Culture learning in Myanmar EFL context

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
	In this era of information and technology explosion, peoples in the world encounter one another more often and more easily than ever before. The need for mastering a foreign or second language besides one's own seems to dramatically grow. More people are learning languages for their personal and professional needs. Specifically, cultural features of the language being learned must be taught concurrently with the linguistic parts, which have traditionally been underlined. Consequently, the present study sought to shed some light on the place of culture in EFL classrooms at educational context in general, and the main goals of teaching culture, major means of teaching culture and the main obstacles facing teachers in teaching culture. To do so, questionnaires were distributed among EFL teachers from different universities and responses were then collected. The findings revealed a gap between the teachers' perceptions and practices in dealing with culture. The data were collected through a questionnaire with 52 Myanmar teachers of English and 86 Myanmar university learners Finally, data analyzed showed that the teachers and learners had positive attitude towards the culture and culture learning. They all preferred to the intercultural communicative competence. And the teachers and learners are actively involved in cultural activities in language classrooms and had the positive attitudes to the cultural activities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Culture as a way of life, as the context within which people exist, think, feel, and relate to others, as the "glue" (Brown, 2007: 188) that binds groups of people together. Moreover, culture, as Brown (2007) suggested, can also be defined as the ideas, customs, skills, arts, and tools that characterize a certain group of people in each period. Sowden (2007) indicated that "culture tended to mean that body of social, artistic, and intellectual traditions associated historically with a particular social, ethnic or national group" (pp. 304-305). Additionally, Mead (1961) postulated that culture can be learned, whereas Fox (1999) noted that "culture is relative and changeable in space and time" (p. 90). Like language, culture may seem to be another notion that is not easy to define. In fact, Tang (2006) rightly observed that despite the continued efforts in various corrective fields to find a definition for the term culture, at the present time there is no single definition that satisfies everyone. Similarly to Brooks (1964) regarded language as the most advanced element of culture. As language and culture are two inseparable entities, the incorporation of cultural issues in teaching is inevitably recommended.

In contexts where there is no direct access to the target culture, teachers and the materials being used play a significant role in supplying cultural information. In addition to teachers and realia, textbooks can also play a crucial role in supplying students with rich cultural information. According to Tavares & Cavalcanti (1996), the aim of teaching culture is to heighten students' awareness and to develop their curiosity towards both the target and home culture. In addition, Kaikkonen (2001) asserted that "the most important goal of foreign language education is to help learners grow out of the shell of their mother tongue and their own culture" (Ritlyova, 2009) coped that students improve their perception of a foreign culture and their own culture by gaining awareness of a foreign language.

However, teachers sometimes do not much address cultural issues in language classrooms due to factors like shortage of time, lack of cultural knowledge, or lack of training as to which aspects of culture to teach, among other things. Besides, in some contexts in which the target language is considered a foreign language, addressing too much cultural issues might be viewed as promoting the foreign language values and undermining the local ones. Although a plethora of studies can be found which have dealt with some aspects of teaching culture, few, if any, extensive studies have addressed developing cultural awareness in an Iranian context. Therefore, this study sought to explore the place of culture in EFL classrooms at secondary-school level. More particularly, it takes into consideration the importance of incorporating culture in teaching, major means of developing cultural awareness, main obstacles facing teachers in tea.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The aim of this research is to investigate teachers' and language learners' perceptions of culture and culture teaching / learning in Myanmar context. The research aims to unearth the idiosyncratic (personal) views of teachers and learners about learning culture and figure out how far these views are in line or mismatch. This is important since these perceptions may directly affect their teaching / learning in the long run and additionally teachers' current practices in the English classroom can provide a general picture of the current situation in language teaching in Myanmar.

(1) To find out the attitudes and perceptions on culture and culture teaching of teachers and learners.

(2) To investigate the attitudes of teachers and learners towards intercultural communicative competence.

