

## The Effect of L1 Culture on L2 Acquisition: The Case from an Iranian Context

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### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this study is to search TEFL university students' attitudes towards the role of their L1 culture on their L2 acquisition. To accomplish this aim, a group of 100 Iranian university students majoring in teaching English as a foreign language participated. The instrument used in this study was mainly based on a questionnaire designed by the researcher to ask attitudes of the participants. This questionnaire consists of 22 items about Persian culture (the participants' L1) and English culture (the participants' L2). To analyze the data, the quantitative statistics of the questionnaire is calculated. An analysis of data from the questionnaire revealed students' opinions about these two cultures that was mostly positive about their culture and identity.*

**Keywords:** Culture, TEFL, L1, L2 Acquisition

### INTRODUCTION

Recent publications emphasize on the unified relationship between SLA and target culture teaching, particularly through writings of certain scholars such as Byram, (1989; 1994a; 1994b; 1997a; 1997b) and Kramsch (1988; 1993; 1996; 2001). Language teaching stakeholders have restarted to focus on the interweaving association between culture and language (Pulverness, 2003). It is stressed that teaching L2, without a study of culture, is incorrect and imperfect. L2 learners consider language study meaningless if they are not acquainted with how people who speak the target language live and behave.

Culture as an idea has embraced frequent characterizations and definitions (Atkinson, 1999; Baldwin, Faulkner, Hecht & Lindsley, 2006; Geertz, 1973; Kramsch, 1998; Robins, 2005; Tyler, 1881; Wilson, 1935). Baldwin et al. (2006) offer over three hundred definitions of culture. Omaggio Hadley (1993), Kramsch (1993) and Lo Bianco (2003) correspondingly made available characterizations and valuable overviews for language acquisition and teaching through a historical setting. Jointly, these publications provide a conceptualization of the extent and complexity of the theme and the applied array of definitions and explanations over time. These scholars demonstrate the multidimensional potentials and characteristics of the culture concept as they discourse the rapport between civilization and culture as a collection of truths or a list of items, culture as a gathering of traditions and practices, and culture as acquired, communicated, moving and manifold. However, like Baldwin, Faulkner & Hecht (2006) noticed the concept of culture continues to be intricate and mysterious.

Till recently, we presumed that if one is going to acquire another language she or he has to acquire the culture embedded within that language as well. Arguably, acquisition of a language rather than the mother tongue does not merely encompass acquisition of the linguistic aspect of the language, but take in acquisition of the culture that represents the appreciation of the religion, traditions, customs, economics, politics, conducts, etc. of that language culture

as well. Consequently, converging on one dimension of the language over the additional one will give rise to fabricating unskilled learners in the target language. The researcher selected 100 TEFL students randomly from among the population of all TEFL students in Tehran, Guilan, Ferdowsi Universities, who have been studying English teaching for at least two years. On the basis of such evidence, through assessing learners' attitudes about the effect of L1 (Persian) culture on the acquisition of L2 (English) culture, this paper aims to answer the following question:

Does Persian culture have any positive effect on the acquisition of English culture among Iranian English language learners?

According to the literature in this area, the researcher has suggested a hypothesis as follows:

Persian culture has a positive effect on the acquisition of English culture among Iranian English language learners.

In the following, a number of influential works on the relationship between culture and SLA, L1 culture and L2 culture and the associations between the acquisition of L2 and L1 in the context of SLA.

Valdes (1986) argued that the associations concerning culture and language are so solidly unified that it seems unmanageable to isolate them to the degree that both inspire one another through diversified methods. The results of the National Standards for Foreign Language Education Project (1996) revealed that learners will not perfectly acquire a new language until they acquire the *cultural context* of the target language (Cheng-Chieh & Kritsonis, 2007).

Justifiably, the associations between language and culture are a significant situation on the ground of language teaching research. The Sapir and Whorf hypothesis raised in the 20th century has been reflected as one of the most noticeable philosophies implying the interweaving connection stuck between language and culture and the impact of language on how we contemplate and how we intellectualize things in our being. Conversely, this strong version did not obtain much consensus in the research; as an alternative, several language education scholars have embraced the weak version that undertakes that communication in another language simply means captivating another world viewpoint in the learners' thoughts.

