Target Language Culture in EFL class: Teachers' Perception in Saudi University

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ABSTRACT: From the cultural perspective, the site of English language teaching can be considered as a melting pot of language, cultural differences and identity-where students with strong belief of vernacular language and culture are given a curriculum which contains western cultural element and ideology. The present study aimed to explore the EFL teachers' perception about L2 culture in Saudi University and whether integrating target language (TL) culture in the EFL curriculum can be effective in facilitating language learning. It reviewed literature on culture and language learning to develop an understanding of the nature of challenges and various cultural issues related to language teaching. In the study, a qualitative method was utilized. The participants were asked to provide their opinions on several multiple choice questions on Likert scale. The responses of the participants were then analyzed implementing descriptive statistics of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The results of the study showed that, the majority of the participants (language instructors) hold positive attitudes towards integrating L2 culture in teaching English Language in Saudi Arabia.
KEYWORDS-culture, language, teachers' perception, Saudi University

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I   INTRODUCTION

Language is deeply rooted in culture. Any language including English bears the essence of its cultureand every attempt to communicate with the speakers of other language is more or less a cultural act (Kramsch: 1993a). But the dilemma is: language does not mirror an object that is out there rather it constructs and constitutes it (Barker, 2001). To a more skeptic note, language in culture works like a filter through which ideas and beliefs get through and eventually they constitute perception, experience and in due course identity. This is more visible in case of second language education where the learners endeavor to acquire the target language through the means of a cultural experience of that language. Students in an EFL classroom get exposed to cultural elements like pictures, lifestyles and ideologies that might seem alien to them at the beginning but eventually they get accustomed with those concepts and get their own thoughts aligned with the newly found ideas. Against this backdrop of possible culture effect there have been attempts to teach language secluded from culture where teachers adopted curriculum based on their own cultural values and understandings. On the contrary to this ideology,researchers and some teachers' are of the opinion that, language devoid of its culture is nothing but a set of linguistic-structure. If the learning objective is communicative competence then it's not ideal that one should learn linguistic structure in isolation. Language learners need to have access to the cultural rules which are used in the interactions in which they are likely to engage in. Culture needs to be integrated into the teaching of all language skills so that learners can learn to utilize the language in culturally appropriate ways (Liddicoat & Crozet, 1997).Furthermore, an apathy towards the target language culture is likely to generate demotivation among the learners and in the learning process.

The question of culture constitutes a large part of "teacher-cognition" (Borg, 2015:1). Hence, teacher is the principal mediator between cultures who has to consider learners' own culture and at the same time introduce a new cultural belief and viewpoints. In Saudi Arabia for example Western cultural standards and principles often go against the traditional cultural values.Teachers often are left with this quandary whether to include cultural components in their lesson or to what extent they should include them? The following study is an attempt to capture teachers' perception on this very intriguing question: how important it is to integrate target language culture in EFL curriculum?

II   POSITIONINGCULTUREIN LANGUAGE TEACHING

In course of time ELT practitioners' opinion has swayed against or in favorof integrating cultural elements in teaching. At the beginning of the last century Danish linguist Otto Jesperson (1904)

pronounced:learning about the culture of another people is the highest purpose of language teaching. But for much of the twentieth century language teaching focused mainly on grammar rules rather than culture. This method is still popular in places where language is taken merely as a set of rules (syntax) and lexicons.With the advent of communicative language teaching (CLT) in late 70s we saw the focus shifting on plurality of approaches causing negligence of culture (Pulverness, 2003). Nevertheless, the intricate relationship between language and culture has always been discussed throughout the century in the writings of prominent philosophers such as Saussure (1966), Wittgenstein (1980; 1999), Foucault (1994), and Chomsky (1968).During the first decade of 20th century researchers argued about the importance of culture in EFL curriculum (Sysoyev & Donelson, 2002). Recent studies advocate even stronger relationship between language and culture. Scholars like Byram (1989; 1994a; 1994b; 1997a; 1997b), Kramsch (1988; 1993; 1996; 2001), Stuart Hall (1996) and Pulverness (2003) focused on the inseparable complex-intertwined relationship between culture and language.