3. METHOD

This research was conducted in the academic year 2017-2018 at eight universities by voluntarily participation of 52 (41 females and 11 males) teachers of the English language and 86 learners (69 females and 17 males) studying English Language and Literatures. Teachers' ages vary from 28 to 59 and learners from 17 to 33. This questionnaire is an attitude scale which was developed by Han, Hui (2010) but it is slightly modified by the researchers to suit the requirements for the writing course. The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert type scale, requiring participants to respond to each item once whether strongly disagree (1 point), disagree (2 points), undecided (3 points), agree (4 points) or strongly agree (5 points). After some revision, the questionnaire is developed as two parts. The first part contains biographical information about participants such as age, gender, educational background etc. and the second part consists of 26 questionnaire items in three different sections: 1st section consists of 11 questionnaire items asking participants beliefs and perceptions on culture and culture learning. 2nd section consists of 7 questionnaire items asking participants perception on the place of culture and perception of intercultural competence. 3rd section consists of 8 questionnaire items asking participants perception on how to pass culture. Completion of the scale takes about 20 minutes.

4. RESULT

As seen in the data collection process, the form of this research data is quantitative; the manner of data collection is both descriptive and experimental. Participants are selected randomly from the study population in an unbiased manner, and finally, data from the culture questionnaire were studied statistically. The data about teachers' and language learners' perceptions of culture and culture teaching/learning was collected through a questionnaire to see whether there is a significant difference between the groups. As stated earlier in the data collection procedure, the method of analysis is statistical analysis. Then, the data were analyzed with percentage step by step before drawing objective conclusions.

4.1 The importance of culture and culture learning in Myanmar ELT classrooms

In this research, the perceptions on the importance of culture and culture learning in Myanmar ELT classrooms are explored to see whether there is an important difference in teachers and student perceptions. According to the data, there is no significant difference between the views of teachers and learners on the importance of culture.

Regarding the student's perceptions on the importance of culture, 64% of learners responded that getting evidence about the target culture is important for them. We also investigated learners' thoughts on the effects of culture class. A significant similarity between the learners' views and experts in the field was observed. Regarding the benefits of learning about culture, 61% of the learners responded that attending the culture class has raised cultural awareness and benefitted learning about shared value and beliefs of the L_2 culture (Figure 1).
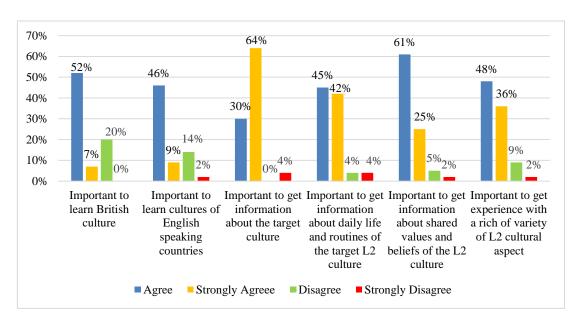
Figure 1 Learners' perceptions on the importance of culture

The data in general revealed that Myanmar foreign language learners were willing to try and attain culture learning objectives in foreign language education. We also aimed at describing an average foreign language-culture teacher in terms of perceptions on the importance of culture, irrespective of the country in which s/he teaches. The following figure is interpreted the result of teachers' perceptions on the importance of culture (Figure 2).
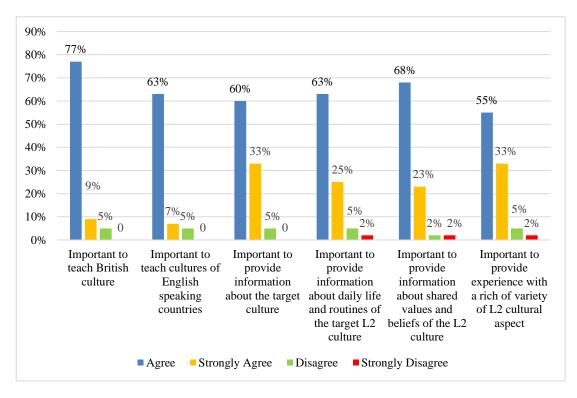

Figure 2 Teachers' perceptions on the importance of culture

According to Figure 2, 77% of teachers agreed on the fact of teaching British culture is important for them. It has been also found that 68% of the teacher participants were aware of the importance of information about shared values and beliefs of the L2 culture, yet they were also aware of their own lack of knowledge related to the target language culture(s) and that the teaching culture involved more than what they could do.

