



## Cultural barriers on English language Teaching and Learning in EFL context

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### Abstract

*This paper investigates some crucial cultural factors which hinder learning process and identifies the impacts of cultural barriers on English language teaching and learning. The study is organized on the basis of investigating the effect of the usage of social factors, religious matters, and taboo words as cultural dimension and analyzing the questionnaires which are based on Likert scale in 18 questions with the participations of 40 males and 40 females of Cambridge English Institutes students to diagnose the cultural elements which might hinder the learning process in Sari city, Iran. The questionnaires include five main domains as follows: i. the usage of both Iranian and English cultural based factors; ii. learners' faithfulness to Iranian culture as a criterion in avoiding cultures' devastations by focusing on English culture; iii. religious and political beliefs; iv. the effect of globalization on English language learning; and v. avoiding strategies in using topics regarding taboo vocabulary as cultural barriers. The analysis describes the relationships between the items in the survey. The effect of each domain is calculated on the basis of five domains, the findings demonstrates that English learning may be more effectively processed for Iranian students if both Iranian and English culture are going to be used (44.7% partially agree). It also shows that barriers like taboo words (30.62% neither agree nor disagree), political relations (31.3% partially agree) and religious factors (34.8% disagreed) are partially effective on ELT.*

**Keywords:** Cultural barriers, English language teaching, English language learning, Cultural awareness, Taboo words.

### Introduction

**Culture definitions:** Culture could mean various things to different people. In the anthropological sense, culture is outlined as the way people live<sup>1</sup>. Culture defines as "an all-inclusive system which incorporates the biological and technical behavior of human beings with their verbal and non-verbal systems of expressive behavior ranging from birth, and this "all-inclusive system" is acquired as the native culture. This process, which can be referred to as socialization", prepares the individual for the linguistically and non-linguistically accepted patterns of the society in which he lives<sup>2</sup>. Culture is language and language is culture. He suggests that to speak a language well, one must be ready to assume in that language, and thought is extremely powerful. Language is the soul of the country and people who speak it<sup>3</sup>. Language and culture are inextricably linked, and as such we might think about moving away from questions about the inclusion or exclusion of culture in foreign language curriculum, to issues of deliberate immersion versus non-deliberate exposure to it. In a word, culture is a way of life<sup>4</sup>. It is the context within which we have a tendency to exist, think, feel and relate others. It is the "glue" that binds a group of people together. It can be defined as a blueprint that guides the behavior of people in community and is incubated in family life. It governs our behavior in groups, makes us sensitive to matters of status, and helps us to know what others expect of us and what is going to happen if we do not live up to their

expectations. Thus, culture helps us to know how far we can go as individuals and what our responsibility is to the group.

**Inseparability of culture and language:** It is ordinarily accepted that 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 formed by it. He describes the two as follows :Language is a part of a culture and culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the importance of either language or culture. He additionally believes that language is the mirror of culture in the sense that, people can see culture through its language<sup>4</sup>. Language and culture have an mutually beneficial relationship. "Language and culture are not separate, but are acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other"<sup>5</sup>.

**Cultural barriers:** Culture is an integral part of every human's life. Each individual is born in a special cultural context which results in acquiring its different aspects in life. In general terms, culture could be outlined as a collection of social beliefs, values, religions, credence and ideologies accepted by most members in a social community. During the process of language learning some crucial cultural factors may be notified, seriously hindering the effective learning process, and ordinarily referred to as cultural barriers. Effective language learning among

different cultures is particularly difficult and challenging, as a result of the various ways of thinking, seeing, hearing, and interpreting the world provided by cultures. Cultural barriers are considered as those traditions which become hurdles in path of understanding or teaching/learning completely different languages, among which body language, religious beliefs, etiquette and social habits are noteworthy<sup>6</sup>.

**Cultural Awareness and Understanding:** In the last decade, the concept of culture has become highly regarded and vital in language teaching and second language teaching because culture is a part of a language, and language is a part of a culture. They cannot be separated. Learning a language means learning a culture. It is necessary to know the way of life or culture of foreign people in order to survive in the world full of conflicting ideas and value systems, which excludes those with different ideas. However, to enter into another culture, we need to grasp the language of that culture. It can be said that language acts as a gateway to culture. Language and culture are therefore interrelated<sup>7</sup>. The concept of cultural awareness is regarded as the key innovation of the national curriculum in England and Wales. The term "cultural awareness" is outlined as "the promotion of the understanding of and respect for other cultures, one of the most important aims of modern language studies". In fact, cultural awareness signifies understanding<sup>8</sup>.

