



Cultural Diversity, Awareness and Teaching: A Study in an EFL Context

Liqaa Habeb Al-Obaydi
University of Diyala, Iraq

Introduction

Cultural diversity is the presence of variation in human culture; each culture has its own aspects which may distinguish it from others, and this becomes particularly apparent when different cultures occupy the same geographical region. A monoculture community, on the contrary, is one in which only one culture exists in the community, however this is rare and most human communities are influenced by at least some level of cultural diversity. The implications of investigating this phenomenon has become more crucial in areas where there is an exceptionally high level of cultural diversity as in the context of the present study, the Diyala governorate of Iraq. The Diyala governorate was intentionally chosen for this study because it has a long and intense history of sectarian conflicts. The population and the cultural composition of the area have been in a major state of flux since 2003. Within Diyala, a large number of ethnic groups, nationalities, languages, life conditions and religious sects are present. Learners of the study grew up in this diverse community and as such the level of cultural diversity may either positively or negatively affect learners' acceptance of other foreign cultures. This viewpoint is in accordance with Milliken et al.'s (2003) belief that the diversity of cultures can be a two- edged sword which may have either positive or negative impact. Gebhard (2006, p. 124) confirmed that "teachers can teach concepts that not only bring about appreciation for people and culture but can also be useful for students when placed in cross-cultural communication situations".

Whereas cultural diversity represents variation in culture, cultural awareness reflects the degree of awareness the learners may have towards different cultures in order to take the appropriate action to avoid any kind of cultural conflict if it happens in their educational context. Brown (1994, p. 165) clarifies that "language is a part of 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". This idea was also expressed by Baylan and Huntley, (2003, p. 38) who mentioned that "language and culture cannot exist independently; each is the shadow of the other to such an extent that language meaning can frequently be obscured if there is no recognition of cultural rules". The present study attempts to examine how language is interwoven with culture in relation to cultural diversity. It also investigates learners' attitude towards the current situation of teaching culture in Iraq and how learners interact with it.

With the above information in mind, the present study tries to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the nature of the relationship between Iraqi EFL college learners' awareness towards English culture and their cultural diversity?

2. Are the learners satisfied with the current situation of teaching culture in Iraq?
3. What are the main reasons that may lead some of learners to not accept the current situation of teaching culture in Iraq? What are their main suggestions towards teaching culture?

Literature Review

Cultural diversity is increasingly employed and defined in relation to social and cultural variation (Dietz, 2007). According to Burden and Byrd (2010, p. 96) “cultural diversity is reflected in the wide variety of values, beliefs, attitudes and rules that define regional, ethnic, religious and other culture groups”. It usually occurs in a mixed community of more than one culture. One explicit definition of it was provided by the Diversity Dictionary (2000) “a situation that includes representations of multiple (ideally all) groups within a prescribed environment such as a university or a workplace”. Burden and Byrd (2010, p. 96) ascribe its appearance to the wish of the minorities to be recognized as unique cultures and preserved for their children. The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity approved that cultural diversity is “the common heritage of community. ... cultures take diverse forms across time and place ... as a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is a necessary for human kind as biodiversity is for nature” (Stenou, 2002, p. 4).

In relation to the educational context, Ladson- Billings (1997) mentioned an important point which is to make learners’ native cultures as a source of strength on which they depend and not as a problem. In this context, Galloway (1992 as cited in Hadley, 2003, p. 360) asserts that “to help learners construct a new frame of reference based on the target culture; they need to understand their own frame of reference and then explore the target culture under the supervision of their teacher through materials”. A good implication for teaching culture in Asian contexts was provided by Shin and Brenna (2018, p. 1236) who assert “that sharing of multicultural picture books which combine English language with Asian content/themes, offers readers inviting perspectives through which they critically explore the world and their own culture”.

In addition, to promote an ideal learning environment and to prevent behavioral problems inside class, Burden and Byrd (2010, p. 221) noted the importance of understanding and respecting the ethnic and cultural differences among students. This is supported by an interesting study by Boylan and Huntley (2003) which discusses the relationship between foreign language learning and cultural awareness. They conclude that “language and culture shadow each other to such an extent that they are inextricably linked” (p. 43). In the same context, they add that “learning about other peoples’ language and cultures provide students with the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding and greater tolerance of people who are different from them”. Another conclusion by Almujaivel (2018, p. 424) who writes that “it seems that raising awareness of local cultures inserted into the English textbooks tends to make students competent regarding how they express their own cultures via the international language, English”. Choudhury (2013, p. 23) demonstrates that “the goal behind teaching culture in EFL should be inculcating intercultural communicative competence among learners, rather than propagating or showing superiority of the target culture over the native culture.”

