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THE ROLE OF CULTURAL CONTEXT IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

A Research

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بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

((فَرِحِينَ بِمَا آتَاهُمُ اللَّهُ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ ۖ وَيَسْتَبْشِرُونَ بِالَّذِينَ لَمْ يَلْحَقُوا بِهِمْ مِنْ خَلْفِهِمْ أَلَّا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ))

صدق الله العلي العظيم

آل عمران [170]

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my family, whose unwavering support and encouragement have been my guiding light throughout this journey. To my parents, thank you for instilling in me the values of hard work and perseverance. To my friends, who have stood by me through the challenges and triumphs, your camaraderie has made this experience worthwhile. Lastly, I dedicate this research to all my mentors and educators, whose wisdom and guidance have shaped my academic path and inspired me to pursue knowledge with passion and dedication.

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Abstract

This study investigates the essential role of cultural context in learning English as a second language (ESL), addressing the challenges that arise from cultural divergence and the importance of cultural awareness in language acquisition. It examines the interconnectedness of culture and language, highlighting how cultural elements shape communication and can lead to misunderstandings. By analyzing the significance of cultural knowledge in the language learning process, this research aims to provide insights for educators to enhance ESL instruction, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and effective learning environment.

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Chapter One

1.1 Introduction

Understanding the role of cultural context in learning English as a second language is pivotal for both educators and learners. This topic delves into how intrinsic cultural elements shape language acquisition, influencing not only the way learners comprehend and utilize the language but also the manner in which they engage with diverse cultures. Cultural context encompasses the social, historical, and emotional dimensions that impact language learning, which can significantly enhance or impede the overall educational experience for non-native speakers.

Chapter One lays the groundwork by defining key concepts such as culture and its elements, as well as exploring the intricate relationship between language and culture. This section addresses the core problem being studied and the overarching aim of the research, establishing a framework for understanding how these factors intertwine. The discussions in this chapter will highlight the profound implications of cultural context on language learning, setting the stage for a deeper exploration in the subsequent sections.

Chapter Two expands upon the findings from the first chapter by examining the interconnection of culture and language in greater detail. It discusses the impacts of cultural awareness on language acquisition, emphasizing how misunderstandings may arise from cultural differences. Additionally, this chapter underscores the significance of culture in the language learning process, supported by insights into how cultural influences can facilitate or hinder effective communication. Through this structured approach, the research aims to provide comprehensive insights into the complexities of language learning within cultural frameworks.

1.2 The Problem

Cultural differences in communication are an essential aspect to consider when teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). Learners often come from diverse cultural backgrounds, and each culture has its unique communication norms that can influence how they express themselves in English. These norms include not only verbal communication but also non-verbal cues such as gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and tone of voice. These elements of communication can vary greatly between cultures, leading to potential misunderstandings and misinterpretations. A gesture that conveys respect or agreement in one culture may be viewed as impolite or improper in another. Similarly, differences in tone of voice, such as the use of a soft or forceful tone, can convey various meanings across cultures, and a lack of awareness in this area may result in confusion or unintended insult.

In addition to gestures and tone, cultural variations can influence the level of formality or directness in interactions. Some cultures prioritize formal speaking and indirect communication, whilst others may choose a more casual and straightforward approach. These distinctions can be difficult for ESL students to navigate, particularly when dealing with circumstances that require specific politeness rules or the usage of formal versus informal language. For example, using a casual tone with someone of higher social rank or in a professional context may be regarded as unacceptable in some cultures, whilst others may not place the same amount of formality on such encounters.

1.3 The Aim of The Study

The aim of this study is to explore the significant role that cultural context plays in learning English as a second language (ESL) and its impact on language acquisition. Understanding the interplay between culture and language is crucial in the ESL context as cultural differences influence not only communication styles but also learning methods and interactions in a new language. By investigating how culture shapes language learning experiences this research seeks to shed light on how varying cultural backgrounds affect students' ability to grasp and use English effectively. Additionally, the study aims to examine how cultural norms, values, and practices can both facilitate and hinder the acquisition of English, ultimately affecting learners' confidence and proficiency in the language.

1.4 The Concept of Culture.

Culture is notoriously difficult to define. Kroeber and Kluckhoh two American anthropologists, conducted a comprehensive assessment of cultural concepts and terminologies in 1952, compiling a list of 164 definitions. Apte (1994: 2001), writing in the ten-volume Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics, summarized the problem as follows: "Despite a century of efforts to define culture adequately, there was in the early 1990s no agreement among anthropologists regarding its nature."

