Asian Journal of University Education

Faculty of Education

ASIAN JOURNAL OF UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

A Publication of
the Asian Centre for Research on University Learning and Teaching (ACRULeT) Faculty of
Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA

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The Relationship between Iranian EFL learners' Self-perceived Knowledge and Loyalty to Iranian Culture and their Attitudes Toward Cultural Differences in their First Year and Last Year of Studying at University

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ABSTRACT

This study used mixed method research to find out about Iranian EFL learners self-perceived knowledge and loyalty to their Iranian and Islamic culture and their attitude toward cultural differences in their first and last year of studying at university. 40 senior students, majoring in English Language and Literature were asked to rate their self-perceived knowledge of and loyalty to their own Iranian and Islamic culture and then answer the questionnaire about attitudes toward cultural differences. They were also interviewed about this. The analysis of data showed first, there was a positive relationship between Iranian EFL students' knowledge of and loyalty to their own culture. Second, no relationship was found between students' attitudes toward cultural differences and their knowledge of and loyalty to their own culture. Third, it was found that there was a significant improvement in the degree of ethnorelativism from first to last year of studying at university. It is concluded that students can have an ethnorelative attitude toward cultural differences and at the same time, be loyal to their own culture.

Keywords: cultural differences, cultural attitudes, cultural sensitivity, cultural awareness

INTRODUCTION

The development of cultural awareness and intercultural skills is a by-product of learning a foreign language. Hereby, L2 learning connects one to a world culturally different from one's own (Sercu, 2005, p. 1). Greey (1994) defines culture as a learned system of values and beliefs among a group of people. According to Corbett (2003), an intercultural approach to second language learning develops an understanding of how the values and beliefs are produced and negotiated within a particular language community. One cultural and intercultural benefit of language learning and the development of intercultural competence is that one learns about one's own culture and will be able to compare it with that of the target language culture. Alptekin (2002) favors an intercultural communicative competence rather than a native-like competence. Meanwhile, Crozet and Liddicoat (1999, p. 115) state that students need to "distance themselves from their native language/cultural environment to see it for the first time as what it really is, as just one possible world view and not the only world view."

Schumann in his acculturation model (1986) studied the impacts of personal variables (e.g., relative status, congruence, attitude, integration, closed or open attitudes, amount of time in the culture, size of the learning group and cohesiveness of the group) on adult language learning and suggested three strategies taken by adult learners when encountering a foreign culture: total adoption of the target culture (assimilation), preservation of the home culture (total rejection of the target culture) and "acculturation" which he defines as learning to function in the new culture while maintaining one's own identity. Tomlinson (2001, cited in Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2004, p. 3) states that cultural awareness involves an increased understanding of one's own and other people's cultures. Levine and Adelman (1982) maintain cultural conflicts occur as a result of misinterpretations, ethnocentrism, stereotypes and prejudice. Preventing these conflicts is possible with increased awareness of our own attitudes as well as sensitivity to cross-cultural differences. Developing cultural sensitivity does not mean that we lose our cultural identities—but rather that we recognize cultural influences. Paige (1993) believes that if cultural differences are greater, especially when they are perceived negatively, the experience of these differences will be more challenging.

In the past, a native-speaker variety of English was the norm in language learning and the native speaker's culture, perceptions and speech were of high significance in setting goals for teaching of English (Richards, 2003). The native speaker norm was the criterion for measuring the authenticity of materials, the efficacy of teaching methods, the proficiency of the learners, etc. (Rajagopalan, 2004). However, this native speakers' norms of linguistic accuracy and social appropriateness is no longer a must, mainly because of the imperialistic motives behind the teaching of the Standard English for Anglo-Americanizing the world (Modiano, 2009). The teaching of English in its western cultural context which was formerly thought to be a neutral language and the means for the expression of culture, or cultures (Richards, 2003) is now considered by many ELT practitioners as a mean through which some superpowers transfer their ideologies and social values to other nations of the world. Phillipson (1992) calls this 'linguistic imperialism' and Cooke (1988) uses the metaphor "Trojan Horse" for the harmless-looking expansion of English to many areas of the world. Therefore, there was resistance to the teaching of English containing its western culture and countries began to think of protecting their indigenous languages and cultures. Kasaian and Krishna (2011) studied the attitudes of the Iranian education officials and parents of high school students toward the teaching of English in its Western cultural context. Results showed that exposure to aspects of incompatible western culture was resisted by parents and Iranian education officials. Holmes (2003) believes that the consequences of teaching English in its western culture can be averted if it is used just as a culture-free instrumental tool.