Accordingly a vibrant and dynamic philosophy of the interconnection concerning language and culture is entered the discipline of language education. This dynamic standpoint proposes the practice of the L1 culture in the development of acquisition of the target language culture as the principal basis of knowledge so that the learners can benefit from when acquiring a second language. It is stated that languages possess linguistic variances that would hamper the acquisition of a new language, though, on every occasion correspondences exist between L2 and L1, the acquisition turns out to be far easier and plausible (Lado, 1957). Meanwhile, since languages possess variations in structure, syntax, and pronunciation, possibly through cultural provision and understanding, the variations are fixed, and the learners' anxiety shrinks.

## RESEARCH METHOD

In this survey study, the researcher does not modify the variables and instead of providing authentic elaborations, tends to describe the input processes authentically. Such researches are conducted to give a better understanding of the nature of the problem that has not been widely investigated (Birjandi & Mosallanejad, 2005). Moreover in survey studies, researchers collect qualitative and quantitative data via questionnaires or interviews and through statistical techniques, describe the process of responses to test the hypotheses.

## **Participants**

Participants were 120 university students studying teaching English as a foreign language at least for about two years at Tehran, Guilan and Ferdowsi universities including 53 male and 67 female students. They were between 20 to 27 years old and had passed a placement test with a desirable score.

## **Instrumentation**

To answer the research questions, both qualitative and quantitative instruments were used.

## **Quantitative Instrument**

In order to assess the presence of possible effect of Persian culture on the acquisition of English culture, a self-reporting survey was developed by the researcher since no other questionnaire was found to match what the present study aims to. The survey has many advantages for the present research. The first merit is the process of validity and reliability check. Since the survey items pass clear and precise steps, the results are so trustworthy. The second advantage relates to this point that other questionnaires are designed to measure particular aspects of the relationship between culture and SLA and demand a great effort to fit within the framework of other subject areas, which in this regard the researcher made survey excels.

## **Survey of the effect of Persian culture on the acquisition of English culture**

The survey in the form of a questionnaire has many advantages over other types of data-collection instruments, especially individual interviews. Mackey and Gass (2005) argued for benefits and limitations of questionnaires. They stated that questionnaires are much more economical, practical and can be administered in many forms, which adds the flexibility of data elicitation activities. Regarding the characteristics of the present study and in order to collect the required data from the participants, a closed-ended questionnaire was developed and piloted in order to assess the possible deficiencies, needed effort and administration procedure (see Appendix A).

## **RESULTS**

The participants answered the items in the questionnaire on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, where 4 stood for "Disagree", 5 stood for "Strongly Disagree", 3 stood for "no idea", 2 stood for "Agree", and 1 stood for "Strongly Agree". The male and female answers are also differentiated in the table to recognize the role of gender in the influence of L1 culture on L2 learning. For processing the data obtained through a questionnaire, it was done by calculating the frequencies and percentages for each question and the results were presented in the table.

As it is evident in Table 1, in the first question, about half of the participants declared that they think in English when speaking English. However, the male ones think in English more than the female ones when speaking English. In the second question, about half of them (40%), that mostly were male participants (28%) stated that they feel comfortable while thinking in English and about the rest (45%) stated that they don't feel comfortable while thinking in English. In the third question, most of them denied that they enjoy celebrating holiday according to the English culture, and in line with the results of this, in the next question most of them (mostly females) declared they enjoy celebrating holiday according to Persian culture. In the next question, the answers showed that about half of them enjoyed eating English food, and a half did not enjoy it. In the questions 7 and 8, most of them (almost the same portion for male and female participants) enjoyed their own and their parents' ethnic identity.

Table 1.

