

The importance of cultural awareness in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction to undergraduate students

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Abstract

This study sets out to identify the importance of inclusion of culture in English language teaching for non-native speakers. Communicative competence, an essential goal in learning English as a foreign language, is identified as the linguistic and behavioral competence. In addition, this study explores the contribution of culturally-sensitive English language teaching to students' increased awareness of culture. The study uses the culture tests, developed by the author, throughout the culturally-sensitive English language teaching course to check students' progress in cultural awareness. The research revealed that there is valuable benefit in adopting the view of inseparability of language and culture by teachers and using culturally-sensitive English language teaching. It is essential to increase students' sensitivity about different cultures in today's culturally rich environments.

Keywords: culture, culturally-sensitive language teaching, communicative competence, behavioral competence, culture tests, culture awareness

Introduction

Concerns with cultural differences in teaching foreign languages have a long history and the connection between language and culture has been well proved. Valdes (2001), for example, states that 'culture specific world views are reflected in language' (p.8). This means that how people think and speak is determined by their culture. Byram (1989) also observed that culture represents a 'hidden' curriculum in second language teaching and pointed out that language teaching implicitly involves teaching in a culturally-sensitive way because language refers to speakers' knowledge and perception of the world, concept of culture, and cultural learning.

What has become evident in recent decades is that learning pure 'language' (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, listening, speaking, reading, and writing) is insufficient for verbal communication. Simply encoding the message in a certain language does not guarantee communication or interaction with a person (Morain, 2001). Communicative competence which is a well-admitted goal in learning English is defined as the unity of linguistic competence and the behavioral expertise (Hymes, 1967&1972). Adequate / deep / complete understanding of interlocutor takes place only with the knowledge of the language used for communication and the culture from which the language derives. The negative impact of the lack of target-language cultural information in communication is especially strong in the process of communication between non-native speakers with native speakers. A native speaker may use many names, facts, holidays, idioms, which are culturally-bound and not known to the non-native speaker, which will cause misunderstanding or lack of understanding. When both / all interlocutors are non-native speakers, the problem of one-sided comprehension

will not arise. On the other hand, non-native speakers may allude to their culture, not well known to their interlocutor(s), which may also impede communication.

Method

The aims of the study involve two concerns:

- (1) To reveal how language instruction, focused on culturally-embedded activities, raises the cultural awareness.
- (2) To make up an adequate culture test, hold it and analyze its results.

The participants were 24 freshmen students at the direction of Business Management at the International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia. The tuition language at the university is English. This is why it is essential that the freshman students, while taking their practical English courses, do not simply gain knowledge of vocabulary and grammar and some skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing, but also communicative competence in English.

The researcher earlier held an experiment described in her doctoral dissertation Implications of different cultures of (English as Second Language) ESL classes in terms of language teaching methodologies (Tvalchrelidze, 2014) to check the effectiveness of culturally-sensitive English language teaching in acquisition of communicative competence in the English language.

For the purposes of the experiment, the researcher had two groups (experimental and control). In the experimental group, the researcher created special activities using different approaches, methods, and techniques to increase

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the interaction of language learners and keep their motivation high. These activities enhanced students' skills for comparative analysis of their own and target culture while maintaining their own cultural identity.

Furthermore, the researcher designed a syllabus where linguistic and cultural goals were given the same importance. Reflection questions and non-verbal communication elements with a variety of specially designed activities were incorporated for the enhancement of intercultural communication.

Language skills of the students in both groups were assessed twice during the experiment: Once in the process with the introduction of while-test and for the second time after the experiment, when the post-test was held. All tests were in the same format to ensure the comparability of the results.

For experimental group, the following teaching activities and methods were followed in the classroom: different forms of presentations including PowerPoint, group activities and assessment developed by the researcher, while the control group simply used the materials provided by the English textbook.

These materials to a less degree focus on culturally-sensitive language teaching.

As the next step, this article investigates whether this approach to language teaching also increases students' knowledge of culture, besides improving language skills.

This study assessed the impacts of culturally-sensitive language teaching on students' cultural awareness. In this study, compared to the above-mentioned experiment with a control and experimental group, assessment of the knowledge about culture was conducted only in the experimental group. The rationale for the choice of the group is the fact that culturally-embedded activities, texts and vocabulary were introduced throughout the semester only to the students of the experimental group.

The researcher made up a test to assess the knowledge of culture, based on Byram and Morgan's (1994) proposal and Valette's (2001) culture test. The test comprised four parts, enabling to check the achievement of four important categories of the cultural goals, pre-set before the research started. These are: **1. Culture awareness** – measuring the culture knowledge; **2. Command of etiquette** – illustrating the polite cultural conventions for behavior of people living in the countries where target language is spoken and checking students' ability to appropriately use the etiquette; **3. Understanding of outward cultural differences** – assessing how well students can interpret unfamiliar customs to function easily in the country of the target language; **4. Understanding of cultural values** – evaluating how well students realize that system of values in target culture and in students' own cultures may be different and come to respect them.