The term "culture" has several different meanings. For some, it means an appreciation for good literature, music, art, and food. However, anthropologists and other behavioral scientists define culture as the entire set of learned human behavior patterns. The term was first used in this way by the pioneer English Anthropologist Edward B. Tylor in his book, *Primitive Culture*, published in 1913. Tylor says that culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom,

and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."

The term culture initially referred to the simple domestic concept of growth in animals and plants. Later, the term came to refer to people who had received education and training."In the nineteenth century it was recognized as bearing not only the absolute meaning of refinement of mind, taste, and manners in an individual, but also of intellectual attainments, especially as exemplified in the relics of artistic endeavor, representing whole phases of a civilization"(Brooks, 1964:83).

We use the term culture to refer to all the ideas and assumptions about the nature of things and people that we learn when we become members of social groups. It can be defined as "socially acquired knowledge." This is the kind of knowledge that, like our first language, we initially acquire without conscious awareness. We develop awareness of our knowledge, and hence of our culture, only after having developed language. The particular language we learn through the process of cultural transmission provides us, at least initially, with a ready-made system of categorizing the world around us and our experience of it (Yule, 2010:267).

Everyday culture is more comprehensive and developed than before. This development influences learners to learn the English language through culture. Al-Hussein (2013:68)"culture is a controversial term". There is a lot of argumentation about this term accordingly, the term culture has different definitions. It is difficult to say exactly what culture is. Lederach (1995 : 9) expresses that "culture is the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing and responding to the social realities around them".

Finally, in order to establish a uniform definition of culture, UNESCO published a paper on cultural identification in 2002. According to this statement, "culture is the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of society and of social groups, and that it includes, in addition to art and literature, lifestyle, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs". Needless to say, despite the different identifications and understandings of culture, "people instinctively know what culture means to them and to which culture they belong" (Katan 1999: 16). In addition, it should be stated that culture is not visible as a product, but is internal, collective and is acquired rather than learned.

1.5 Element of Culture.

Each individual belongs to a distinct group. He/She reflects his/her own special thought and culture. It is simple to place him/her in his/her group and differentiate him/her from the others. For instance, language of a child is different from the language of an adult or the people in the North speak differently from the people in the South or the language of the poor is different from the language of the rich, even their clothes are different. Elements such as language, rituals, clothes, science, beliefs and values connect people together (Roohul-Amini, 1989). Culture is learnt through relation with other people. Therefore, culture is not natural, inborn and will-less; it is a social product. Some factors are considerable and momentous in this transmission such as information and knowledge in a society, social changes, social relations and mass media. Thus, culture transmits generation by generation, the elements are carried from one place to another place, it is divided into some sub-cultures and it is finally the victim of crises.

Words are the most important tools for cultural symbolism. That is to say, poems, stories, fictions, epics and myths are the main ingredients and components of a culture in a society. Myth, Levis Strauss (1976) believes, in a language expresses universal realities in symbols. On the whole, the elements of culture are the entirety of socially transmitted and common behavior patterns, prototypes, samples, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought.

1.6 The Relationship Between language and Culture.

Language is a part of culture, and that it plays a very important role in it. Some social scientists consider that without language, culture would not be possible. Language simultaneously reflects culture, and is influenced and shaped by it. In the broadest sense, it is also the symbolic representation of a people, since it comprises their historical and cultural backgrounds, as well as their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking. describes the two as follows: 'A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture.' In a word, culture and language are inseparable (Brown 1994:165).

According to Nida (1998: 29) holds the view that 'Language and culture are two symbolic systems. Everything we say in language has meanings, designative or sociative, denotative or connotative. Every language form we use has meanings, carries meanings that are not in the same sense because it is associated with culture and culture is more extensive than language. People of different cultures can refer to different things while using the same language forms.

Many anthropologists, sociologists, and linguists have agreed that culture and language are inextricably linked. Language is commonly used to define culture, and vice versa. Even the relationship between culture and language is considered a separate branch of study. That is, neither culture nor language can be comprehended without the other. Related to this field, we can find many prominent theorists who support this. Bronislaw Malinowski was one of the first anthropologists to realize that language could only be understood with reference to culture: a context of culture. In 1923 he coined the term "context of situation" and noted that a language could only be fully understood and has meaning when these two contexts (situation and culture) were implicitly or explicitly clear to the interlocutors and hearers (Katan 1999: 72).