The term "cultural awareness" is also described as "sensitivity to the impact of culturally-induced behavior on language use and communication". There are three qualities concerning cultural awareness suggested, that is: Awareness of our behavior influenced by our cultures. Awareness of the others' behavior influenced by their own cultures. Ability to explain our own cultural point of view<sup>9</sup>.

It is clear that when we point out cultural awareness, we do not mean solely our culture, but also other people's culture. A lack of cultural awareness which is essential to language learning will definitely cause miscommunication. Therefore, cultural awareness rising is crucial because it helps promote language learning and communication success. This clearly reflects the connection between language and cultural awareness, which can be concretely illustrated and concluded by this quote :A growing awareness of the culture of the people who speak the language of study is intrinsic to the learning of it ...Without the cultural dimension, successful communication is usually troublesome. Comparison between the learners's own way of life and that of the other language community are an essential means to better understanding of both<sup>8</sup>.

The data in this paper is organized through the questionnaires prepared and distributed among 80 students at the Cambridge English Institute, Sari city, Iran. Those questions are distributed for distinguishing the cultural elements which might hinder the learning process.

**Literature review:** Cultural environmental differences provide the second language learners a sort of social psychological

distance<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, social distance restricts the employment of language and causes the fossilization of second language<sup>11</sup>. Shared means of speaking and shared culture and knowledge enhances shared social identity, and a shared identity strengthens the social network of in-group members<sup>12</sup>.

It has been accepted that bilingual education can break down cultural barriers between community and school and produce a greater commitment by the community to the project of the school<sup>13</sup>. It has additionally been argued that the incorporation of the culture of the minority group leads to greater cultural sensitivity on the part of the teacher<sup>14</sup>. Living in a culturally diverse world, requires encountering cultural barriers in learning languages of different races, religions, and nationalities, effectively. Knowing regarding these traditions, which may become hurdles in teaching/learning process, will facilitate to realize better results and to solve learners' issues in classrooms . These barriers need research, due to the fact that people from different backgrounds may have varied approaches to the conflicts. Consequently, the impossibility of knowing the various systems of all cultures requires the process to be approached in one culture at a time as to meet and deal with a new one .

On the basis of the significance of English as an international language, spoken and taught worldwide, the present research focuses on the cultural impacts and barriers on ELT and effective communication in Iran. The present study is mainly focused on the positive and negative impacts of cultural barriers on English language teaching/learning process. Accordingly, the effect of the usage of social factors, religious matters, and taboo words as cultural dimensions are investigated throughout the research, in which culture interferes with effective cross-cultural English learning. The research question is to find out the effect of the usage and the common cultural barriers in Iran which mainly hinder English language learning, as well as exploring the percentage of each matter in the community being studied.

## Methodology

**Procedure:** The study is organized to analyze the questionnaires which are distributed among 40 male and 40 female students at the Cambridge English Institute, Sari city, Iran. The questionnaires include 18 questions which are mainly to identify the cultural elements to hinder the learning process. Topics involve five main domains as follows: The usage of both Iranian and English cultural based factors Learners' faithfulness to Iranian culture as a criterion in avoiding cultures' devastations by focusing on English culture. Religious and political beliefs The effect of globalization on English language learning, Avoiding strategies in using topics regarding taboo vocabulary as cultural barriers

**Participants:** A questionnaire was distributed among 40 male and 40 female students of Cambridge English Institutes and it included 18 questions asking the participants to express their

own ideas through those questions by means of the impact of culture in English language learning and the cultural elements which might hinder their learning process.

## Results and Discussions

The questionnaires were distributed among 80 students using a Likert scale ranging from 5 (totally disagree) to 1 (totally agree) which include 18 questions to the students to assess their

responses in regard to the effect of culture in English language learning and the cultural elements which might hinder their learning process and there are information about a number of items which are existed in the tables. The frequency tables of counts and percentages are calculated and presented below in 5 tables. The analysis explains the relationships between the items in the survey. The selection of the variables included in the tabular analysis is based on the research findings.

**Table-1**  
**Usage of both Iranian and English cultural based factors**

Questions	Totally agree	Partially agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Partially disagree	Totally disagree
1. Using Iranian culturally related topics in discussions would lead to a better understanding of ELT texts.	15%	30%	-	50%	5%
2. Knowing the culture of English speaking countries would facilitate the learning process.	28.8%	10%	17.5%	33%	10.7%
3. By keeping learners free in choosing the discussion topics, Iranian learners would select subjects based on their cultures.	30%	31.3%	18.8%	11.3%	8.6%
4. Preparing the syllabus on the basis of both Iranian and English culture will be helpful in understanding the text.	17.5%	10%	-	45%	27.5%