While explaining the nature of this complexity Claire Kramsch (1998) pointed out: members of a speech community knowingly or unknowingly codify and attribute meaning to their language, using distinctive accent and conversational pattern. Language (if not taken in structural sense) means a whole lot of complex cultural values and common understandings of a given context. Through language, people express ideas which are on the one hand universal (Kramsch termed it 'nature') and on the other culture-specific. Based on this second nature of language Kramsch claims, 'language expresses cultural reality' (1998:3). So, as to say, language creates a cultural-cycle within which it identifies and recreates commonly shared experiences. The cycle which apparently seems impenetrable for the so called 'outsiders'. These meanings are then adopted and imposed on the community as a whole. Members of the community are then fall under certain invisible obligations which they find hard to ignore. Thus, through language, culture encircles and restrains its community. So, to speak, educating or socializing an individual in a certain language can be instrumental to mold him or her into its values and understandings (power dynamics of language). Because of this nature of cultural effect, policy makers has often been cautious about including cultural elements into curriculum; the purpose is to maintain the purity of native culture.In addition to this, circumstances under which EFL learners come in contact with English language are accompanied by varied emotions including fears and anxieties that learning English will take away their value and native culture. Prior research confirmed the existence of such anxieties. (Zaid, 2008; 2011).

However, this apprehension has been refuted by researcherswho claimedawareness about different culture only enriches and widens students' mental horizon, it also can have humanizing and motivating effect on language learners (Genc & Bada, 2005).Cultural elements increase learners' curiosity and motivation in the target language (TL). It is also related to linguistic performance which is different from linguistic competence: what one knows about language (Chomsky: 1965).Communicative competence on the other hand has two aspects: linguistic and pragmatic. Cultural competence aptly falls into pragmatic aspect of communicative competence. When language is used so that culture can flourish in the classroom it creates an atmosphere where language learning moves beyond just an instantaneous experience (Brooks, 1969; Citron, 1995; Eoyang, 2003).Communicative competence is now being redefined in terms of cross or intercultural critical communicative competence. Whereas Intercultural attitudes mean curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002:12). This means willingness to relativize one's own values, beliefs not to assume theirs' the only possible and naturally correct ones. Apart from all these, there is a fundamental standard position which all language teaching should promote: a position which acknowledges respect for human dignity and equality of human rights as the democratic basis for social interaction. (Byram et al., 2002:13).

Inclusion of target language culture in EFL curriculum may just provide right kind of atmosphere to connect with students in a real communicative way (Humphrey, 1997). Therefore, 'there needs to be more curricular options for inducing rich and insidious cultural content to be presented side by side with the language to the L2 students both in classroom curricular materials and in extracurricular materials intended for ELT' (Mekheimer, 2011:49). Social, cultural and pragmatic features of language must be taught alongside linguistic structures of language and knowledge of language structures should be matched by competence to utilize linguistic resources to attain communicative goals. In this condition, teaching the target language has become more of an endeavor to teach how to relate learner's first culture to the target culture.

III   CULTURE & ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN SAUDI ARABIA

The unique nature of Saudi Arabian culture is rooted in their tradition and belief system that they preserve over many generations. In many ways the nature of the culture is 'self-enclosed cohesive and Saudi national culture is rested and shaped on and around the faith of Islam' (Faruk, 2015:524). However, with the advent of economic development English is considered to be imperative in Saudi education and ever since the importance kept rising along with its perceived economic values. Large number of foreign companies with their foreign employees provided the foreground of multicultural context necessitating English as a lingua franca and

medium of communication. AsMahboob&Elyas (2014) mentioned referring Al Braik (2007): in 1978 almost 90 percent employees of country's crucial establishments were expatriates with 10 percent being Arab nationals with good command in English. During this time, the main objective of Saudi EFL curriculum was to produce students with communicative competence who could interact with these huge number of expatriates. With the introduction of Saudization policies, it become even more important for the Saudi nationals to achieve English communicative competence as they were to replace the key service positions.

To meet this increasing demand of English speakers, the policy makers in Saudi Arabia focused heavily on employing Western consultants who implemented Western pedagogies like communicative language teaching (CLT). English preparatory courses in Saudi universities rely mainly on CLT which promotes learning through authentic communication with authentic texts. The emphasis is on making language learners culturally and communicatively competent English speakers through some true cultural experiences. This issue of culture and 'alien' ideologies (Al Brashi, 2003) has always evoked controversies among the educationalists in Saudi Arabia (Mahboob&Elyas, 2014). As a result, there has been initiatives to produce localized language teaching materials especially in primary and intermediate levels. Although there are debates over their end results or effectiveness. The question is: how alive a language is devoid of its culture? And how logical it will be to present language as a medium of communication spoken by people of some alien culture? When a person who has been nurtured in one culture is placed in juxtaposition with another (in this example through language)his reaction might be anger, frustration, curiosity, repulsion and confusion. Such a predicament is threatening and until the threat or confusion is removed language learning may be blocked (Valdes, 1986). Teachers through their presentation can remove these mental-blocks and help learners accept language non-judgmentally if not favorably.