As pointed out by (Hale 1992:36) some forms of art, especially verbal art (music, poems), are highly dependent upon "properties of the language" in which it was originally conceived. Language is what defines us as humans and humans are culturally and socially entwined. Other authors have pointed out that a language loss represents the loss of "linguistic and cultural knowledge" (Ladefoged 1992:810), the loss of the "cultural tradition connected to it". There is no way to dissociate language from culture (Sasse 1992:7).

Chapter Tow

2.1 The Interconnection of Culture and Languag.

Language and culture are inextricably linked, with language reflecting culture but also actively contributing to its production . The complicated dance between language and culture is obvious in English language learning, where the acquisition process entails more than just grammatical and lexical skill; it also includes understanding the cultural nuances interwoven within the language . This symbiotic relationship between language and culture is fundamental to efficient language acquisition and meaningful communication . Beyond the mechanics of language, student must.explore the cultural layers, comprehending the intricacies that impact expression and meaning.Given English's global position, it naturally reflects the differ ent cultural origins of its speakers. As learners move through their language journey, they will undoubtedly encounter a variety of cultural aspects, including idiomatic expressions, metaphors, and social cust oms (Hossain, 2023).

Culture is frequently viewed as mere information given by the language, rather than as a feature of language itself; cultural aware-ness becomes an educational goal in and of itself, independent of language. If languageis viewed as a social practice, culture becomes central to language teaching. Cultural awareness must then be understood as both facilitating language competence and the result of language proficiency related reflection (kramsch, 1993:8).

When it comes to culture and language, and how they interact as two components of human society's infrastructure, it is important to note that some sociologists and social science analysts believe that nations are not born of the new age, but rather the result of the reconstruction of older land

cultures, which are influenced by traditions, history, language, religion, environmental and geographical factors, and especially myths. Language is the basic tool with which we conduct our social lives. When language is employed in communication contexts, it is culturally reliant in several complex ways. The words individuals use refer to common experiences. Describe words, facts, thoughts, or experiences that are transferable. This is because words refer to a wealth of language information that other people possess. Words reflect not just the authors' ideas and beliefs, but also the perspectives and ideas of others. In both circumstances, language reflects cultural reality (Musafer, 2021).

According to Edward Sapir's research, language is more than just a tool for communication; it is also a means of expressing cultural reality. It is reasonable to assume that language was the first part of culture to gain a highly developed form, and that its essential perfection is a prerequisite for the evolution of culture as a whole (Sapir, 1949:349).

The two most prominent figures in the development of linguistic anthropology were Edward Sapir (1884-1939) and Bemamin Whorf (1897-1941). Both men studied the languages and cultures of many Native American groups. Among Sapir's various interests and contributions to the discipline were his lectures about the need of analysing vocabulary in order to understand the physical and social environments in which people live. Sapir asserts: The complete vocabulary of a language may indeed be looked upon complex inventory of all the ideas, interests and occupations that take up the amention the community.Sapir contended that culture and language mediate all aspects of human experience. Objects or forces in the physical environment are classified in language only if they are culturally significant, or if they "take up the attention of the community." And once a language assigns a word to an object or activity, that object or event gains

cultural significance. The link between vocabulary and cultural value is multidirectional. Speakers give names (words) to key entities and events in their physical and social contexts, and once named, such entities and events gain cultural and individual recognition and experience. Through this interdependent process, distinct cultural models are developed and reinforced (Bonvillain, 2020:43).

2.2 The Impact of cultural awareness on second language learning

Cultural awareness is essential as we interact with others. Cultural awareness is not just a knowledge of existing cultures, but also involves further study about diverse cultures and the cultural distinctions between them. Cultural awareness is influenced by our own culture and how we perceive other cultures. Understanding their culture allows for smoother interactions with others. Furthermore, adopting cultural awareness. Awareness is the attitude of someone who is willing to follow all regulations and understands their responsibilities. According to the definitions above, cultural awareness means several things. Anyone who is culturally informed may understand other cultures. In every connection with others, it is important to respect the different cultures (Firmansyah, 2023).