Moreover, the result showed that 63% of teachers believed that teaching cultures of English-speaking countries such as Canada, Australian and New Zeeland which they teach as well as providing information about daily life and routines of the target culture are also important for them. As both results, most learners thought that getting information about the target culture is more important than the others. But as teachers' view, teaching British culture to their learners is more important than the other options. According to the result, the perceptions of learners and teachers on the importance of culture teaching (Figure 3).
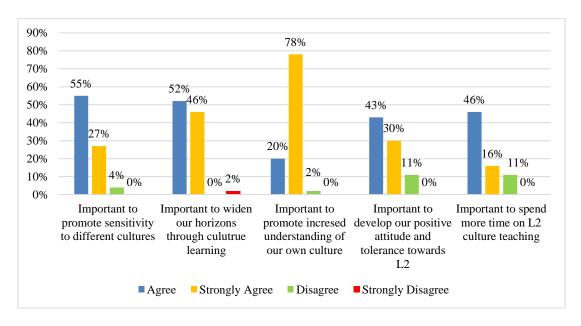

Figure 3 Learners' perceptions on the importance of culture learning

Regarding learners' perceptions on the importance of culture learning, it is clear that 78% of learners showed a high preference on their own culture. 55% of student participants wanted to expand their knowledge on different culture (Figure 4).
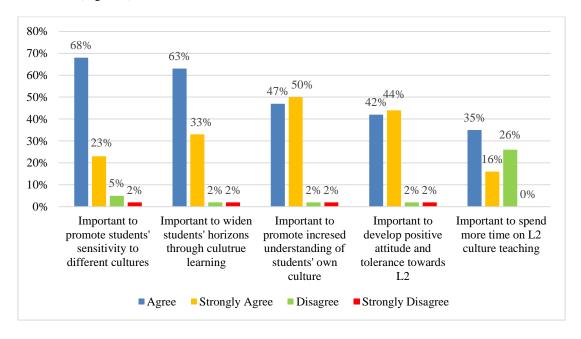

Figure 4 Teachers' perceptions on the importance of culture teaching

According to Figure 4, 68% of teacher participants favored to promote learners' sensitivity to different cultures. When we compared to the learners concerning with the fact of to promote increased understanding of our own culture, 47% of teachers agreed with this. Instead of that 63% of teachers inspired to widen learners'

horizons through culture learning. When we compared both results, most learners want to promote increased understanding of their own culture but most of the teachers want to promote their students' sensitivity to different cultures.

4.2 Place of culture and intercultural competence

Moreover, the opinions of Myanmar learners and teachers of English on intercultural competence teaching were investigated to see how and to what extent these opinions are reflected in their classroom applications (Figure 5 and 6).
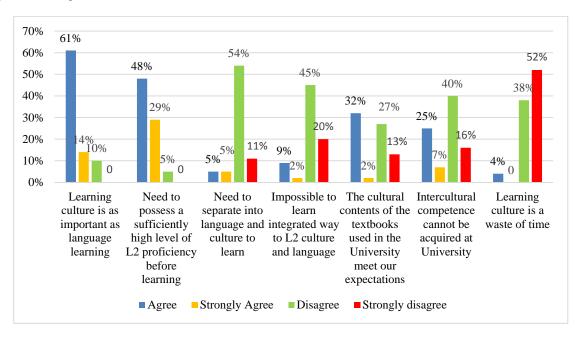

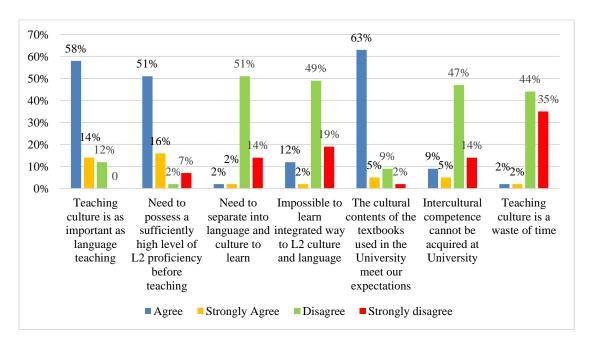Figure 5 Learners' perceptions on place of culture and intercultural competence

Figure 6 Teachers' perceptions on place of culture and intercultural competence

Data were collected from 86 learners and the findings of Figure 5 revealed that 61% of them agree with the statement of learning culture is as important as language learning and 54% of participants thought that

language and culture can be learned in a united way and no need to separate the two. 52% learners responded to the statement of learning culture is a waste of time as strongly disagree.

