

THE PERCEPTIONS OF UNDERGRADUATE ELT STUDENTS ON THE TEACHING OF CULTURE

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Abstract: *The relationship between the teaching of language and culture in the ELT context is a debatable topic. Since how culture is supposed to be taught in the context of ELT has not been comprehensively discussed, there are needs to explore these issues further, especially from the perspectives of learners. The reported study aims to examine the perceptions of undergraduate ELT students on the teaching of culture. Students shared their perceptions of the teaching culture, cultural content in handout from teachers, and their expectations towards the aspects to be taught concerning culture in a questionnaire distributed to students from four cohorts who were still actively enrolled in courses during the data collection stage of the study. The study results showed that, in general, language learners had positive perceptions towards the teaching of culture as they could learn English speaking people's and countries' culture alongside their own native culture. Moreover, they started to learn cultural understanding and cultural awareness by comparing both cultures. Nevertheless, they preferred taking cultural courses and learning cultural topics that are not within skill courses. They also expected to learn culture from native speakers and authentic materials used to support cultural learning activities.*

Keywords: *culture, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English Language Teaching (ELT), learner perception*

INTRODUCTION

Many people believe that when we learn a second/foreign language, we learn not only the target language itself but also the culture of the language. As a world language spoken in more than 60 countries as the dominant or official language, English plays an essential role in many aspects of modern life, including education, business, politics, and society. Also, it has become the lingua franca of the world, and people everywhere willingly or unwillingly learn this language. Therefore, when learning English as a second/foreign language, learners will directly or indirectly be exposed to the culture of the people speaking the language as their mother tongue and second/foreign language. In foreign language (FL) learning and teaching, the question regarding learning the culture and language emerges as a topic of debate and discussion. "The person who learns language without learning culture risks becoming a fluent fool" (Bennett & Allen, 2003). In short, it can be concluded that it is impossible to learn English without learning the culture of English-speaking people and the countries where English is spoken as a first or second language; since learning the culture is the key to learning the language itself. Nevertheless, how culture is taught in language teaching and learning has not been comprehensively discussed as language learners have different contexts, needs, and expectations.

According to Cortazzi and Jin (1999), there are three basic types of cultural materials in English teaching: source culture, target culture, and international culture. Source culture draws on learners' own culture. For instance, Indonesian would easily relate to materials that are based on Indonesian society and culture. A target culture concerns the cultures belonging to the target language culture, e.g., English. It focused on the cultures of English-speaking countries or the country's culture in which English is spoken as an L1 or L2. EFL learners in Indonesia spend some of their learning time learning and reading about life in native-English speaking countries, such as the United States, Great Britain, and Australia. This way, they know the lifestyle of the speakers of English in their English-speaking countries. The last is international culture. This is related to the cultures that do not belong to the source culture nor the target culture. For example, Japanese work ethics can be compared with European work ethics.

In order to give students an awareness of varied cultures and a better understanding of the diversity and complexity of culture, many colleges offer their students elective courses on culture, such as Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) and cultural studies, such as American Studies and Australian Studies. The focus of the CCU course is on the culture of English-speaking countries (target culture) and how they compare the cultures with the student's own culture (source culture). In addition, many English departments also offer cultural studies that focused on exploring literature and its relation to culture and cultural products. This includes the traditionally perceived literary genres such as poetry, prose, drama, etc. It also includes the modern counterparts such as articles, speeches, travel writings, billboards, games, media, to name a few. The purposes of these studies are to develop students' critical thinking skills and offer alternative solutions to problems related to socio-cultural issues and the political economy of an era of a nation.

Many universities with English Language Teaching (ELT) study programs include the required courses on subject matters. The content of the required courses includes all four basic language skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Therefore, all students should master the basics before they can take higher-level courses. In addition, lecturers teach the culture of the target language by giving them several topics. For example, in speaking courses, lecturers can give students culturally related topics like greetings, patterns of politeness, verbal taboos, music, hobbies, meals, etc. (Brooks, 1968). This is one of the ways culture may be introduced to learners of English. There are, of course, many other ways.

