

Teaching Western Culture to Jordanian Students Majoring in English Language: Perceptions and Achievements

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Abstract

This study aimed at exploring students' perceptions towards western culture classes and to uncover the benefits of these classes from students' view points. It also aimed at finding out which language skills and elements have been improved. To achieve these goals, the researchers developed a five- part questionnaire based upon previous studies. Thirty EFL female students, who attended a course titled "Western Culture" as an optional course, were asked to participate in this research. Findings showed that students' perceptions towards the western culture were positively changed. Additionally, this course was a fruitful one in which students achieved the most important expected benefits of teaching culture such as (1) raising their awareness about history and its relationship to culture , language and communication , (2) motivating them to learn more about the English language and improving language skills and elements as well.

Keywords: Teaching, Western Culture, Jordanian Students, Perceptions, Achievements

1.0 Introduction

Teaching target culture seems to have no place until "the direct method" of teaching English appeared in the late 19th century in France and Germany (Lake, 2013) and (Kitao, 1991). This method of teaching intended to overcome the shortcomings of "grammar-translation method". Whereas the grammar-translation method demands using both the source and target languages ,the direct method requires teaching learners using the target language without any reference to the source language. Consequently, target culture should be taught beside its language to ensure learners' understanding and comprehension.

EFL educationalists, instructors and stakeholders are the ones who shoulder the responsibility of introducing courses and preparing plans whether at high schools or universities. Since they are fully aware that teaching a language is part and parcel of teaching its culture, some universities offer foreign culture classes either as compulsory or elective courses especially for students who are enrolled in the English language departments. The rationale behind teaching culture not only within EFL courses but also as a separate course is a reflection of the great influence of teaching culture on the learners' attitudes and learning outcomes. Furthermore, the idea of teaching culture stemmed from the desire of most learners who want to pursue their higher education abroad. This idea was emphasized by (Kitao,1991) who stated that "cultural orientation is very important for students preparing to study abroad" (p.1).Another interesting idea behind teaching culture is that if EFL learners master a foreign language without understanding its culture, they will end up fluent fool speakers who neither have an idea about the social content of a language nor about the philosophical one (Bennett,1993). To add more, some linguists such as Kramsh (as cited in Heidari , A. , Ketabi, S. and Zonoobi, R. , 2014) deem culture as fifth skill that complements the four basic known skills.

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This paper tackles EFL learners' perceptions towards the importance of teaching western culture classes at the university level. It sheds light on the benefits of culture classes in general and their impact on language skills and elements in particular. Furthermore, this study might be useful for EFL instructors and stakeholders in higher education.

Questions of the Study

1. What are the EFL students' perceptions towards western culture classes?
2. What are the benefits of the western culture classes from students' view points?
3. What language skills and elements that have been improved during culture classes?

2.0 Review of Related Literature

Tzotzou, M. and Kotsiou, V. (2015) called for an attempt to get learners be familiarized with the target culture at early stages to ensure that learners absorb the cultural information year by year.

Guilani, M. ,Yasin, M., Hua, T. and Aghaei,K. (2012) investigated the significance of learning and teaching culture as an interwoven part of teaching a language . They also invited language teachers to integrate cultural elements into the syllabus of language programs. They stated that: it is necessary to include culture in the language teaching programs since familiarity with the cultural features of the target language people can help the learners see the world with open eyes and modify their attitude toward other cultures. This can generally enhance their tolerance not only as a language learner but also as a human being (p.115).

Similarly, Dweik (2007) highlighted the indivisible link between language and culture, emphasizing that it is not possible to teach a language apart from teaching its culture.

Mckay, Gardner and Lambert , Kramersch , Samovar, Porter , and Jain (as cited in Dweik, 2007) paid much attention to the reasons behind teaching culture. They believe that teaching culture motivates and enhances learners especially those who are interested in culturally oriented activities. Moreover, teaching culture influences language teaching, helps learners to observe similarities and differences among various cultural groups as well as encourages learners to be tolerant with others. Additionally, teaching culture helps better communication since culture does not only involve speakers, listeners and the message but also encoding messages in order to get the meaning behind them. However, Hadlley (1993) adds that there must be efforts to promote cultural understanding in many ways in order to make learners more sensitive to other cultures and live in harmony with the target language community.

Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) emphasize the objectives behind teaching culture. They conclude that teaching culture would end up: (1) understanding that nearly most people have learned behaviors that are governed by their own culture, (2) recognizing that age, sex, social class and residence are the reasons that make people speak and behave differently, (3) being fully aware of the acceptable behaviors of the target culture in common situations,(4) being aware of the cultural connotations regarding the words and phrases of the target language ,(5) enhancing learner's ability in terms of evaluating and refining generalizations of the target culture through providing evidence ,(6) improving the required skills for organizing the target culture's information, and (7) increasing learners' intellectual curiosity towards the target culture and enhancing empathy towards the others.

Ching Ho (1998) investigated the ability of culture studies to motivate the Taiwanese junior high school students to learn English. He tried to find out the relationship between students' interests in culture studies and their orientations, attitudes and motivations towards learning English. A sample of 480 students was asked to fill a questionnaire which aimed at evaluating their desire to learn culture studies in EFL classes. Results revealed that students were interested in knowing more about the English speaking countries. Additionally, culture studies are beneficial since they tried to increase Taiwanese students' motivation to learn English.

Genc and Bada (2005) found out the effect of culture classes that students of Çukurova University in Turkey attend. A sample of 38 students at the English language department was chosen to fill in a five-item questionnaire. The questionnaire aimed to evaluate four areas: (1) language skills (2) source and target cultural awareness (3) attitudes towards the target culture. Findings uncovered that all language skills have positively been improved with some variations in their percentages although this was not of the main objectives of the course. However, such classes have raised their awareness in ELT regarding both native and target societies. Furthermore, the

results revealed that students' and language experts' attitudes towards the target culture were greatly changed by the end of this culture course.

Tsou (2005) explored the effects of cultural instruction on foreign language learning. A combination of an anthropological process and task-oriented approach were utilized to conduct the culture lessons. Culture instruction was implemented within two elementary EFL classrooms for one semester to see the effects of culture instruction on foreign language learning. Results revealed that when culture lessons were integrated into EFL instruction, students' language proficiency was significantly improved. Moreover, students had better interests in language learning.

However, Hayati (2009) investigated the effect of cultural knowledge on improving the Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension. Data were collected from 120 pre-intermediate language learners who were selected based on their scores on a listening comprehension test and were randomly assigned to four groups. Each group was exposed to a certain condition as follows: TC (Target Culture), ITC (International Target Culture), SC (Source Culture), and CF (Culture Free). At the end of the experiment, a post-test was administered to the four groups to see whether any changes happened regarding their listening proficiency. The results indicated that the participants performed differently on the post-test indicating familiarity with culturally-oriented language material which promoted the Iranian EFL learners' listening proficiency.

Ömer and Ali (2011) explored the importance of culture-based foreign language courses. About 38 students were chosen from French language teaching department at Erzincan University to elicit their opinions on the relation between culture and language learning. They were asked to write their responses through the application of qualitative structured written response method. Results of the analysis revealed that culture integrated foreign language course can make positive contributions to students' learning, language learning process and learning environment.

Fetemi, M., Montazerinia, F., Shirazian, Sh. and Atarodi, M. (2014) investigated the effects of integrating culture on the development of Iranian EFL learners' learning comprehension. A sample of 52 upper-intermediate Iranian learners were selected based on a placement test and were also distributed randomly into two groups; the control and the experimental one. Results of the T-test indicated that there were remarkable effects of cultural integration on the development of listening comprehension on those students. Also, results offered pedagogical implications for integrating first language (L1) culture in EFL listening comprehension classrooms.