Items	Responses																			
	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 No idea		4 Disagree		5 Strongly Disagree											
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%						
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
1	4	2	4	2	24	15	24	15	4	10	4	10	10	22	10	22	4	5	4	5
2	2	2	2	2	26	10	26	10	4	6	4	6	15	25	15	25	5	5	5	5
3	2	1	2	1	3	2	3	2	8	2	8	2	32	39	32	39	4	7	4	7
4	1	4	1	4	20	57	20	57	5	3	5	3	6	2	6	2	1	1	1	1
5	6	2	6	2	22	8	22	8	8	10	8	10	19	20	19	20	3	2	3	2
6	15	17	15	17	18	22	18	22	9	9	9	9	4	4	4	4	2	0	2	0
7	20	22	20	22	18	20	18	20	3	2	3	2	4	6	4	6	2	3	2	3
8	18	28	8	28	19	21	19	21	8	4	8	4	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
9	5	5	5	5	10	16	10	16	3	2	3	2	23	22	23	22	7	7	7	7
10	7	20	7	20	10	14	10	14	5	7	5	7	15	6	15	6	7	9	7	9
11	9	12	9	12	16	25	16	25	2	1	2	1	14	8	14	8	9	4	9	4
12	9	9	9	9	12	20	12	20	6	3	6	3	16	21	16	21	4	2	4	2
13	18	20	18	20	22	26	22	26	4	4	4	4	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2
14	1	3	1	3	4	3	4	3	5	6	5	6	20	25	45		15	19	34	
15	7	4	7	4	20	11	20	11	10	18	10	18	8	12	8	12	5	5	5	5
16	15	16	15	16	19	20	19	20	10	7	10	7	4	4	4	4	3	2	3	2
17	9	10	9	10	14	16	14	16	10	9	10	9	7	6	7	6	5	5	5	5
18	8	10	8	10	10	14	10	14	10	10	10	10	10	16	10	16	6	6	6	6
19	17	10	17	10	20	20	20	20	5	3	5	3	10	8	10	8	4	3	4	3
20	15	12	15	12	19	13	19	13	10	10	10	10	6	6	6	6	5	4	5	4
21	10	12	10	12	10	15	10	15	10	11	10	11	9	10	9	10	7	6	7	6
22	6	6	6	6	14	12	14	12	16	20	16	20	10	10	10	10	3	3	3	3

In line with these results, the question 9 showed that most of them (59%) disagree or strongly disagree with identifying themselves as an English person. In the question 10 and 11, almost 51% of them (mostly females) stated that they have difficulty accepting some ideas held by English people and 61% (mostly females) have difficulty accepting some behaviors exhibited by English people. In the question 12, almost half of the participants (51%) think they would

have, difficulty accepting an English person as close friend and (43%) were disagreed. The results of questions 13 and 14 showed that 86% (40% male and 46% female) agreed or strongly agreed that Persian people understand their ideas best; and 11% agreed that English people understand their ideas best. In questions, 15 and 16, just about 32% feel proud to be a part of English culture, and 70% (34% male and 36% female) feel proud to be an Iranian person. In items 17 and 20, 49% (23% male and 29% female) agree and 23% (12% male and 11% female) were disagree that their cultural identity has changed during their academic education, and 59% (34% male and 25% female) felt their cultural identity changes when they were learning English. In items 18 and 19, 47% of the participants stated that they try to keep their cultural identity while learning another language and 67% of them expressed they want to learn English but preserve their cultural identity. In the last two items, 21 and 22, 47% of them said that they are proud of their cultural identity and 26% disliked, and 38% liked to have an English cultural identity.

## **DISCUSSION**

This part of the study is mainly based on the results obtained from the analysis of data-collection instrument (questionnaire). The quantitative analysis for this study was a questionnaire with 22 questions asking the participants' tendencies to their culture and English (as their foreign language) culture. This questionnaire was conducted among 100 university students

This study intended to find the attitudes of learners towards the effect of L1 culture on their L2 acquisition. In this respect, the quantitative data collected by questionnaire indicated that the participants preferred to celebrate holidays according to their own culture rather than English culture as they enjoy their own and their parents' ethnic identity and don't like to identify themselves as an English person and it is hard to accept some behaviors of English people. As this study examined the role of gender on cultural preferences of the participants, among the findings of the current study proved that mainly the females answered emotionally and defended their culture.

As we mentioned earlier, some other scholars have done similar studies in different contexts or different variables. The findings of the current study are in line with most of the previous studies such as Grabe and Kaplan (1989) who have done a research to realize whether interviews with a member of the target culture would affect foreign-language learners' views and attitudes to the target culture. Robinson-Stuart and Nocon (1996) who reached the positive outcomes, as learners obtained particular understandings about a particular dimension of L2 culture through adjusting their formulaic impressions of L2 culture and people. In Byon's (2007) work that learners expressed their suppositions about Korean culture and then during the semester examined those suppositions. Mostafa El-dali (2012), also re-examined the influence of native language and culture on L2 learning from a multidisciplinary perspective; the results arguing for the inclusion of the L1 in that 'its use reduces anxiety, enhances the effective environment for learning, takes into account sociocultural factors, facilitates incorporation of learners' life experiences, and allows for learner-centered curriculum development.