Cultural awareness has long been regarded as the most important factor in personal and professional development, described as an individual's sense of and attitude toward other cultures and communities. As a result, people with cultural awareness comprehend and respect diverse culture beliefs, values, and decision-making processes. Individuals must be interested in learning about diverse cultures in order to master different languages. A

thorough understanding of culture contributes to the development of a learning methodology that enhances effective intercultural communication. To build language competence, learners must connect with locals and determine their diction, accent, dialect, and speaking pattern. Furthermore, improving grammatical skills and expanding local vocabulary assist students in identifying both culture and language (Braine, H. J. 2024).

The relationship between language and Culture is pretty evident, it is simple to describe the impact of cultural awareness on English learning, i.e., cultural awareness is vital during the process of English learning. It is an important part of language learning, and without cultural awareness, a language cannot be completely understood. Learning English well entails not only understanding its syntax, pronunciation, and vocabulary, but also learning about the culture, which reflects ideas, conventions, lifestyles, and values. Learning English is inextricably linked to learning about its culture. Culture reflects a nation's characteristics; it includes not only its history and cultural background, but also its view on life, lifestyles, and ways of thinking. It was also stated that culture and language learning should take place concurrently; else, culture and language will become separated (Ying, 2013).

Cultural awareness plays a crucial role in learning English, as it is deeply intertwined with language. While grammatical errors may be easily recognized and accepted, pragmatic failures can lead to misunderstandings, causing speakers to come across as impolite. To effectively learn a language, students must grasp not only its rules but also the meanings and cultural nuances behind it. Understanding culture broadens learners' perspectives and enhances their ability to use English appropriately. Therefore, a thorough comprehension of the cultural context of English-

speaking countries is essential for achieving proficiency in the language (ibid).

2.3 Cultural misunderstanding

Linguistic differences significantly contribute to cultural misunderstandings in English language learning. Students whose first languages exhibit distinct phonetic and syntactic structures may encounter challenges with English pronunciation and grammar. These learners often struggle to understand the subtleties of English intonation and stress patterns, which can vary widely across different cultures. Such difficulties may lead to frustration and a decline in confidence, complicating their overall journey in acquiring the language (Lund, 2006: 45).

To effectively address these challenges, it is crucial to integrate intercultural competence into language education. Educators must recognize the importance of cultural contexts in communication to bridge existing gaps and enhance understanding among students from diverse backgrounds. For example, students from collectivist cultures may find it difficult to navigate the individualistic approach that predominates in Western educational settings, which can lead to misinterpretations of assertiveness as rudeness. This disconnect can create barriers to effective communication and hinder the learning process (ibid).

Furthermore, understanding the role of cultural contexts is essential for improving communication in language education. A lack of cultural awareness can lead to significant misunderstandings among students, especially when linguistic differences are involved. The importance of incorporating cultural awareness into the curriculum is vital for helping students navigate these misunderstandings more effectively. By fostering an inclusive environment that values cultural diversity, educators can

enhance the overall learning experience and promote better understanding among students from various backgrounds (Wold, 2006:78).

Cultural misunderstandings often arise from the differing communication styles and social norms present in various cultural contexts. For instance, students from collectivist cultures may struggle to adjust to the individualistic approaches typical in Western educational settings. This can lead to misinterpretations, where assertiveness is perceived as rudeness, ultimately hindering effective communication and creating barriers to learning. Such discrepancies highlight the importance of recognizing and addressing the influence of cultural backgrounds on communication. To mitigate these challenges, integrating intercultural competence into language education is essential. Educators must cultivate an understanding of cultural contexts to bridge communication gaps and facilitate a more inclusive environment. By incorporating cultural awareness into the curriculum, teachers can help students navigate potential misunderstandings and foster better interactions. Valuing cultural diversity within the classroom not only enhances the overall learning experience but also promotes mutual understanding among students from diverse backgrounds, ultimately supporting their language acquisition journey (Wold, 2006:333).

Cultural misunderstandings occur when individuals interpret interactions through the lens of their own cultural backgrounds, leading to misinterpretations and conflicts. For example, gestures, expressions, and even silence can carry different meanings across cultures. A friendly nod in one culture might signify agreement, while in another, it could be interpreted as indifference or disagreement. Such discrepancies can result in frustration and miscommunication, emphasizing the need for cultural awareness in diverse settings, whether in personal relationships,

workplaces, or educational environments. to address and minimize cultural misunderstandings, fostering open communication and promoting cultural sensitivity is vital. Educational programs that include cultural competence training can equip individuals with the knowledge and skills to navigate cross-cultural interactions more effectively. By encouraging individuals to learn about and respect different cultural norms and practices, organizations and communities can create an atmosphere of inclusivity and understanding. This proactive approach not only enhances interpersonal relationships but also supports collaboration and harmony in increasingly multicultural societies (Kuo & Lai, 2020:1-10).