The Context of the Study

The choice of the context of the study, the Diyala governorate, is intentional since this part of Iraq is very culturally diverse representing a colorful painting of all Iraq’s constituents. Diyala is situated northeast of Baghdad and Baqubah is the capital. Ncci (2016, p. 2) reports that “Diyala has an ethnically and religiously diverse population”. The United Nations Inter-Agency Information and Analysis Unite (2009, p. 1) writes that “Diyala has a diverse ethnic composition of Kurds, Turkmans and Arabs”. In addition to the ethnical diversity of the governorate, it is also diverse religiously as stated by the UNHCR

(United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) (2016, p. 6) “Religious groups in the governorate include Muslims (Sunni and Shiite), Christians, Yezidis and Ahl-Al- Haqq”. Each one of these ethical and religious groups has its own specific culture, the differences and similarities between the groups vary depending on the topic of comparison.

The diversity of the governorate does not prevent it from being equal to other parts of Iraq in its exposure to English language education. In Iraq, the study of the English language begins at an early stage of primary school. The method of teaching is eclectic most of the time consisting of varied techniques that are related to different skills. Cultural passages are included in most units of the curriculum through which students are exposed to different kinds of customs, values, and traditions of many different cultures throughout the world. In higher education, specifically in an English department, college learners study more than nine subjects within their English language studies. These are divided into grammar, linguistics, phonetics and phonology, literature (poetry, novel, short story, and drama), essay and composition writing, and conversation. All textbooks do not employ simplified language forms and thus English culture is reflected as it appears in the books.

Method

Participants

The 50 learners in the study were selected at random from an English language department at a university in Diyala. The learners’ viewpoints and attitudes towards the teaching of culture are very important, as they study in the College of Education, so they have mature vision towards cultural education.

Instruments

Data for the study came from three sources. The first one is a questionnaire adopted from the Miville – Guzman University Diversity Scale (1999) to measure learners’ awareness of cultural diversity. The second is the cultural awareness questionnaire (CAQ) (see Appendix 1) that was constructed by the researcher as it became necessary to develop such an instrument to suit the aims and the context of the study. The definition of culture according to this study includes art, literature, social traditions, worship, history and geography, so the questionnaire covers all these elements. It consists of six parts with four yes or no questions per part.

The third instrument (see Figure 1) is an action sheet measurement tool designed by the researcher in order to answer the second question. The construction of it was based on ideas that stem from the process of action research (Burns, 2009; Celce-Murcia, 2001) The role of the action sheet in the present study is to seek local understanding and to diagnose learners’ satisfaction concerning the current situation of teaching culture and to access their main suggestions and reasons for not accepting it without any improvement procedure. After constructing the two instruments, both were exposed to a jury of specialized experts to determine the acceptability and suitability of their formatting to the sample, the context and the aim of the study. All of them agreed that they were suitable except for some modifications which have been taken into consideration.