L1 culture can be considered as an effective tool for learning different parts of a foreign language, and especially as it was confirmed in the present study. Indeed, the inclusion of the L1 helps the learner in the development of thinking, of social and interpersonal skills and even enhances independent study skills (Kimberly, 2009). It is effective in students' linguistic success in foreign language learning (Byram et al., 1994).

## **GUIDELINES**

So, in the light of the findings of the current study, hopefully, fruitful guidelines can be provided for instructors, students, and those who are involved in materials preparation. The results of this study can be useful for the EFL instructors who are in doubt about the use of L1 culture in teaching the L2 and its culture. As Durkin (1979) stated, teachers spend much time on assigning, testing and correcting the tasks that they expect from their students rather than learning them the required strategies to do these tasks correctly. The learners also can benefit these results in knowing that effects of their L1 culture on their learning. The results of this study can be useful for the educational officials who make policies for better leading of education and EFL textbook designers to consider the role of L1 culture on their L2 learning.

As suggestions for future research, further studies can be done to the participants with different levels of proficiency. As already stated, this study was carried out among the university students who majored in teaching English as a foreign language (B.A.). Further studies can be done among the university students of other fields of study, or among the university students at Ph.D., M.A or M.Sc levels or even it can be conducted in different educational systems like schools or foreign language institutes.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire

1. When speaking English, I think in English.  
A) Strongly disagree    B) disagree    C)no idea    D)agree    E)strongly agree
2. I feel comfortable while thinking in English.  
A) Strongly disagree    B) disagree    C)no idea    D)agree    E)strongly agree
3. I enjoy celebrating the holiday according to English culture?  
A) Strongly disagree    B) disagree    C)no idea    D)agree    E)strongly agree
4. I enjoy celebrating the holiday according to Persian culture?  
A) Strongly disagree    B) disagree    C) no idea    D) agree    E) strongly agree
5. I enjoy eating English food.  
A) Strongly disagree    B) disagree    C)no idea    D)agree    E)strongly agree
6. I like my parent's ethnic identity.  
A) Strongly disagree    B) disagree    C)no idea    D)agree    E)strongly agree
7. I like my ethnic identity.  
A) Strongly disagree    B) disagree    C)no idea    D)agree    E)strongly agree
8. I enjoy speaking English.  
A) Strongly disagree    B) disagree    C)no idea    D)agree    E)strongly agree
9. I like to identify myself as an English person.  
A) Strongly disagree    B) disagree    C)no idea    D)agree    E)strongly agree
10. I have difficulty accepting some ideas held by English people.  
A) Strongly disagree    B) disagree    C)no idea    D)agree    E)strongly agree
11. I have difficulty accepting some behaviors exhibited by English people.  
A) Strongly disagree    B) disagree    C)no idea    D)agree    E)strongly agree

12. I have, or think I would have, difficulty accepting an English person as close personal friend.

- A) Strongly disagree    B) disagree    C)no idea    D)agree    E)strongly agree

13. In my opinion Persian people understand my ideas best?

- A) Strongly disagree    B) disagree    C)no idea    D)agree    E)strongly agree

14. In my opinion, English people understand my ideas best?

- A) Strongly disagree    B) disagree    C)no idea    D)agree    E)strongly agree

15. I feel is proud to be a part of English culture.

- A) Strongly disagree    B) disagree    C)no idea    D)agree    E)strongly agree

16. I feel proud to be an Iranian person.

- A) Strongly disagree    B) disagree    C)no idea    D)agree    E)strongly agree

17. I think my cultural identity has changed during my academic education.

- A) Strongly disagree    B) disagree    C)no idea    D)agree    E)strongly agree

18. I try to keep my cultural identity while learning another language.

- A) Strongly disagree    B) disagree    C)no idea    D)agree    E)strongly agree

19. I want to learn English but preserve my cultural identity.

- A) Strongly disagree    B) disagree    C)no idea    D)agree    E)strongly agree

20. I feel my cultural identity changes when I am learning English.

- A) Strongly disagree    B) disagree    C)no idea    D)agree    E)strongly agree

21. I am proud of my cultural identity.

- A) Strongly disagree    B) disagree    C)no idea    D)agree    E)strongly agree

22. I would like to have an English cultural identity.

- A) Strongly disagree    B) disagree    C)no idea    D)agree    E)strongly agree