However, Dweik and Al-sayyed (2015) investigated the attitudes of 156 EFL Jordanian students and 30 teachers towards including culture in EFL learning. To achieve the goals of their study, data were collected through questionnaires. Results indicated that both EFL teachers and students had positive attitudes towards teaching / learning the British culture during EFL classes.

3. Study Design

3.1 Participants

The current study was conducted in Amman at Middle East University where teaching a western culture was part of the study plan for B.A English language students. About 20 Jordanian female English Language students whose ages ranged between 20-23 years participated willingly in this study. However, about 13 students were at the fourth year while seven were still at the third and the majority were Muslims except one. Moreover, two of them were married and the rest were single. Their proficiency in English language varied from excellent to poor. Three of them were excellent, 15 were very good and the rest seemed to be very poor. Additionally, their cultural orientation was also a mixture of being conservative, secular and westerner. Six of them had already visited a foreign country and stayed there for different periods e.g two weeks, one month and 17 years. All of them started learning English since their childhood at the first grade.

3.2 Data Collection

Data were collected by using a five-part Likert scale questionnaire that combined quantitative and qualitative data. The first part was devoted to the participants' demographic data. The second part consisted of seven items that uncovered students' perceptions towards western culture classes. The third part, which comprised 12 statements, was to grasp students' opinions towards the benefits of western culture classes that they have gained by the end of the course.

The fourth part was to see which language skills or elements have been improved by the end of this course. Finally, the questionnaire ended with open-ended questions in which students answered the questions freely. It is worth mentioning that this questionnaire was designed based on Genc and Bada (2005) and Gonen, S. and Saglam, S. (2012). The researchers distributed 25 copies of the questionnaire by the end of the course that students have attended in the first semester, but 20 of them were filled and received. Additionally, data were calculated through means and percentages to show the degree of agreement.

4.0 Results

4.1 Results Related to Question One?

What are the EFL students' perceptions towards western culture classes?

To help answering this question, data of the second part of the questionnaire were calculated and presented in the table below. Data of Table (1) indicate that students have mostly shown positive perceptions towards such western culture classes. It seems that students are interested in getting knowledge of some cultural facts about the target culture and its people. This statement has scored the highest level of agreement 89% with a mean of 4.45. Interestingly, the change in students' perceptions towards the western culture has scored another high level of agreement by the majority of the students scoring about 87% with a mean of 4.35.

Table (1): Results of Students' Perceptions towards Western Culture Classes

Part II : Perceptions towards Western Culture Classes	Mean	%	Level of Agreement
It was interesting to know some cultural facts about target language and its people	4.45	89%	High
My perceptions changed towards the western culture at end of this course	4.35	87%	High
This course encouraged me to take further classes about the western culture	4.20	84%	High
I'd like to see western cultural components included in any future language classes	4.15	83%	High
I'd like to learn about western culture during EFL classes too	4.05	81%	High
My perceptions changed towards my own culture	3.80	76%	High
This class contributed to the loss of my cultural identity	1.75	35%	Low

Surprisingly, “*taking further classes about the western culture*” and “*seeing western cultural components included in any future language classes*” have scored high level of agreements and nearly similar percentages 84% and 83% respectively.

Finally, although students scored a high level of agreement (76%) towards the change in their perceptions towards their own culture, this does not lead to the loss of their cultural identity which scored a very low level of agreement with a percentage of 35% and a mean of 1.75.

4.2 Results Related to Question Two?

What are the benefits of the western culture classes from students' view points?

A quick look at Table (2) evidently proves that this western culture course was a fruitful one in which students have given high levels of agreement towards all benefits listed.