This study aims to investigate undergraduate English Department students' perceptions and expectations towards the teaching of culture. The finding of this study will contribute to a better understanding of how students perceive culture and how it should be learned. The survey study investigated the undergraduate ELT students' perceptions and expectations toward teaching culture in their department. Data were collected from four cohorts, i.e., 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019. The online questionnaire was distributed using Google Form to all students. It took two weeks to collect data. The total number of respondents who returned the questionnaire is 258 or 55.3% from the whole population of the four cohorts, which is 466.

The study attempted to answer three research questions: (1) What the students' perception towards the teaching of culture are; (2) What the students' perception toward the cultural content in their teacher's handout is; and (3) What cultural aspects the students expect to learn from the courses offered in their department. The teaching of culture in this study refers to how English-speaking people and countries' cultures are taught in skill and content courses in the department of English. Culture in this study includes native speakers' way of life, traditions, customs, way of thinking, etc. Besides native speakers, students are also asked about their own culture compared to English-speaking people's and countries' cultures.

METHODOLOGY

The survey study employed descriptive research as the approach for analyzing the data. Descriptive research was used since the purpose of the study was to describe a phenomenon and its characteristics. According to Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007), descriptive research is concerned with 'what' rather than 'how' or 'why' something has happened. This study was concerned with students' perceptions and expectations towards the teaching of culture. The data were collected using survey tools with close-ended type questions.

The study respondents were undergraduate students of the English Language Teaching of the 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019 cohorts at the Department of English, Universitas Negeri Malang. The estimated total number of students from the four cohorts was 466 students, but only 240 students (55.3%) returned the questionnaire.

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire adapted from Uddin (2017) and Gonen and Saglam (2012). Some items from both studies were selected because not all items were relevant

to the present study. Even though the questionnaire was adapted from other studies, some modifications were required. All of the thirty-one questionnaire items concerned with the teaching of culture. The closed-ended question in the study used the Likert scale of 1-4. The scale used were, 1: Strongly disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Agree, 4: Strongly Agree.

After the survey instrument was revised based on the feedback of the tryout respondents, it was distributed to the targeted population through the WhatsApp application (application for calling, chatting for smartphone).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings correspond to the research questions the study tried to answer. There are three research questions in this study. The first question asked the students' perception towards the teaching of culture. The second question asked the students' perception toward the cultural content in their teacher's handout. Finally, the last question asked the students' perception and expectations towards the aspects of culture that are supposed to be taught.

Attitudes Towards Learning Culture in ELT Context

The first four numbers discussed the importance of the teaching of culture in ELT courses. A closer examination of the findings showed that 148 (61.6%) respondents believed learning the culture of English-speaking people and countries is as important as learning the language. The lowest score showed that not even a single respondent thought that learning the culture of English-speaking people and countries is not essential. On the contrary, it proved that the students needed to learn English speaking people and countries' culture as well as when they learn the language. Likewise, in question number three, 117 (48.7%) of the respondents strongly agree with the idea that the more students know about English-speaking people's and countries' cultures, the more tolerant they are. Only fourteen respondents answered strongly disagree and disagree. Thus, the respondents might think that they were already tolerant of others when they know English-speaking English-speaking people's and countries' cultures.

In questions number two and four, which have negative statements, the researcher found that most of the respondents strongly disagree with the statement, and some agree with the statements. The question surprisingly gave the unusual pattern of the respondents' answers. The researcher noted that even if the students learning English-speaking people and their culture, it will not diminish their understanding of their own culture and native culture since, in question number three, most of them agree that they are more tolerant if they know English speaking people and countries' culture, it is showed their positive attitude in learning English speaking people and countries' culture. For question number five until seven in the questionnaire were almost similar meaning. These focused on the learners' confidence level in their own cultural, social values, and identity. Most of the respondents strongly disagree and disagree with the statements. Almost all of the respondents opted to strongly disagree and disagree with the statements. Some of the respondents who answered strongly agree with the statements were below ten respondents. Question number five, which asked the subjects whether or not they can forget the importance of their own culture because of learning English, has a relatively more significant number of respondents who opted to strongly disagree and disagree rather than the other two questions. It showed that learning English never made the students forget the importance of their own culture, losing their confidence in their cultural identity nor lack of understanding of their own culture. The students believed that learning English has no adverse effect on their own culture or their cultural identity. On the contrary, they might use English as a language or a tool for communication so that they do not feel threatened by learning English.