IV   IMPLICATIONS OF TEACHERS' PERCEPTION

The question of culture constitutes a large part of teacher-cognition and it is well- established that teachers' perception about the target language culture plays crucial role in language teaching. Teachers are active, thoughtful decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically-oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs" (Borg, 2003:81). Teachers make use of their own and learners' culture-specific schemas in explaining new knowledge and eventually end-up constructing the teaching materials intended or unintended meaning. On the other hand, teachers and learners may have similar or very different kind of lenience towards the target language culture.However, both sets of beliefs are sure to have ramifications in the effectiveness of teaching and learning process.

The two corresponding views of EFL teaching: foreign language learning can be considered as a process of opening-up a new horizon of understanding by connecting with other cultures or it may be dubbed as a process of assimilation or acculturation promoted by the dominant culture. Hence, EFL teachers can find themselves in the dilemmaof trying to avoid creating fluent speakers who has no cultural understanding of the language and at the same time trying to avoid becoming an object of 'Linguistic Imperialism' (Phillipson, 1996). In one way or the other, EFL teachers' endeavor to challengeor not challengelearners' built-in cultural stereotypes is not an easily justifiabletask.

During the past decades there has been an increase in the amount of attention given to the lack of culture incorporated language teaching, although for teachers, the question of how, when and why to incorporate culture remains unanswered because of the shortage of information regarding these questions. A general understanding of different research findings is: nevertheless, teachers believe that 'culture' was important it was not their primary concern compared to other issues in EFL classroom. Most of the teachers, use culture as a pedagogic tool for attracting students' interest or for contextualizing the study materials (Byram, 1991). Whatever the reason might be, EFL teachers' opinions about target language culture has always been intricate and far from meeting the expectations of the researchers.

V   THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theoretical background draws on sociocultural anthropology to linguistic relativity (language and thoughts are interdependent) which in broad sense focus on the complex and integral relationship between language and culture. Whorf (1940) first draws attention on linguistic structures and their relation with human experience and behavior. He raises question: whether the characteristics of a language have any effect on the thought process of its users; if so, to what extent? To suggest the relationship (popularly known as Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) between language and Hopi Indian culture Whorf (1939) wrote: "the grammar of Hopi bore a relation to Hopi culture and the grammar of European tongues to our own Western or European culture" (as cited in Werner, 1997:77). Later, Hymes (1972) drawing a relationship between language and cultural understanding coined the term 'communicative competence'. His theory assumes, L2 learners need to know not only the linguistic knowledge but also culturally accepted ways to interact with others in different situations and

relationships. During this time Widdowson (1978) notably proclaimed: there are rules of language use without which the rules of grammar are useless.

Sociocultural Theory of mind originally conceived by L.S. Vygotsky put forward this idea few steps ahead. Vygotsky (1978) believed, human mind fundamentally functions in a mediated process organized by culture, activities and concepts. Within this framework, humans are believed to utilize existing cultural artifacts, beliefs and understandings to create new knowledge. Language usage, structure and organization are the prime means of this mediation process. This process of mediation and internalization of cultural ideas with language are the core concepts of Sociocultural Theory. Internalization is the negotiated process that adjust or reorganizes the relationship of the individual to his or her social environment and carries it into future performance (Winegar, 1997).

Current perspective of culture and language is characterized by Kramsch (1991) and Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of language and culture of representational practices. Question of 'identity' and the notion of representation are central to Stuart Hall's theory. Representation is also the key first moment of 'circuit of culture'. According to Hall (1997) representation is the process through which meanings are generated, and these meanings are then exchanged between the members of the culture by the use of language, signs and images. So, signs, images including languages are representational tool for 'shared meanings' of culture. Claire Kramsch (1991) claimed that, teaching of language implicitly or explicitly infuses the sociocultural interaction of spoken and written language. She reiterated, language cannot be learned without an understanding of the cultural context of that language

VI   RESEARCH QUESTION

The first phase of the study intends to investigate how teachers perceive L2 culture in relation to EFL classroom, while the second phase aims to find out how strongly teachers feel about culture if they really believe it's not relevant in their class. Results are expected to shade light on these following research questions.

- What is the nature of EFL teachers' attitudes towards incorporating cultural information in their class?
- How do teachers relate cultural knowledge to students' overall achievement?