Liddicoat (2002) states that language acquisition and culture acquisition are similar processes in that the learner begins with knowledge of L1 culture and gradually approximates the target culture. These processes contain rules which are derived either from L1 or L2 cultures and/or rules that belong to neither culture. Following Selinker (1972) who coined the term interlanguage, Liddicoat (2002) coins the term intercultures for these approximative systems, and regards each interculture as a new stage in the development of a set of intercultural practices. However, learning about cultural practices in English language as transferred through imported learning materials is still regarded as a worrying issue by Iranian policy makers and curriculum developers who greatly value their own cultural norms and values. The question here is whether an increase in the awareness

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of a foreign culture really results in the rejection of one's own culture among Iranian EFL learners. Therefore, it is interesting to know about the attitude of Iranian EFL learners toward such cultural differences and to study the development of intercultural sensitivity from the first to the last year of studying at university. Thus, this study is an attempt to answer the following questions:

1. Is there any relationship between knowledge of native culture and loyalty to it?

2. Is there any relationship between the stages of intercultural sensitivity with knowledge of native culture among Iranian EFL learners?

3. Is there any relationship between the stages of intercultural sensitivity with loyalty to native culture among Iranian EFL learners?

4. Is there any significant difference between the stages of intercultural sensitivity in the first year and last year of studying at university among Iranian EFL learners?

5. What attitudes toward cultural differences do Iranian EFL learners have in their first and last year of studying at university?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of this study were 40 (6 female and 34 male) sixth and eighth semester BA students, majoring in English language and literature from the University of Mazandaran. They had already passed at least six semesters of English literature courses and were considered to have good familiarity of English culture due to these courses. Students of English language and literature course were selected for this study as they were more aware of the history and culture of the country whose language they were studying. They all had previous experiences of learning English at guidance school, high school and English language institutes. They were exposed to English culture input during their years of study. These forty

students were first given the questionnaire for the quantitative phase of the study. Then, for the qualitative phase, five participants were interviewed. They were identified as Students A to E.

Student A, a female, aged 23 believed that she would continue her studies after graduation. In addition to the obligatory courses, she spent about 20 hours a week working on homework outside the classroom. She believed that her speaking ability was not very good but she could fluently read texts of different genres. She also had limitless access to different learning materials in English, either in print, or audio or video materials.

Student B aged 22 thought English was an interesting language and that it was a necessity to know English. His goal was to learn to become an English teacher. He felt that his comprehension skills (reading and listening) were better than production skills (speaking and writing skills). In addition to the obligatory courses, he spent about 16 hours a week working on homework outside the class. He also had good access to different learning materials in English, either in print, or audio and/or video materials.

Student C, aged 23 had been exposed to English from the age of 10 at language institutes. Although he said he improved much of his English language ability when he became a university student. He also would like to start learning another foreign language like German. In addition to the obligatory courses, he spent about 17 hours a week working on homework outside the class. He also had good access to different learning materials in English, either in print or audio and/or video materials.

Student D, aged 23 said that he usually spoke English very often to classmates or roommates on campus and he enjoyed communicating with them. However, he had a difficult time writing in English, as he had less interest in it in language learning. In addition to the obligatory courses, he spent about 17 hours a week working on homework outside the class. He also had good access to different learning materials in English, either in print, or audio or video materials.

Student E, aged 22 had studied English with a focus on vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension at school for seven years. He enjoyed English and was happy to have learnt the skills of listening, speaking, reading

and writing. He appreciated every opportunity to use materials of various genres to improve his general English. He spent good time working on his English outside the classroom and did his homework with care. He felt it would be good to learn another foreign language. He had access to different learning materials in English.