The statement above is parallel with the study by Uddin (2017), who showed that the respondents thought English has no negative effect or affects their self-identity, social norms, and

cultural values. They assume English as a language, a tool for communication to achieve their goals. Having a culture in learning English is for their knowledge and to build their cultural understanding.

A high percentage of the subjects agreed to both questions in number eight and nine; the questions reflect opinions of the subjects whether misunderstanding of other speakers with different languages meets often arises from linguistic or cultural differences. It revealed that 139 (58%) of the subject agree if misunderstanding often comes from linguistic differences, while 136 (56.6%) of the subject agree if misunderstanding comes from cultural differences. The researcher noted that the subjects agree if both cultural and linguistic often make speakers with different languages found difficulties understanding each other; therefore, students need to learn English speaking countries' culture to enhance their understanding apart of only learning their language.

Perceptions on Cultural Content in Lecturers' Handout

The questions about cultural content in the lecturers' handout asked the students about their attitude in general and their opinion about the cultural content in the handouts. The researcher believes it is necessary to ask the students about their handout from lecturers since lecturers' handout is a tool and the media to guide the learners in learning. It showed a high percentage of the participants 125 (52%) agree. However, 48 (20%) respondents disagree with the idea that the development of cultural awareness of the foreign language should not be kept only for the learners in advanced levels. For those respondents who agree with the statement, they had a strong desire to develop their cultural awareness along with learning English. It is essential to develop the students' cultural awareness since they are in beginner levels, and the teacher could help them by giving appropriate materials for each level. Although some respondents disagree with the statement, the researcher noted that developing students' cultural awareness is a hard thing to do when they are at the beginner level, so that they chose to develop their cultural awareness later when they are in the advanced levels.

Number eleven and thirteen have a strong correlation. It asked the learners' opinions regarding lecturers' handout content related to American and British culture. Most of the participants, 131 (54.6%), disagree with the idea that they feel alienated or detached if their handout from lecturers does not contain their own culture. Similarly, item number thirteen of the questionnaire revealed that 110 (46%) opted to choose to disagree with the question or it means that American or British (or other English-speaking countries') contents in the lecturers' handout are not demotivating them or make them alienated while learning British/American/other English speaking countries' culture even though it does not match well with the learners' culture.

In item number fifteen, an unexpected result revealed that 142 of the participants disagree with the statement and supported by 44 respondents who strongly disagree with the statement. It means that almost half of respondents wanted their own culture to be included in lecturers' handouts; unlike the previous question asking about British or American culture-related content in the lecturers' handout, the students determined to choose that their handout from lecturers should also contain their own culture. Even though ELT students are focused on learning English culture and language, the students still need to learn their own culture, especially in the form of a handout from lecturers. It will be good if the students could learn about both cultures without missing the other one. They can learn their own culture and English-speaking countries' culture in an integrated way or by comparison.

The results are also in line with Abdullah and Chandran (2009), who investigated the cultural elements in the Malaysian textbook. They recommend putting the students' own culture (local culture) to be integrated with the target culture in English textbooks or handouts. It is also essential to introduce Western culture by comparing both cultures through textbooks or handouts to raise the students' awareness (Suemasa, 2004).

Aspects of Culture Expected to be Taught in ELT Contexts

There are many topics and themes in terms of cultural context that can be taught in teaching and learning; nevertheless, the teacher might need to conduct the need analysis of the students and sort out the suitable topics for them without forgetting their own culture and the target culture. Furthermore, in the questionnaire, the researcher also asked the participants about the aspects that they want and need to learn.

Based on the findings from the questionnaire in item number sixteen there were 111 of the subjects agree with the idea, supported by 100 of the subjects who opted to choose strongly agree. As has been expected, it can be concluded that they considerably recognize in studying the English language must be taught separately. In short, they wanted to learn the English language (especially grammar and other four skills) without learning English-speaking people's and countries' cultures at the same time. It such an idea to have courses like Cross-Cultural Understanding, Human and Culture, or Cultural studies, which focused on learning the English-speaking people and countries' culture. Those separate courses could also make the students learn many cultures deeper without minding grammar and the other four skills.