Table (2) Results of the Benefits of Western Culture Classes

	Part III: Benefits of Western Culture Classes This course	Mean	%	Level of Agreement
1	raised my awareness about history and its relationship to culture	4.75	95%	High
2	motivated me to learn more about the language	4.55	91%	High
3	raised my awareness about history and its relationship to language	4.45	89%	High
4	helped me to know the aspects of other western cultures	4.45	89%	High
5	helped me in understanding my own culture and cultural identity	4.45	89%	High
6	provided me with strategies for coping with culture shock through identifying symptoms and stages that most people go through in adjusting to a new culture	4.45	89%	High
7	made me more tolerant with the differences	4.40	88%	High
8	helped me in communicating with people of the target language	4.40	88%	High
9	provided me with better understanding of the influence of philosophical phenomenon in relation to contemporary western culture	4.35	87%	High
10	improved my language skills since there is a combination of culture and language	4.35	87%	High
11	raised my awareness about history and its relationship to communication	4.20	84%	High
12	developed critical attitudes towards both the western and the native cultures	3.90	78%	High

Data extracted from Table (2) show that EFL students have gained many benefits after attending western/foreign culture classes. It is clear that most statements that appear in Table (2) have scored high levels of agreement. Apparently, large percentage of students reported that such western culture classes have raised their awareness about history and its relationship to culture. This benefit has risen to reach 95% with a mean of 4.75. Additionally, such western culture classes have also highly motivated students to learn more about the language and thus scored the second highest level of agreement with a percentage of 91%.

Surprisingly, statements 3,4,5 and 6 have reached the same high levels of agreement with a similar percentage 89%. Students’ awareness about history and its relationship to language has also increased by the end of this course. Moreover, students were exposed to the aspects of western culture and thus this statement was given a high level of agreement. It seemed that this course has also helped students in understanding their own culture as well as their cultural identity. Seemingly, students are equipped with strategies for coping with culture shock through identifying symptoms and stages that most people go through in adjusting to a new culture.

Interestingly, responses demonstrate that such a western culture class has two other positive benefits such as being more tolerant with the differences as well as facilitating communication with people of the target language. These two scored high levels of agreement with a percentage of 88% and a mean of 4.40.

Finally, this course has relatively developed critical attitudes towards both the western and native cultures with a percentage of 87% and a mean of 3.90.

4.3 Results Related to Question Three?

What language skills and elements that have been improved during culture classes?

To have a much more comprehensive idea regarding the benefits of culture classes on both language skills and language elements, Table (3) illustrates the results of the responses received by the participants.

Table (3) Results of the Language Skills and Elements that Improved during this Course

Part IV: Language skills and elements : This course improved my	Mean	%
reading comprehension skills	4.65	93%
vocabulary and provided me with new terms	4.60	92%
ability in translation	4.50	90%
writing skills	4.45	89%
listening comprehension skills	4.40	88%
speaking skills	4.40	88%

Results prove that western culture classes in general have improved all language skills and elements. They were all given high levels of agreement with percentages ranging from 88% to 93%.

Reading comprehension skills seem to have scored the highest level of agreement 93% in which students feel that their ability to comprehend has increased by the end of this course. Their linguistic repertoire in terms of vocabulary as well as terminology has also increased as a result of this course. This statement has scored a high level of agreement of 92% with a mean of 4.60.

Results of Table (3) reveal that students’ translation abilities have improved during this course. They have given a high level of agreement 89% towards this improvement. Undoubtedly, since translation abilities have improved during this course, the writing skills would also be in progress. This has scored 89% of agreement. Furthermore, listening and speaking skills are also given a reasonable percentage of agreement. Students have acknowledged that these two skills have also improved by scoring a high similar percentage 88%.

4.4 Results of the Open-Ended Questions

In attempting to have a combination of quantitative and qualitative data, the researchers ended the questionnaire with open-ended questions to be filled by the participants. Each participant was asked the two questions below:

1. *To what extent do you think this course is an important one? Why?*
2. *Has this course changed your views and corrected some beliefs? Why? Why not?*

Results of the first question show that almost all participants agree that this course is an important one for the numerous benefits they have gained. These benefits would either be related to general or linguistic knowledge.