The test was administered three times during the study course of the above-mentioned freshmen group: a pre-test, a while-test and a post-test. The researcher used three same format tests to check how students progressed in the knowledge about the target culture. See below a sample of the culture test used in the study.

Culture test

Cultural awareness

1. Contributions of the target culture.

- 1.1. Benjamin Franklin is:
- writer, philosopher, inventor
 - American rock and roll star
 - English poet

2. Differences in way of life patterns

2.1. What cultural differences would you observe if you are living in America and Britain? (Please choose all that apply)

- In America, people say too many "please," "thank you," and "sorry."
- Americans hug and kiss an acquaintance.
- Dating in America is more casual and informal than in any cultures and should not be interpreted as anything more.
- An invitation to someone's home is less common in England than in the rest of Europe.
- In Britain, gifts are not opened upon receiving.

Command of etiquette

3. Knowledge of etiquette

3.1. What is the traditional American pattern when a man and a woman are walking down the street? (Please circle one category)

Command of etiquette

3. Knowledge of etiquette

3.1. What is the traditional American pattern when a man and a woman are walking down the street? (Please circle one category)

- The man always walks on the curb side.
- The woman always walks on the curb side.
- The man always walks a step forward a woman.

Understanding of outward cultural differences

4. Linguistic cultural referents

4.1 While dining with your British friend, his/her mother started telling how beautiful her friends and her plaited pattern of ribbons round the pole were in her childhood. What holiday is she talking about?

- Easter
- Valentine's day
- May Day
- Christmas

Understanding of cultural values

5. Interpreting behavior of members of target culture

5.1 Imagine an old woman with heavy load is moving with difficulty. An American saw the old woman and passed by without help. What would you think about him? (please circle one category)

- He is impolite
- He does not feel well
- He values individualism

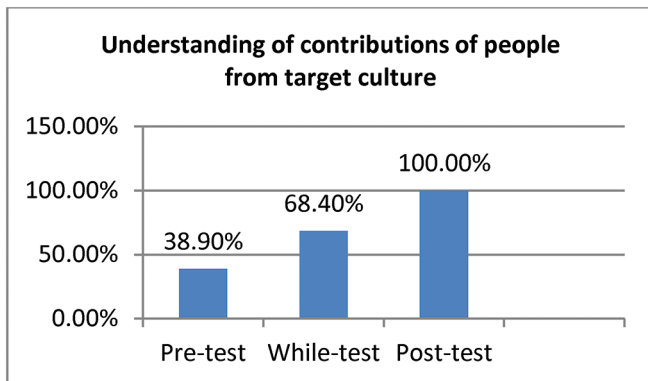
6. Interpreting behavior of members of the native culture

6.1 Imagine an English friend is staying in a Georgian family. Which of the following behaviors will shock him? (please circle one category)

- a. Mother always cooks meals for the whole family.
- b. Mother watches soap operas.
- c. Father comes late from work.

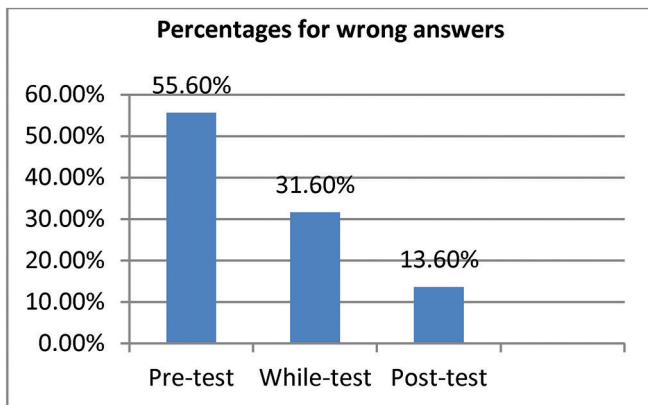
Result

Question 1. From the category *Contributions of target culture*



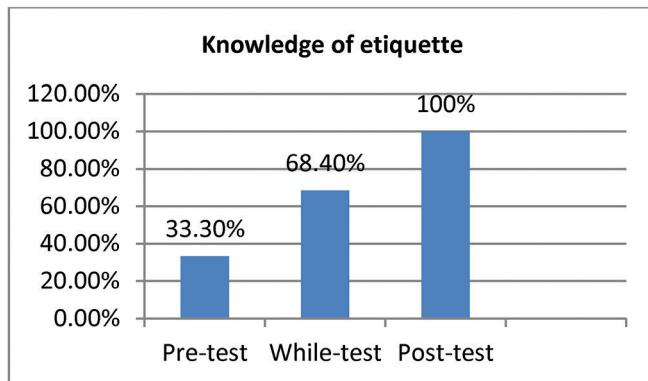
The graph shows the growth of students' understanding of contributions of target culture from test to test. In pre-test 38,9% of the students identified the correct answer, in while-test 68,45% of the students were correct in their answers and in post-test all 24 students chose the correct answer.