Questions seventeen and eighteen have a similar purpose, which asked the subjects what they needed and what they have learned during semesters. The questions also remind the teacher to prepare some topics that make the students interested in learning the English language and its culture. In number seventeen, about 146 (60.8%) of the respondents strongly agree with the statement, and only eight respondents disagree with the statement. Such an unexpected result appeared since almost all of the respondents thought they needed to learn traditions, folklore, and tourist attractions. The same unexpected result was also found in question number 227 of the respondents who answered for both strongly agree and agree with the statement, and the lowest score found only thirteen respondents. From those questions, it can be concluded that the students still lack the materials regarding traditions, folklore, music, virtual arts, classical arts, moreover literature, prose, poetry, and drama. A tourist attraction is one of the materials which rarely found as a topic in ELT. The teacher tends to focus on literature such as prose, poetry, drama, and so on.

Valdes (1986) views literature as "an unbridged fiction, drama, poetry, or essay written for an educated audience of native speakers of the language in which it is written, purporting to represent life as it really is." It shows that other cultural expressions help the students recognize the target culture easier since they represent the culture as it is. Boudreault (2010) summarized the benefits of using drama in a language such as "(1) the acquisition of meaningful, fluent interaction in the target language; (2) the assimilation of a whole range of the features of pronunciation and prosody in a contextualized and interactional fashion; (3) the acquisition of new fully contextualized vocabulary and structure; (4) an improved sense of students' confidence in their ability to learn the target language; (5) an opportunity to develop the students' imagination; (6) an opportunity to increase independent thinking..."

In item number nineteen until twenty-two is related. It revealed that most of the participants strongly disagree with the statement in number nineteen. However, many respondents in giving responses to an idea of expanding the cultural dimension, including students' skill and other ELT courses, received agreement for about 101 of the respondents strongly agree with the idea, and 122 of the respondents also opted to agree with the idea. The researcher noted the students disagree that their teacher never tells them about English speaking people and countries' culture, but felt the cultural dimension should be expanded. The students needed to vast their knowledge by acknowledging certain uniqueness of English-speaking people and countries' culture. As can be seen, the highest percentage could be found in the number twenty-two. It proved that students still lack cognition about English-speaking people and countries' cultural stereotypes. Therefore, as an important aspect to introduce native speaker's culture, teachers could provide them with stereotypes of English-speaking countries and native speakers. Another advantage of teaching something fascinating is to build students' understanding and tolerant of other cultures.

Sercu (2005), in his study, states that comparing both cultures can develop a better understanding of the student's own culture, including the characteristics, and develop empathy toward the diversity of the target culture. Parallel with the previous study, Ekşi (2009) also added that this kind of activity could help students think critically and build their intercultural understanding that the students' culture is not only the one which is proper and correct other cultures.

Question number twenty-three showed that most responses strongly agreed with the statement, which asked if their teachers needed to invite a native speaker to their class to make them more excited about learning native culture. It revealed that 127 of the subjects strongly agree, and 79 of the subjects also chose to agree. As can be seen, the students tend to choose strongly agree, and 34 of the subjects did not agree with the statement, it may happen due to the expectation of the students to have a native speaker in the class cannot be fulfilled by their teachers. Students agree that teachers needed to invite a native speaker to their classroom to gain their excitement in learning native speakers' culture. Students who answered agree and strongly agree with the statement might believe that learn English speaking people and countries' culture should have more interesting if they got it from the first speaker. They could exchange their knowledge and thoughts about their own culture. This idea can help the learners to improve their cultural awareness and cultural understanding.

Peterson and Coltrane (2003) recommend some instructional strategies for the teacher in teaching language and culture, which can integrate culture in practical ways. One of those strategies is "sending students into the community of the native speakers of the target language to find information about their target culture."

In item number twenty-four, the analysis results showed that 127 of the participants strongly agreed, and 100 participants agreed with the statement. The lowest score for this question is that 13 respondents disagree with the statement. It revealed that the students needed the teacher to combine both language and culture in language teaching to improve their English skills.