**Table-2**  
**Faithfulness to Iranian culture**

Questions	Totally agree	Partially agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Partially disagree	Totally disagree
5. Learners' fear of losing Iranian traditions and values has negative effect on ELT.	20.2%	12.3%	21.3%	46.3%	-
6. Tribe's prejudices would hinder the learning process.	16%	10%	30%	44%	-
7. Learners faithfulness to the Iranian culture and Islamic believes would limit learners not to choose subjects such as alcoholism, premarital relationship in their discussion.	10%	28.7%	30%	31.35	-

**Table-3**  
**Religious and political beliefs**

Questions	Totally agree	Partially agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Partially disagree	Totally disagree
8. Using Islamic related topics rather than other religious (such as Christian) would lead to a better understanding of the texts.	15%	30%	-	50%	5%
9. Broadcasting of the Iranian television in regard to England or America as imperialistic countries discourage Iranian learners to learn English.	28.8%	10%	17.5%	33%	10.7%
10. Iran's political relation to English speaking countries has positive effect on ELT.	30%	31.3%	18.8%	11.3%	8.6%
11. The boycott of English speaking countries on Iran and Iran's neighboring countries with the same religion (Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan...) has negative impact on English learning process.	17.5%	10%	-	45%	27.5%

**Table-4**  
**The effect of globalization on ELT**

Questions	Totally agree	Partially agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Partially disagree	Totally disagree
12. Learners' concept of globalization as cultural dominance of a country over others has negative effect on ELT.	21.2%	8.8%	5%	38.8%	26.2%
13. Learners' concept of globalization as vanishing of Iran's old culture and traditional believes has negative effect on ELT.	-	3.77	32.5%	48.8%	15%
14. Globalization leads to an imperialistic view and political dominance of English spoken countries over other countries.	-	7.5%	25%	37.5%	30%

**Table-5**  
**Taboo words as cultural barriers**

Questions	Totally agree	Partially agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Partially disagree	Totally disagree
15. Taboo words cause perception gap for Iranian learners.	6.2%	28.8%	27.5%	37.5%	-
16. Iranian learners refuse using English words which are homophones to taboo words in their language.	6.35	2.5%	42.5%	21.2%	27.5%
17. Avoiding using subjects related to taboo words would help learners to preserve their culture and religion.	-	35%	41.2%	21.3%	2.5%
18. Iranian learners avoid using subjects related to taboo words.	28.8%	36.2%	11.3%	12.5%	11.2%

Based on the rankings above, the usage of both Iranian and English culture could be interpreted as the top priority needs in the community being studied (44.7% partially agree). It also shows that barriers like taboo words (30.62% neither agree nor disagree), political relations (31.3% partially agree) and religious factors (34.8% disagreed) are partially effective on ELT.

According to the information from tables, students partially agreed with the first category (44.7 %) and believed using both Iranian and English culture in discussion and text books could facilitate the learning .In the second category, learners' faithfulness to Iranian culture, demonstrated that students were partiallydisagreeing with the question of this category (40.53%). The result of third category, religious and political beliefs , indicates that students were partially disagreeing with the question of this category (34.82%). Thefourth category, in relation to the effect of globalization on ELT and the result showed partial disagreement ofstudents with this category (41.7%). In the last category which was about taboo words, (30.62%) ofstudents had no opinion and neither agreed nor disagreed with it, (23.12%) partially disagreed and (25.62% ) partially agreed.

Hence, the results explain Iranian students could have a better learning when both Iranian and English culture were used in English text teachings and also those barriers as taboo words or political and religious relations have partial effectiveness on ELT.

## Conclusion

With the aim of identifying the key elements hindering the learning process of English as a foreign language in Iran ,

typically known as cultural barriers, the present research examines how those five domains are relative to one another on the basis of statistical analyses of the questionnaires prepared for the research explores the effect of the usage of social factors, religious matters and taboo words as cultural dimensions on ELT; i.e. diagnosing the matters hindering or fostering the ELT learning process in the community being studied .The partial effect of each domain on hindering the learning process is calculated on the basis of the questionnaire results. The results highlight the main criteria in ELT included under the broad term of cultural barriers and its implications on overcoming the desired outcomes in the teaching/learning process in Iran .It indicates that English learning may be more effectively processed for Iranian students if both Iranian and English culture are going to be used (44.7% partially agree). It also shows that barriers like taboo word (in different stance) or political relations (31% partially agree) and religious factors (31.5% disagreed) are partially effective on ELT .In consequence, the research findings demonstrated that using both Islamic teachings and getting familiar with the L2 culture may lead to achieve in teaching and learning of English and to solve learners' problems in ELT classroom in the city of distribution.

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