According to the responses of the English teachers, 63% teachers responded that the cultural contents of the textbooks used in the University meet their expectations. And 53% of teachers thought that teaching culture is as important as language teaching. But 51% of them suggested that language and culture can be learned in an integrated way and before teaching L2 culture, learners must possess a sufficiently high level of L2 proficiency. The findings revealed that most of the learners and the teachers did not seem to be aware of the role of the culture in foreign language education and they do not often integrate culture into their teaching to develop intercultural competence (Figure 7).
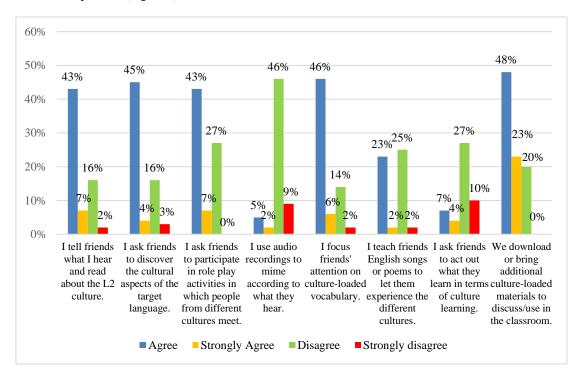

Figure 7 Learners' perceptions on how to pass culture

The data in Figure 7 clearly showed the types of cultural activities learners would enjoy in language classrooms, at which level they would like to do them, their attitudes towards the target culture, the level of importance learners attach to the target culture and their understanding of "culture". 48% of learners want to download or bring additional culture-loaded materials to discuss or use in their classroom. But 46% of learners don't want to use audio recordings to mime according to what they hear.
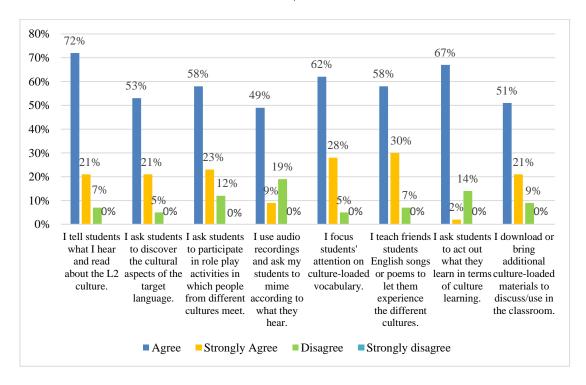
Figure 8 Teachers' perceptions on how to pass culture

In figure 8, found that 72% of English teachers want to tell students what they hear and read about the L2 culture which they teach. And 67% of them would like to ask learners to act out what they learn in terms of culture learning. From the results most of the learners (48%) and teachers (72%) who took part in the research had positive attitudes towards the inclusion of cultural components during their study of the English language by bringing additional culture-loaded materials through technology and telling the learners what they hear and read about the L_2 culture.

5. DISCUSSION

An understanding of the relationship between language and culture is important for language learners, users, and for all those involved in language education. For language teachers and learners in general, an appreciation for the differences in opinion regarding the relationship between language and culture can help to illuminate the diversity of views held toward the use of language. According to the data, it is generally agreed that language and culture are closely related. In this research, the teachers and learners had positive attitude towards the culture and culture learning. They all preferred to the intercultural communicative competence and the teachers and learners are actively involved in cultural activities in language classrooms and had the positive attitudes to the cultural activities (Luo, 2021).