The former lies in: (1) learning about western culture in terms of its history and traditions which helped them to know how to deal with people from different countries with different cultures, (2) changing their ideas about the western culture, (3) increasing their awareness of different cultures and helping them to learn new things, (4) understanding others and being more familiar with the western cultural aspects, (5) increasing their motivation to learn English language, (6) helping students to understand some situations very well, (7) helping them to recognize the differences among cultures and (8) recognizing that each culture has its own origins which we should all respect. Moreover, students acknowledge that their linguistic knowledge has also improved such as: (1) getting new vocabulary, (2) improving their ability to comprehend and (3) sharpening their writing skills.

Answers to the second question reveal that most students believe that this course has changed their views and corrected some beliefs. One of the respondents states that “*this course opened my eyes on angles that I haven’t paid attention to . Knowing western culture and their attitudes helped me to know how human beings differ and how do people act in different spots on the earth*”. Another respondent shows her agreement adding that “*this course has widely changed my views towards the other cultures since it enables me to understand and respect the others*”. Others believe that such a course made them able to cope with people of western culture; has changed previous ambiguous ideas about the western culture and also helped them to differentiate between both western and eastern cultures. Responses reveal that after finishing this course, students’ views and opinions of the western culture and their attitudes have been changed since it raised their awareness of the history of other cultures.

5. Discussion

5.1 Discussion Related to Question One

The present study seeks to investigate students’ perceptions towards western culture classes. Results show that students have registered positive attitudes and tendencies towards the western culture classes. These results support the findings of the open-ended questions in which students revealed that their ideas about the western culture have changed positively leading them to understand and respect others. This could be justified by the fact that all participants are EFL students who in a way or another might be interested in knowing not only about the target language but also about the target culture of the language they are learning. Results also revealed that students’ perceptions towards the western culture highly changed by the end of the course. This result might be ascribed to the fact that students at this age are still not fully exposed to other cultures. Fortunately, this course came to fill a gap found in students’ knowledge of western culture. That’s why by the end of this course, students were encouraged to: take further classes about western culture, see western cultural components included in any EFL classes as well as learning about western culture. This means that this course is a successful one since it has helped the learners to see the western culture from their own angles and has eventually changed their attitudes positively. These results are compatible with those of Guilani, M. ,Yasin, M., Hua, T. and Aghaei,K. (2012) who stated that familiarity with the cultural features of the target language people could help the learners see the world with open eyes and modify their attitude towards other cultures. Findings were also consistent with Dweik and Al-sayyed (2015) who proved that EFL students and teachers had positive attitudes towards learning the British culture. Furthermore, findings were in total harmony with those of Genc and Bada (2005) who found out that both students and language experts had also positive attitudes towards culture classes.

Another interesting result is that this course had not contributed to the loss of the students’ cultural identities. This means that learning and knowing about other cultures should not affect learners’ own culture; instead , it should enhance students’ knowledge of other cultures.

5.1 Discussion Related to Question Two

Results have proved that students have gained various benefits from western culture classes. Students’ awareness about history and its relationship to culture has reached the top among other benefits. This result might be due to the fact that history is a crucial component of any culture and should not be neglected. Moreover, students’ motivation to learn more about the language has increased as a result of this course. This could refer to the fact that the respondents are all EFL students who are always encouraged to learn more about the language they are learning. This result is in agreement with those of Ching Ho (1998) who proved that culture studies were beneficial since they tried to increase Taiwanese students’ motivation to learn English and make students more interested in knowing about the English speaking countries. Additionally, results are in harmony with those of Tsou (2005) who came up with the result that cultural instruction gave students better interest in language learning.

Interestingly, results showed that students' awareness about history and its relationship to language had scored a high level of agreement. This result would be justified by the fact that learning any language could not be separated from history, and history is an important element that complements any language learning. Additionally, learning any language should start from its history and origins.

Learning about the aspects of other western cultures was one of the main benefits that students gained at the end of this course. This might be due to the fact that all respondents were EFL students who should be aware of the cultural aspects of western culture since culture is part and parcel of language learning. Additionally, if students do not learn the target culture they will end up fluent fool speakers (Bennett, 1993).