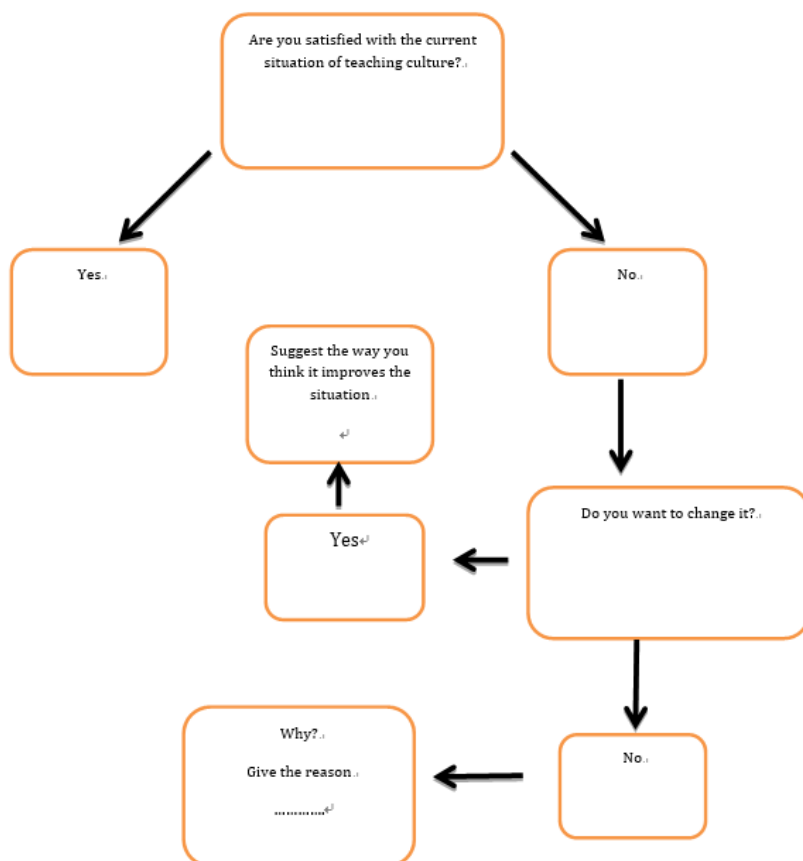


Figure 1. Action sheet.

Results

The results of each question are presented as follows:

1. What is the nature of the relationship between Iraqi EFL college learners’ awareness towards English culture and their cultural diversity? A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated, 0.68, which indicates that there was a positive correlation between learners’ cultural awareness towards English culture and their cultural diversity awareness, see Table 1. This means that learners’ cultural awareness increases whenever learners’ awareness of cultural diversity increases and vice versa.

TABLE 1
The Statistical Results of the Correlation

The variables	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>r</i>
Cultural awareness	50	3.34	10.70	0.68
Cultural diversity	50	2.67	9.51	

2. Are the learners satisfied with the current situation of teaching culture in Iraq? As student-teachers, the sample of the study is asked to give their opinions towards the current situation of teaching culture. Their viewpoints may stem from their experience as learners in the English department and/ or as future teachers. The results show that 60% of learners were satisfied with the current situation of teaching culture. 28% were not satisfied and want to change the present situation and have provided suggestions as to how to achieve this. 12% of the learners were not satisfied and expressed no desire to change the

present situation (see Table 2). The researcher asked them to justify their opinions by providing the reasons for not changing a situation they were dissatisfied with.

TABLE 2
The Statistical Results of the Action Sheet

N	Yes	The percentage	No. For those who want to change	The percentage	No. for those who don't want to change	The percentage
50	30	60%	14	28%	6	12%

3. What are the main suggestions of learners towards teaching culture, and what are the main reasons that may lead some of them to unaccepting the current situation of teaching culture in Iraq? The learners that answered (no) on the action sheet, indicating they are not satisfied with the present situation, were asked to provide their suggestions concerning the current situation of teaching culture. Of the fourteen learners, see Table 2, who expressed a desire for change, six of them suggested that teaching culture must be in a separate syllabus that deals mainly with English culture including all its other aspects such as the fine arts, history, geography, worship and so on. Four of them strongly supported the suggestion that learners should visit the country of the culture they study in order to see and experience it directly. The last four learners mentioned a variety of suggestions concerning the teaching of culture. The main ideas are as follows:

1. We need modern and innovative activities in teaching culture and leaving the traditional ones.
2. It will be good to insert popular songs and general information about the pioneers in music and painting.
3. Avoid touching the subjects of worshipping that may raise sensitivity specifically in hot areas.
4. Add a factor of fun to all activities.
5. I prefer to use culture capsule technique in lectures.

In contrast, six learners were very rigid towards accepting change. They answered (no) and presented no desire to provide suggestions towards improving the current situation of teaching culture. The learners were asked to give the reasons behind their strict attitude. The main reasons they gave were:

1. It is difficult for me to accept others open style of living.
2. My situation stems from the difficult living circumstances in my country.
3. Studying others culture is not of my concern.
4. I think that teachers' style of teaching culture is not purposeful.
5. I think that my teachers are biased toward English culture; they stick on it without paying attention to other cultures such as French. We know a lot of things about English culture due to our studying of English language from our childhood till now. So, I think it is time to change.

Discussion

The results show that there is a positive context of studying English culture in this diverse area. The diverse community of the learners positively affects their acceptance to study other foreign cultures such as the English culture. This means that the students have a high cultural awareness which is manifested in their respect to foreign cultures other than their native one.