Brown (2007) provided guidelines on accounting for cultural issues for classroom teachers. A student's cultural identity is usually a deeply seated bundle of emotions, so teachers should practice empathy as they relate to their students in cultural matters: behavior patterns, and expectations; expected relationship to authority, family, and peers; ambiguity, tolerance, and openness to new ideas and ways of thinking; students' attitudes toward their own and the second language culture; their view of individualism versus Teaching Culture in the EFL/ESL classroom collectivism; linguistic conventions of politeness, formality, and other socio-pragmatic factors. Secondly, teachers should recognize the cultural connotations and nuances of English and the first language of their students. Moreover, teachers should use the classroom as an opportunity to educate their students about other cultures and help them to see that no one culture is better than another (Kulachit & Nuangchalerm, 2021). Furthermore, teachers should also practice in words and deed their respect for their students' deeply ingrained emotions that stem from the students' cultural schemata. When cultural differences emerge, teachers should help their students to appreciate and celebrate diversity.

Especially in an English as a second language context where students in the same class may represent many different cultures, teachers should try to make their classroom a model of openness, tolerance, and respect. Peterson and Coltrane (2003) recommended that culture be instructed without preconceptions. In other words, they indicated that cultural information should be provided in a nonjudgmental fashion that does not place value or judgment on distinctions between the students" culture and the culture being explored in the classroom. Peterson and Coltrane also pointed out that possessing only linguistic competence is not enough for learners of a

language to be competent in that language. These authors further noted that learners of a language need to understand that language use must be associated with other culturally appropriate behavior for communication to be successful. Moreover, as these authors suggested, instead of teaching culture implicitly through linguistic forms the students are learning, teachers can make the cultural features reflected in the language more explicitly. 30 Teaching Culture in the EFL/ESL classroom.

Furthermore, Wylie (1961) postulated that although it is of great importance to learn the facts about a foreign culture, facts alone are not enough, and that the values and attitudes behind the facts are more important to cultural understanding. In addition, Krasner (1999) argued that both linguistic and extra-linguistic cultural features should be taught to the students so that miscommunication, misinterpretation, and a major culture shock may be avoided. Reiterating what Thomas (1983, 1984) observed, Hinkel (1999) noted that nonnative speakers are typically perceived to use inappropriate language behaviors and they are even not aware that they do. Assisting second and foreign language learners to avoid utilizing inappropriate language behaviors is obviously by no means an easy task. Thus, further research is much needed to ascertain effective methods or approaches to maximize the effectiveness of teaching culture in the language classroom and minimize the chances that learners use a second or foreign language in a culturally inappropriate manner.

6. CONCLUSION

Although there are advantages as well as disadvantages of teaching culture in the language classroom, as Damen (1987) pointed out that teaching culture to second and foreign language students is a must that no classroom language teacher should ignore. The question at the time being is not whether to teach culture to students of second or foreign languages or not, but rather the valid question should be how to best teach culture to students in second or foreign language classrooms. In conclusion, understanding the relationship between languages and cultures can be a good starting point for any approach to language education. This association can help policy makers to design programs to teach language learners about the target cultures to achieve real competency in the languages they are expected to learn. Learning language through culture has good impact on language learning. It draws learners' attention to cultural diversity thus enhancing tolerance, understanding and cooperation between people with different cultural backgrounds.

7. RECOMMENDATION

This present study investigated the interest of students and teachers towards cultural learning in their classroom. The findings revealed that the respondents were in favor of learning mostly about their own culture, followed by target and international target culture. Based on the research findings, teachers can look at different ways to motivate students to be curious to explore various cultural themes. Therefore, the study suggests that teachers should provide supplementary authentic teaching materials about cultural themes from diverse cultural sources to motivate students and expose them to more varied cultures. They can also use documentaries, video, or film to illustrate appropriate nonverbal communication in both international and target cultures to help students identify the meaning of gestures from different cultures. For students with advanced language skills, presentations and discussions/debates can be used for cultural knowledge learning. For example, students can discuss the similarities and differences between cultures. Finally, role-plays are another activity which can be used for skills and attitudes training to motivate students and to strengthen cultural knowledge learning. Some of the issues remaining to be investigated include the following. First, further research needs to be drawn from a larger sample size. Second, reasons why students prefer a particular source of culture over another, and a particular cultural theme over another should be investigated. Finally, teachers' perceptions as well as how to teach culture need further research.

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