Question 2. From the category *Differences in way of life pattern*

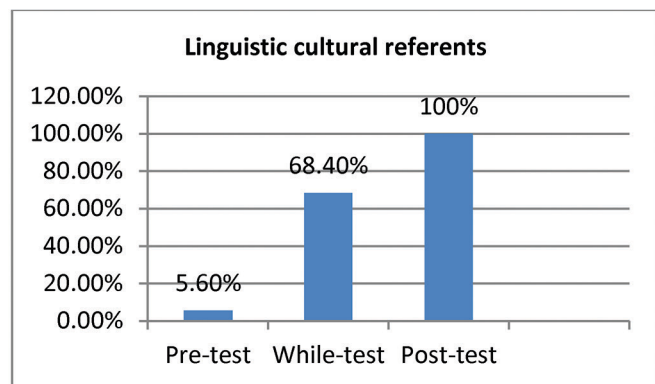


The graph illustrates the decrease in wrong answers from test to test. In pre-test 55,6% of subjects identified wrong differences in way of life pattern of the British and Americans, in while-test the wrong answers were 31,6% and in post-test only 13,6% of students were not correct.

Question 3. From the category *Knowledge of etiquette*. The graph shows the increase of the knowledge of etiquette in target culture from test to test 33,3% in the pre-test, 68,4% in the while-test and 100% in the post-test.

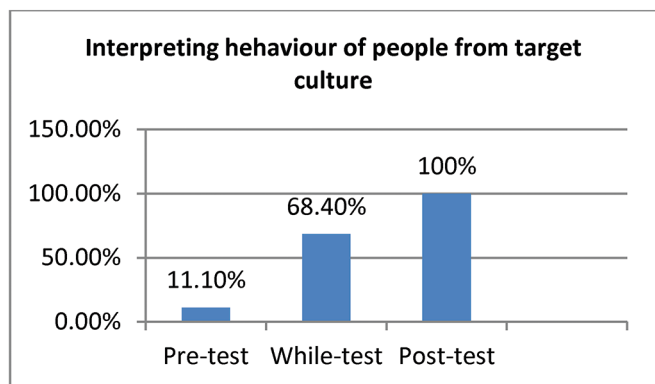


Question 4. From the category *Linguistic cultural referents*



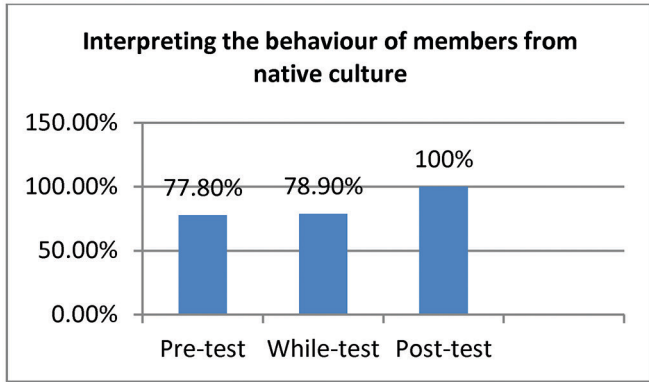
The graph presents that only 5,65% of students in the pre-test were aware of the outward cultural referents. In the while-test 68,4% of students were correct and in the post-test all 24 students identified the correct answers.

Question 5. From the category *Interpreting behavior of target culture*



Students' understanding of cultural values has grown from 11,1% in the pre-test to 68,45 in the while-test and 100% in the post-test.

Question 6. From the category *Interpreting behavior of members of the native culture*. The graph illustrates the increase in understanding of behavior of people from native culture from test to test 77,8% in the pre-test, 78,9% in the while-test and 100% in the post-test.



Thus, it is possible to say that the experiment proved that culturally-sensitive language teaching improved students' knowledge about the target culture.

Conclusion

The tests showed the increase in students' understanding of all categories of knowledge about the culture.

1. Though the students' awareness of their native culture was quite high from the very beginning of the course, a 22.22% increase is very valuable, as their increased awareness of their own culture will help them to behave with the native speakers in a way more appropriate for their interlocutors. Finally, a better mutual understanding will be achieved.

2. The tests showed an increase (5.6% → 68.4% → 100%) in understanding of outward cultural differences (question 4), which will help students while interacting with people from countries where English as a native language is spoken.

3. Students' understanding of contributions of people from the target culture has increased by 61.1%, which is also beneficial for them in their lives. The idea of awareness of their famous personalities is valued by people from every culture. This awareness will promote friendship and good relationship with people from target culture.

4. In the end, the test showed an impressive growth in grasping the differences in life patterns, etiquettes (by 66.7%), understanding of students' own culture (by 22.22%) and the target culture (by 88.89%). Most importantly, this growth proves the effectiveness of culturally-sensitive language teaching.

Thus, the study has proved that culturally-sensitive English language teaching suggested by the researcher is effective for acquisition of knowledge about the target culture.

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