2.4 The significance of culture in language learning

Culture plays a pivotal role in language learning, as it shapes the context in which a language is used and understood. Language is not merely a system of grammar and vocabulary; it is deeply embedded in cultural norms, values, and practices. For instance, idiomatic expressions often reflect cultural beliefs and social relationships unique to a particular community. This cultural insight allows learners to understand subtleties and nuances that are integral to effective communication, such as humor, politeness, and tradition. Recognizing the cultural backdrop of a language enhances learners' ability to interpret meaning beyond words, leading to more authentic and meaningful interactions. The integration of cultural content into language education fosters motivation and engagement among learners. When students explore aspects of the target culture such as customs, literature, history, and art they not only acquire language skills more effectively, but also develop a greater appreciation for diversity and intercultural communication. This holistic approach encourages learners to see language learning as a gateway to understanding another way of life, which can lead to increased empathy and tolerance. Ultimately,

recognizing and incorporating culture into language learning can transform the educational experience, making it richer and more relevant for learners in an increasingly globalized world (Ali et al., 2015:1-10).

2.4.1 Cultural Influences on Language Acquisition.

Cultural influences play a pivotal role in language acquisition, shaping not only the vocabulary and grammar learners absorb but also their understanding of context, pragmatics, and social nuances. Different cultures have unique ways of expressing thoughts and emotions, and these variations can significantly affect how learners interpret and produce language. For example, cultures that prioritize direct communication may employ a more straightforward approach to language, while those that value indirect forms may rely on implications and subtleties. This disparity can create challenges for language learners, as they must navigate not just the structure of a new language but also the cultural contexts in which it is used, fostering a deeper engagement with both the language and the culture it embodies (Majidova & Badelbaeva, (2023:268).

Moreover, culture informs the learning environment and motivation of language learners. Cultural values surrounding education, communication, and interaction dictate the methods and contexts in which language is taught and acquired. For instance, in some cultures, group learning and collaboration are emphasized, while others may focus on individual achievement. These cultural frameworks influence learners' attitudes toward language learning and their willingness to participate in social exchanges. Recognizing and integrating these cultural dimensions into language education can enhance learners' ability to connect with native speakers, comprehend idiomatic expressions, and appreciate the rich tapestry of cultural references that language encompasses, ultimately

leading to a more holistic and successful language acquisition experience (ibid:271).

2.4.2 Integrating Culture into Language Curriculum

Integrating culture into language curriculum is essential for fostering a well rounded understanding of the target language. Language is not just a set of grammatical rules and vocabulary; it embodies the nuances, values, and traditions of a culture. By incorporating cultural elements such as literature, history, music, and customs educators can enhance learners' engagement and comprehension. This approach allows students to see language as a living, dynamic entity that reflects the people's identities and experiences from which it originates. Engaging with cultural contexts helps learners develop cultural competence, which is vital for effective communication and reduces the risk of misunderstandings (Byram & Grundy, 2003:74).

Moreover, when culture is woven into the language curriculum, students are encouraged to think critically and reflect on their own cultural identities. This integration promotes awareness and appreciation of diversity, allowing learners to explore perspectives beyond their own. Activities such as role-playing, discussions on cultural practices, and the analysis of culturally significant texts can create rich learning experiences. Ultimately, integrating culture not only enhances language acquisition but also shapes global citizens who are empathetic and open minded, equipped to navigate an increasingly interconnected world (ibid:86).

Conclusion

The findings of this research underscore the importance of cultural context in learning English as a second language.

Firstly, cultural understanding is vital for effective communication; language learners must navigate the nuances of cultural expressions and idioms that may not directly translate, underscoring the need for cultural awareness as a foundational element in language education.

Secondly, cultural misunderstandings can create obstacles for learners. Inappropriate interpretations of words or phrases often stem from a lack of cultural insight, leading to miscommunication and potential frustration among speakers. Acknowledging and addressing these disparities can greatly enhance comprehension and interaction in a second language environment.

Thirdly, the study emphasizes that language acquisition is not merely about memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules but is an active construction process influenced heavily by cultural input. Learners need to engage with authentic cultural materials and experiences, allowing them to make meaningful connections and apply the language effectively in real-life contexts.

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