INSTRUMENTS

Questionnaire on the Background of the Participants

The participants in the study were asked about their self-perceived knowledge of and their loyalty to their Iranian and Islamic culture. A five-point Likert scale (Very much, Above Average, Average, Below Average and Very Low) was designed for this questionnaire. They were also asked about their language learning experience, access to different learning materials in English and interest in English.

Questionnaire on Attitudes toward Cultural Differences

For the purpose of determining the attitudes of Iranian EFL learners towards cultural differences and to show the development of intercultural sensitivity from the first to the last year of studying at university level, a questionnaire on attitudes toward cultural differences was used. Items in this questionnaire were adapted from the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) developed by Bennett (1986, 1993 cited in Paige, 1993).

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), developed by Bennett (1986, 1993, cited in Paige, 1993) is an explanation of how people construe cultural differences. The assumption underlying this model is that the more sophisticated and complex one's experience of cultural difference becomes, the more increase there will be in one's potential competence in intercultural relations. Bennett identified two stages, namely, ethnocentric stage which is the extent to which one's own culture dominates other cultures, and the ethnorelative stage, which is the extent to which one recognizes and respects perspectives from other cultures. Each stage has three orientations through which people move in their acquisition of intercultural competence. These are explained as follows:

Stage A: The Ethnocentric Stages of Development

1. Denial: At this stage, that is denial of cultural differences, one's own culture is regarded as the only real culture and the people of one's own culture may be considered to be the only real humans and others are regarded as simpler forms to be tolerated, exploited, or even eliminated if necessary. Generally, at this stage, people are disinterested in cultural differences and may act aggressively to eliminate a cultural difference.

2. Defense: Defense against cultural differences is the state in which one's own culture is experienced as the only viable one and superior to other cultures. At this stage, people are more adept at discriminating differences. They experience cultural differences as more real than do people at the denial stage. At this stage, cultural differences are more threatening to people than at the denial stage.

3. Minimisation: At this stage, people assume a basic similarity, either a biological or a spiritual one among all humans. However, such learners lack cultural awareness and their conceptions of similarity are based on their own cultural positions. Such learners are often interested to have others in activities; however, they do not recognize the problems that underlie cultural differences and the political and social issues of group membership.

Stage B: The Ethnorelative Stages of Development

The next three DMIS orientations are more ethnorelative, meaning that one's own culture is experienced in the context of other cultures.

4. Acceptance: At this stage, one's own culture is just one of a number of equally complex worldviews and people with this worldview are able to experience others as different from themselves, but equally human. People at this stage can construct culture-general categories allowing them to generate a range of relevant cultural contrasts among many cultures.

5. Adaptation: Adaptation to cultural differences is a stage in which the experience of another culture creates perception and behavior which

are appropriate to that culture. One's worldview is expanded to include relevant constructs from other cultural worldviews. In other words, adaptation involves the extension of one's beliefs and behavior, not a substitution of one set of beliefs and behavior for another. Thus, one does not lose his/her primary cultural identity to operate effectively in a different cultural context.

6. Integration: Integration is the final stage of intercultural development. At this stage, learners extend their perception of events in a cultural context to the perceptions of their own identity. However, Bennett et al. (2003) argued that in most situations of intercultural communication, integration is not necessarily more useful than adaptation and to be successful at intercultural communication, empathy for people from other cultures is required and a radical reconstruction of identity is not necessary.

The questionnaire on attitudes toward cultural differences was assigned a five-point Likert scale (Never, Seldom, Sometimes, Usually, and Always true of me). The questionnaire was translated into Persian to ensure students were comfortable with the concepts explained in their mother tongue, and for more clarity some words were clarified in the translation.

To ensure its internal consistency reliability coefficient, the instrument was piloted among eight students and the Cronbach Coefficient Alpha was 0.73. Two experts in the field were also asked to assess the instrument in terms of how effectively it sampled significant aspects in line with its purpose to provide content validity. Ambiguous words were removed and/ or reworded based on their feedback.

Interview

In order to get more in-depth information on the attitudes of Iranian learners of English toward cultural differences, a semi-structured interview was conducted. The interview questions were drawn from available literature. Data from the interviews was transcribed and analyzed. To ensure the validity of the data from the interviews, a pilot interview was conducted with three students from the original population who took part in the quantitative phase of the study. The students used during the pilot

study were excluded from the final sample as their experience with the earlier interview questions might be a bias in answering. The pilot interview lasted for 15 to 20 minutes, and showed that the questions were capable of eliciting data on the thoughts and practices of the interviewees, serving the content validity of the instrument. The pilot test showed that all of the questions were clear except one of the probes for question two which was reworded and clarified.