VII   METHOD

In this study, the goal was to examine Saudi EFL teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards the place of culture in the EFL classroom.The research method that we used is a questionnaire comprised of 8 multiple-choice questions of 1-4 Likert scale from Strongly Disagree (SD) to Strongly Agree (SA). Our understanding about questionnaire is surveys and questionnaires lend themselves to purposes of revealing demographic facts and policymaking. From a more general perspective, questionnaires are applied for three basic purposes: description, explanation, and exploration (McMillan, 1989). The questionnaires in the pilot study were hard copies and the researcher was present as the pilot subjects responded to the survey. The questionnaire was designed to extract mainly eight types of information:

- Teaching EFL culture is important.
- Students learn better by including L2 culture.
- Students' poor achievement in EFL class could be attributed to little L2 culture knowledge.
- Students need to be directly told about the importance of learning EFL culture.
- There are disadvantages of teaching culture to EFL learners.
- It is common that students face difficulties in perceiving L2 culture.
- Teachers should exclude L2 culture from the EFL classroom.
- EFL class can be effective without any reference to L2 culture.

VIII   PARTICIPANTS& PROCEDURES

A total of twenty(12 males and 8 females) English language teachers participated in the study. Teachers teach English language (mainly four language skills) to local students. Most of the participating teachers are MA holders some of them did CELTA before coming into teaching profession. Teachers' age range: between 25-50 years old. The questionnaire was administered to the participants individually and at different times. The participants were asked to anonymously answer the questions. The responses of the participants were collected and analyzed.

IX   DATA ANALYSIS

The questionnaire data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) in the form of descriptive statistics. The frequency of participants' responses were analyzed in the numeric form (1-4) where each number corresponds to a Likert-scale ordinal answer. The first question of the questionnaire was about the importance of culture in the context of EFL teaching (Table 1). To this question, participants mostly agreedwith the statement that, teaching EFL culture was really important. With the exception of one all the

participants agreed with the first item. Response frequency shows 70 percent generally agreed and 25 percent showed strong agreement.

Table 1. Teaching EFL culture is important

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	5	25.0	25.0	25.0
	Agree	14	70.0	70.0	95.0
	Disagree	1	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

In the second item, participants were asked: whether they think their students would learn better if L2 culture is included in their classes (Table 2). To this question 60 percent participants showed positivity stating their responses as 'agree'. Among all the participants 30 percent indicated strong agreement to this question and 10 percent showed disagreement. So, it shows teachers mostly think L2 culture facilitate the learning process.

Table 2. Students learn better by integrating L2 culture

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	6	30.0	30.0	30.0
	Agree	12	60.0	60.0	90.0
	Disagree	2	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

The third question (Table 3) was about any possible link between students' poor achievement in the language class and their lack of L2 culture knowledge. To this question, 55 percent participants general showed agreement whereas 20 percent asserted strong agreement. Among the participants 25 percent disagreed with this statement implying lack of L2 culture knowledge may notbe the reason behind students' poor performance.

Table 3. Students' poor achievement in EFL class could be attributed to little L2 culture knowledge.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	4	20.0	20.0	20.0
	Agree	11	55.0	55.0	75.0
	Disagree	5	25.0	25.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

In the fourth item of the questionnaire (Table 4), participants were asked whether they think teacher should discuss the importance of L2 culture in their classrooms. In answer to this, more than half of the participants (61.1%) stated that they think teacher should focus on the importance of L2 culture. Nevertheless, a significant 38.9 percent indicated that they don't agree with this statement.

Table 4. Students need to be directly told about the importance of learning EFL culture

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	11	55.0	61.1	61.1
	Disagree	7	35.0	38.9	100.0
	Total	18	90.0	100.0	
Missing	System	2	10.0		
Total		20	100.0		

In the fifth item, participants were asked: what do they think about the possible disadvantages of teaching culture to EFL students (See table 5). Most of the participants (57.9 percent) generally disagreed with this statement. Among all the participants, 31.6 percent strongly believed that there's no disadvantages of teaching culture. 10 percent participants strongly or generally agreed that, there are disadvantages of teaching culture to EFL students.

Table 5. There are disadvantages of teaching EFL culture

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	1	5.0	5.3	5.3
	Agree	1	5.0	5.3	10.5
	Disagree	11	55.0	57.9	68.4
	Strongly Disagree	6	30.0	31.6	100.0

	Total	19	95.0	100.0	
Missing	System	1	5.0		
Total		20	100.0		

In the sixthquestion they were asked to state their opinion about the difficulties students might face in perceiving EFL culture. In response,participants almost unanimously supported the statement that students actually face difficulties in understanding EFL culture. Among all the participants 65 percent teachers indicated general agreement with this statement whereas, 30 percent strongly supported this statement. Only 5 percent participants disagreed with this.

Table 6. Students face difficulties perceiving EFL culture

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	6	30.0	30.0	30.0
	Agree	13	65.0	65.0	95.0
	Disagree	1	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

In the item number 7 participants were asked whether they think L2 culture talk should be avoided in the EFL class. In answer to this question, 65 percent teachers strongly disagreed implying they do not support this idea that L2 culture should be avoided. Another 25 percent participant generally disagreed with this idea. Interestingly, 10 percent participants strongly supported this proposal.