Learners' satisfaction towards the current situation of teaching culture sheds light on the role of the language teachers, in the world generally, and in Iraq specifically, who deal with all cross-cultural matters objectively. Such an approach helps create a favorable atmosphere which is full of curiosity to discover

the diversity in the world's countries, diversity in values, traditions and styles of living despite religious affiliation or other contradictory cultural matters. The nature of the governorate's diverse population may have positively affected the choice of the learners, to enter an English department and may be viewed as part of their positive attitudes towards other cultures.

Based on the study's results, it seems that the cultural background of the learners, specifically if they live in a culturally diverse area, reflects positively on their respect and appreciation to other cultures, whether in their own area of living or towards another further removed foreign culture. Living in a multicultural community enhances learners' motivation towards studying the languages of other cultures, as with English, which in turn leads them to keep discovering and searching for more cultural information about it even if it is far from their daily routines. This can justify their curiosity to know their place in the world and to develop a deeper understanding towards other cultures. This is part of encouraging learners to depend on real experiences to judge others and to avoid overgeneralizations. Encouraging learners to work collaboratively on cultural assignments increases their tolerance towards their colleagues as well as their motivation to learn about and understand other cultures.

Implications for Practitioners

It is essential for language teachers, specifically those who work in diverse societies and specifically in EFL contexts, to be a model to their learners and to be aware of cross cultural differences between their learners' native culture and the target one as well so as not to neglect any tiny details that may raise sensitivity. Also, it is important to insert moral ideas of equality and respect to other cultures indirectly in learners' syllabuses.

It is recommended to help learners to know and understand their own culture first by focusing on the idea that their culture may differ from others', but this difference must be appreciated and respected. Brown (2001, p. 65) mentioned an important point concerning the discouragement of the learners towards studying culture clarifying that "once students become aware that some of their discouragement may stem from cultural sources, teachers can more squarely address their state of mind and emotion and do something about it". The role of the teacher becomes crucial here as he/she must be aware of the individual differences among learners, paying more attention to learners' understanding and awareness, and must use different and varied teaching techniques to include all levels of learners.

Conclusions

The main concluding remarks for this study are; there is a positive correlation between students' cultural diversity and their cultural awareness towards English culture in this particular EFL context. This study helps support the idea that learners can gain knowledge of a specific culture via studying its language. The English language in this context is the main representation of English related culture. The learners developed positive attitudes towards English culture and a moderate satisfaction towards the current situation of teaching through showing the pivotal connection between how language and culture are intertwined.

This study can be a good indicator of how to get benefit from the context of diversity in the learners' lives in teaching foreign languages. The variety of cultures in learners' area of living affects their acceptance to the target educational culture positively, though there may be a huge difference between the two cultures in the aspects of social traditions and worship habits. The results of the study support that the majority of learners were satisfied with the current situation of teaching cultures and that the attitude of those who were not satisfied comes either as a personality reaction or as a backlash towards the difficult atmosphere of living in a culturally diverse situation. Finally, it is crucial to mention that culture is an

important factor in relation to educational contexts, so we need to see more comprehensive studies with larger sample sizes and with more variables to further understand cultural phenomenon.

The Author

Liqaah Habeb Al-Obaydi has a PhD in English Language Teaching from the University of Baghdad. She currently works as Asst. Prof. in the English Department, College of Education for Human Sciences, at University of Diyala, Iraq. Her research interests include the new trends of English language teaching and the use of innovative technologies in teaching English as a foreign language.

College of Education for Human Sciences, University of Diyala
Republic of Iraq, Diyala Province, Baghdad Old Street.
Tel: 07727413239
Email: liqaahabeb@yahoo.com
https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Liqaah_Al-Obaydi