Another important fruitful benefit of teaching culture is that students are equipped with strategies for coping with culture shock through identifying symptoms and stages of adjusting to new culture. This result was given a high percentage of agreement. This might be ascribed to the fact that all respondents were nearly fourth year students who might pursue their higher education abroad. That's why such culture classes would answer all queries they might have with all its solutions starting from symptoms of culture shock and ending with the adaptation strategies. This result is in complete agreement with those of Kitao (1991) who focused on the cultural orientation for students who were willing to study abroad.

Being more tolerant with the difference is one of the fruits that students picked by the end of this course. This result was justified implicitly by one of the participants who stated that this course opened her eyes on angles that she has never paid attention to. This result is in complete agreement with those of Guilani, M., Yasin, M., Hua, T. and Aghaei, K. (2012) who stated that by learning culture, students' tolerance was enhanced not only as a language learner but also as a human being. Such findings are also in agreement with those of Kramsch (as cited in Dweik 2007) who also stated that teaching culture made learners more tolerant with others.

5.1 Discussion Related to Question Three

A general overview of the results of language skills and elements reveal that almost all language skills and elements were improved through attending western culture classes with some slight variations. Additionally, the results of the questionnaire supported the findings of the open-ended questions in which the students acknowledged that they gained linguistic benefits such as getting new vocabulary, improving their abilities to comprehend and improving their writing skills. These results agree with those of Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) who emphasized that one of the theoretical objectives behind teaching culture was to improve the required skills for organizing the target culture's information. They are also in total agreement with those of Tsou (2005) whose results revealed that when culture lessons were integrated into EFL instruction, students' language proficiency was significantly improved. Findings are also in agreement with Kramsh who considered culture as a fifth skill that complements the other four skills. Findings are also identical with those of Genc and Bada (2005) whose participants announced that all language skills have been improved by the end of the 28-hour culture course.

This western culture course has pushed the reading comprehension skills to reach the top of the ladder and scored about 93%. This is because reading comprehension skills are often obstructed by cultural phrases, cultural idioms and cultural information that make the meaning ambiguous especially if they do not exist in the source language. So knowing and being exposed to such culture classes might enlighten EFL students of western culture aspects as well as facilitating the reading comprehension.

Learners' vocabulary and terminology have increased as a result of this western culture class. It has scored the second highest level of agreement and this is the logical reasonable expected order. That is to say, if students' comprehension skills have improved, this implicitly means that students' linguistic repertoire in terms of vocabulary and terminology has also witnessed an improvement.

However, students' abilities in translation have also improved as a result of culture classes. This result might be justified by the fact that the most serious problems that encounter students while translating are the cultural expressions and phrases. Furthermore, by exposing students to such classes, culture-related problems might shrink and decrease. It is worth mentioning that the writing skills are a crucial part in translation and if the translation skills improved, the writing skills would do so.

The aural and oral skills have scored the last two highest percentages. Although these two skills have scored high percentages, they seem to score the lowest.

This is due to the fact that most EFL students have often difficulty in these two skills although they might be skillful in the other two ones. That is to say, the culture classes have improved their listening and speaking skills to some extent but not as same as the other skills. The improvement in the listening skills is in complete agreement with those of Hayati (2009) who proved that the cultural knowledge had an effect on improving the Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension. However, results are consistent with Fetemi, M., Montazerinia, F., Shirazian, Sh. and Atarodi, M. (2014) whose T-test proved that there were significant effects of integrating culture on the development of learners' listening comprehension.

6. Conclusions

The overall results revealed that teaching western/target culture has changed students' views positively towards the western culture. Also, results unveiled that this western culture course was a fruitful and successful one since students gained the most important expected benefits of teaching culture such as raising students' awareness about history and its relationship to culture, language and communication and motivating students to learn more about the language. Finally, findings proved that such western culture classes have not only improved all language skills but also language elements such as vocabulary.

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