Table 7. EFL teachers should exclude L2 culture

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	2	10.0	10.0	10.0
	Disagree	5	25.0	25.0	35.0
	Strongly Disagree	13	65.0	65.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

The last question asked the participants whether they believe EFL class can be effective without any reference to L2 culture. In response, another 65 percent teachers generally disagreed stating that, they do not believe EFL class can be effective with any cultural reference. 10 percent participants strongly disagreed with this idea. However, a total of 25 percent teachers agreed with this statement that, they believe EFL class can be effective without L2 culture.

Table 8. EFL class can be effective without any reference to L2 culture

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	5	25.0	25.0	25.0
	Disagree	13	65.0	65.0	90.0
	Strongly Disagree	2	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

X   DISCUSSION

Considering the outcomes above, it can be assumed that there is a general agreement on the idea that culture is important in EFL classroom. Most of the teachers think students learn better if L2 culture talk is incorporated in the classroom. This states that, there is an understanding of the importance of culture among the teachers. This general sense of agreement to integrate L2 culture in EFL study fundamentally supports the orthodox yet unsubstantiated concept that, language and culture inseparably tied together and integrating culture can facilitate language learning. Numerous authors (Valdes, 1986 & 1990; Byram, 1991; Byram and Fleming, 1998, Kramsch, 1993) have discussed the impracticality of teaching English without reference to its culture. They believed, culture is consciously or unconsciously part of foreign language teaching. As Valdes (1990: 20) interestingly pointed out: 'every lesson is about something and that something is cultural'.

In fact, living in a multicultural globalized society requires individuals to be aware of their own culture and culture of others.Kramsch (2014) proposes that teachers and students develop reflexivity and interpretative capacities in response to the ever-growing complexity that surrounds language, culture and learning in the era of a globalization. Byram, Holmes &Savvides (2013) claimed, language teaching is at present facing a "cultural

turn", withthe introduction of 'intercultural competence' whichpromotes 'communicative competence'" (p. 453).

However, the result demonstrated that, sometimes students find L2 culture difficult to perceive (more than 60 percent teachers agreed with this). This could be the result of the challenges (students are likely to face) posed by cultural differences. To overcome these difficulties learners need to be exposed to the target culture to get familiarized with it and teachers can play a crucial role in this regard.

This study was an attempt to investigate Saudi EFL teachers' perception about the target language culture. The results that came out of this study provide a glimpse on some fundamental characteristics of the way EFL culture is being perceived by the teachers. However, to what extent culture talk is being integrated and how do the students consider EFL culture? Are some crucial issues requires to be investigated.

XI   CONCLUSION

This study examined teachers' perceptions about target language culture in Saudi EFL context. The result shows: teachers generally hold positive agreement with this idea that culture is important and cultural integration facilitate learning. However, the research raises few questions and shade light on some gaps. How do the teachers relate their belief about culture in practical situation of the classroom? How do teachers define intercultural competence? What is the nature of challenges students face in relation to EFL culture? Further study is needed to find answers to these questions. We believe cultural underpinnings of language and its relationship to EFL class is a critical field of language study, especially in an intercultural context where both the teachers and learners are constituting their socio-cultural identities in the process of language teaching and learning.

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Appendix: A

Questionnaire: Culture & Language Teaching

Dear Participant, this is an anonymous survey and your information will be confidential. The purpose of this questionnaire is to examine EFL teachers' perception of the importance of teaching EFL (L2) culture in their classrooms. Your contribution in this survey is voluntary. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this questionnaire survey.

Section 1. Teacher's Information:

Gender: ◯ Male   ◯ Female

Age: ◯ 25-35 yrs   ◯ 36-45 yrs   ◯ 46-55 yrs   ◯ Above 56 yrs

Major: ◯ Language   ◯ Literature

_____

Section 2. Please select (tick) the best answer that you think is true.

Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Teaching EFL culture is important.	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. Students learn better by including L2 culture.	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. Students' poor achievement in EFL class could be attributed to little L2 culture knowledge.	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. Students need to be directly told about the importance of learning EFL culture.	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. There are disadvantages of teaching culture to EFL learners.	☐	☐	☐	☐
6. It is common that students face difficulties in perceiving L2 culture.	☐	☐	☐	☐
7. Teachers should exclude L2 culture from the EFL classroom.	☐	☐	☐	☐
8. EFL class can be effective without any reference to L2 culture.	☐	☐	☐	☐