References

- Almujaiwel, S. (2018). Culture and interculture in Saudi EFL textbooks: A corpus-based analysis. *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, 15(2), 414-428.
- Boylan, G., & Huntley, S. (2003). Foreign language learning and cultural awareness. *El Guiniguada. Revista de investigaciones y experiencias en Ciencias de la Educación*, 12, 37-44.
- Brown, H. D. (1994). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (3rd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Brown, H. D. (2001). *Teaching by principles*. Longman: San Francisco State University.
- Burden, P., & Byrd, D. (2010). *Methods for effective teaching*. Rhode Island: Pearson.
- Burns, A. (2009). Action research in second language teacher education. In A. Burns & J. C. Richards (Eds.), *The Cambridge guide to second language teacher education*, (pp. 289-297) Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Celce-Murcia, M. (2001). *Teaching English as a second or foreign language*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Choudhury, M. H. (2013). Teaching culture in EFL: Implications, challenges and strategies. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 13(1), 20-24.
- Dietz, G. (2007). Keyword: Cultural diversity. *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft*, 10(1), 7-30.
- Diversity Dictionary (2000). Available at: Entry "Diversity". In: *Diversity Dictionary*. URL: <http://www.inform.umd.edu/EdRes/Topic/Diversity/Reference/divdic.html> . Retrieved on March 4, 2005. ohiou.edu/~one/dd.htm/ (Download: 31.01.2007)
- Gebhard, J. G. (2006). *Teaching English as a foreign or second language: A teacher self-development and methodology guide*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Hadley, A. (2003). *Teaching language in context*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.
- IAU (Inter- Agency Information and Analysis Unite) (2009). *Diyala Governorate Profile. Supported by OCHA and UNAMI*. <https://www.iauiraq.org/analysis.asp>
- Ladson- Billings, G. (1997). *The dream keepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Milliken, F. J., Bartel, C. A., & Kurtzberg, T. R. (2003). Diversity and creativity in work groups: A dynamic perspective on the effective and cognitive processes that link diversity and performance In P. Paulus & B. Nijstad, (Eds.), *Group creativity: Innovation through collaboration*, (pp. 32-62). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

- Miville, M. L., Gelso, C. J., Pannu, R., Liu, W., Touradji, P., Holloway, P., & Fuertes, J. (1999). Appreciating similarities and valuing differences: The Miville-Guzman Universality-diversity scale. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 46(3), 291-307.
- Ncci, NGO Coordination Committee for IRAQ (2016). *Diyala Governorate Profile*. https://www.ncciraq.org/images/infobygov/NCCI_Diyala_Governorate_Profile.pdf
- Shin, H., & Brenna, B. (2018). Multicultural English picture books and critical response in Asian EFL classrooms. *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, 15(4), 1230-1238.
- Stenou, K. (2002). *UNESCO iniversal ceclaration on cultural diversity: A vision, a conceptual platform, a pool of ideas for implementation, a new paradigm Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*. Paris: UNESCO (*Cultural diversity series, n1*) <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000127162>
- UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) (2016). *Diyala Governorate Assessment Report*. <https://www.unhcr.org/462cbf672.pdf>

Appendix A

Cultural Awareness Questionnaire (CAQ)

<i>Items</i>	<i>yes</i>	<i>partially</i>	<i>no</i>
Art			
By fine arts, we mean visual art (such as painting, drawing, sculpture, others), music, dance, drama which include (theatrical drama, TV drama, cinematic drama), fashion, photography, others.			
1. Do you know much about English art?			
2. Do you usually follow its updated news?			
3. Do you like it?			
4. Do you think that your study in the English department helps to increase your knowledge about English fine arts?			
Literature			
By literature, we mean poetry, drama, novels, short stories, biographies, others.			
1. Do you know much about English literature?			
2. Do you usually follow its updated news?			
3. Do you like it?			
4. Do you think that your study in the English department helps to increase your knowledge about English literature?			
Social Traditions			
By social traditions, we mean everyday life, values, morals, ethical considerations, social habits, food, tourism, celebrations, knowledge, vision of beauty and harmony, stereotype, acceptability, discrimination, customs, norms, festivals, folklore, others.			
1. Do you know much about English social traditions?			
2. Do you usually follow its updated news?			
3. Are you convinced with it?			
4. Do you think that your study in the English department helps to increase your knowledge about English social traditions?			
Worship			
By worship, we mean the Religion of people and their habits in relation to it.			
1. Do you know much about English worship?			
2. Do you usually follow its updated news?			
3. Do you respect it?			
4. Do you think that your study in the English department helps to increase your knowledge about English worship traditions?			
History			
By history, we mean general information about past events, politics, civilization, philosophy, stories, wars, occupations, public history, woman's history, others.			
1. Do you know much about English history?			
2. Do you usually follow its updated news?			
3. Do you respect it?			
4. Do you think that your study in the English department helps to increase your knowledge about English history?			
Geography			
By geography, we mean the geographical knowledge of English countries, tourism, climate, oceans and seas, natural phenomenon, inhabitants, others.			
1. Do you know much about English geography?			
2. Do you usually follow its updated news?			
3. Do you like it?			
4. Do you think that your study in the English department helps to increase your knowledge about English geography?			