The following questions, numbers twenty-five until twenty-eight, pointed out teaching culture activities in the class. The researcher found that these four questions have the highest percentage other than previous questions. Amongst these four questions, the maximum percentage in question number twenty-seven has the highest one, with 167 of the subjects strongly agree with the statement. Students tend to learn English speaking people and countries' culture through videos or images. It helped them in figuring out the native speaker's culture easily. Moreover, most of the students never go to English-speaking countries. There were only two respondents who disagreed with the idea of learning through video or images. In the second position, statement number twenty-six showed 125 of the subjects strongly agree with the statement. The students agree that authentic materials did affect their understanding of English, both language and culture. Authentic materials could play the central role in teaching culture since authentic materials are made by the native speaker, which students could imagine about the situation and condition there. It could be in the form of newspaper, TV show, magazine, etc.

In the same tone, Richard (2001) states that the learners need to involve in real communication; hence the process of teaching and learning in the class is a preparation for the learners to survive in the real world. Using authentic materials helps to engage the students in authentic cultural experiences. Ho (2009) also suggests the teacher gives exposure to the students through watching videos. He gives an example of an activity and lets the students watch a British family video having the tradition of tea breaks. The students will be able to notice the native speakers behave socially in the afternoon tea. Observing and noticing the target language culture helps students develop their respect and tolerance towards their own culture and other cultures.

This statement different from the statement in number twenty-five, which asked the students whether or not describing the aspect of students' own culture is an excellent chance for them to improve their English, including language and culture. Not much of the respondents disagreed with the statement; it proved by describing their own culture using English could also improve their skills. Rather than only describing English-speaking people's and countries' cultures using English, the teacher could

ask the students to describe their own culture using English. Therefore, they also learn their own culture, but at the same time, they also increase their skills in the language. Last but not least, in statement number twenty-eight, 122 of the subjects strongly agree, and 97 chose to agree with the statement also think that their teachers should introduce the daily life of native speakers of English. Teachers could introduce the daily life of native speakers through television or videos so that the students could get exposure and analyze it.

Different from other numbers, number twenty-nine focused on the education life of the students. The researcher put education life in the questionnaire to ask the students about their future professional life expectations. After learning language and English-speaking people and countries' culture, the students will be able to put themselves better when going abroad. A significant number of the subjects, 135 (56.2%), voted strongly agree with the statement. It revealed the expectation of the students that they need more information about the education system in English-speaking countries, and the students did hope they could get it mostly from their teachers. Moreover, if their teachers graduated abroad, they could share their experiences with the students.

The last two questions in the questionnaire asked the students to compare both cultures, students' own culture, and the target culture. As a result, 117 of the subjects chose to agree on the first statement, and 119 of the subjects opted to choose to agree on the second statement. The first statement revealed the highest score of disagreeing rather than the last statement. Forty-five respondents disagree with the idea of exploring the aspects of English-speaking people and countries' cultures individually. Students might think it would be much easier for them to understand the aspect in a group to share ideas and found many aspects. This was supported by the finding in number thirty-one, which revealed 109 of the respondents strongly agree and 119 of the respondents agree with the statement. If the teachers asked them to compare their own culture and native speaker's culture, either in a group or independently, they could find the difference between both. After comparing the culture, the teacher must give them a clear explanation. The purpose of giving them an explanation is to make the students realize, comparing culture is not to find which one is better, but how to understand each other.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings and discussion in the previous sections, the teaching of culture at the Department of English in Universitas Negeri Malang has been given positive responses by the students. It can be concluded that first, they preferred taking cultural courses and learn the topic, not within the context of skill courses. British/American/Australian studies, Cross-Cultural Understanding, Human and Culture, are some courses that the students chose as they learned many cultures. Second, the teachers also have done some activities to introduce English-speaking people's and countries' using some techniques like role play, drama, and storytelling, which are highly recommended. Third, they are highly interested in putting their own culture and English-speaking people's and countries' cultures in the lecturers' handouts. Fourth, the students want to be taught by native speakers. Native speakers as a model of the language are considered more beneficial than non-native speakers. Alternatively, at least they have a richer vocabulary and can teach the students how to pronounce words better.

The cultural needs of the learners should be given proper attention so that lecturers can present them in their classroom. Material developers and syllabus designers can also include cultural notes and information in coursebooks to increase students' and teachers' awareness of the importance of culture in language learning. Last but not least, holding workshops for teacher will help them to appropriately and consciously familiarize themselves with the development in the area of Cross-Cultural Understanding, anthropology, language and gender studies in ELT, and other related areas of study.

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