Procedures

The study was first conducted on 41 senior students of English language and literature. They had already passed many courses in English language and literature, and since they were exposed to texts (e.g., short stories, novels, poetry) incorporating elements of English culture, they were regarded suitable for the purpose of this study. However, one student withdrew from participation in the midst of data collection, making the total number of participants 40. First, subjects were asked to answer two questions in the questionnaire on their background. Then, the main instrument, which was the questionnaire adapted from the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity, developed by Bennett was given to the participants to find out about their attitudes towards cultural differences in their first and fourth year of studying at university. Therefore, for the quantitative phase of the study, the researchers relied on retrospective longitudinal study methodology. As Dornyei (2011, p. 84) states, "retrospective longitudinal data are gathered during a single investigation in which respondents are asked to think back and answer questions about the past."

For the qualitative phase of this study, the researchers explained the purpose of the interview so that the interviewee responded openly and in detail. The respondents were assured of the confidentiality of the interview data. The interview was conducted on a one-on-one basis and in Persian so that in-depth data could be collected more easily. First, the participants were thanked for agreeing to attend the interview. Then, the interviewees were informed that the interview might last about 20 minutes and they were allowed to stop answering questions at any time if they wished. The researchers often started with easy personal questions to make respondents feel relaxed and to encourage them to open up during the interview. The participants verbally confirmed that they understood the purpose of the

research, the confidentiality of their response and they were happy to take part in the research.

Results

The findings for the quantitative data are reported in line with the research questions one to four and the findings from the qualitative data answered research question five.

Research question 1: Is there any relationship between knowledge of native culture and loyalty to it?

In order to find the relationship between the two variables, that is participants' self-perceived knowledge about their own culture and their loyalty to it, the Spearman Rank Order Correlation Coefficient was used. The correlation was significant at 0.01 level. Therefore, the null hypothesis for question one was rejected (See Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1: Correlation between Knowledge of Native Culture and Loyalty

			X4	X5
Spearman's Rho Correlation coefficient	X4	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.487**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.002
		N	39	39
	X5	Correlation Coefficient	.487**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.
		N	39	40

**. Correlation is Significant at the 0.01 Level (2-tailed)

As shown in Table 2, there is a positive relationship between the knowledge of and loyalty to one's own culture at .05 level of significance.

Table 2: Correlation between Knowledge of Native Culture and Loyalty

Variable	Degree of Students' loyalty to their own culture	
Degree of students' knowledge about their own culture	Correlation Coefficient	0.487**
	Pv	0.002
	N	40

Research question 2: Is there any relationship between the stages of intercultural sensitivity with self-perceived knowledge of native culture among Iranian EFL learners?

As shown in Table 3, Pv is more than .05. Therefore, it is found that there is no significant difference between the stages of intercultural sensitivity with knowledge of native culture among Iranian EFL learners and as a result, the null hypothesis formulated for question two was confirmed.

Table 3: The Relationship between Ethnocentrism and Ethnorelativism with Students' Knowledge of their Own Culture

Variables	Students' knowledge of their own culture	N	Mean	SD	F	Pv	Results
Ethnocenterism	Low	0	0	0	.200	.895	H_0 accepted
	Below average	3	2.6667	.82787			
	Average	7	2.5204	.32918			
	Above average	16	2.6339	.41955			
	High	7	2.5204	.39709			
Ethnorelativism	Low	0	0	0	.839	.280	
	Below average	4	3.1500	.36968			
	Average	7	3.1571	27603			H_0 accepted
	Above average	17	3.2294	44688			
	High	10	3.3600	75159			

Research question 3: Is there any relationship between the stages of intercultural sensitivity with loyalty to native culture among Iranian EFL learners?

Table 4 shows that Pv is larger than .05. There is no significant difference between the different groups; hence, the null hypothesis is not rejected.

Table 4: The Relationship between Ethnocentrism and Ethnorelativism with Students' Loyalty to their Own Culture

Variables	Students' knowledge of their own culture	N	Mean	SD	F	Pv	Results
Ethnocenterism	Low	2	2.9286	.30305	2.148	101.	H_0 accepted
	Below average	3	2.6905	.64813			
	Average	6	2.2976	.35403			
	Above average	16	2.5268	.40814			
	High	6	2.8810	.25422			
Ethnorelativism	Low	2	2.9500	.07071	2.287	.081	
	Below average	4	3.3250	.52520			
	Average	6	3.0833	.33714			H_0 accepted
	Above average	17	3.4706	.49594			
	High	9	2.9444	.50028			

Research question 4: Is there any significant difference between the stages of intercultural sensitivity in the first year and last year of studying at university among Iranian EFL learners?

Table 5 shows the comparison between the first and last year of studying at the University of Mazandaran in terms of two levels of ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism.

Table 5: Comparison between the First and Last Year of Studying at the University of Mazandaran among Iranian EFL Learners in Terms of Levels of Ethnorelativism and Ethnocentrism

Variables	Ethnocentrism				Ethnorelativism			
	First Year		Fourth Year		First Year		Fourth Year	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Low	142	26.15	159	29.28	63	15.37	58	13.46
Below Average	153	29.18	122	22.47	117	28.54	59	13.69
Average	111	20.44	98	18.05	106	25.85	107	24.83
Above Average	90	16.57	106	19.52	70	17.07	106	24.59
High	47	8.66	58	10.68	54	13.17	101	23.43

The findings in Table 5 show that 25.23% and 30.2% of the students in the first year and the fourth year of studying at university respectively reported above average and high level of ethnocentrism. 55.33% and 51.75% of the students in the first year and the fourth year respectively reported below average and low level of ethnocentrism.

The findings also show that 30.24% and 48.02% of the students in the first year and the fourth year of studying at university respectively reported above average and high level of ethnorelativism. Next, 43.91 % and 27.15% of the students in the first year and the fourth year respectively reported below average and low level of ethnorelativism.

According to the results, the highest mean for ethnorelativism (3.24) belongs to students in the fourth year, and the lowest mean for ethnocentrism (2.54) belongs to students in the first year (See Table 6).

Table 6: Highest and Lowest Means for Ethnocentrism and Ethnorelativism

Pair		Mean $\pm S.E$
1	Ethnocentrism First year	2.5433 ± 0.092
	Ethnocentrism Fourth year	2. 5887 ± 0.074
2	Ethnorelativism First Year	2.8105 ± 0.095
	Ethnorelativism Fourth Year	3.2421 ± 0.082

In addition, according to Table 7, there is no significant difference between the mean scores of the first year and fourth year for ethnocentrism; however, there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the first year and fourth year for ethnorelativism. Therefore, the null hypothesis for question four is accepted for ethnocentrism, but rejected for ethnorelativism (See Table 7).

Table 7: Mean Differences for Ethnocentrism and Ethnorelativism

Kind of Attitude	Year of study	Mean	SD	Mean Difference	T	Pv	Result
Ethnocentrism	First year	2.5433	0.52669	-0.04545	-0.684	0.499	H_0 Accepted
	Fourth year	2.5887	0.42297				
Ethnorelativism	First year	2.8105	0.58577	-0.43158	-6.337	0.000	H_0 rejected
	Fourth Year	3.2421	0.50330				

Research Question 5: What attitudes toward cultural differences do Iranian EFL learners have in their first and last year of studying in the university?

The findings from the interview indicated that when the participants were asked for their reasons for studying English students A and B answered they could not gain admission to other courses of their interest. Next, students A, B, D and E mentioned that they studied English for job purposes. Students C, D and E mentioned they were interested in English culture and that they wanted to learn English for possible immigration purposes.

Next, when the participants were asked if the English culture clashes with their native culture and if it still attracted them in their first and final year at the university, their responses were as follows. Student A claimed she found the English culture to be better. She would try to follow it as long as it did not damage her cultural identity. She believed her culture was good but this did not mean it was perfect. Student B believed if it was against the Islamic culture, he would not follow it. Student C would like to follow his Iranian and Islamic cultures. Student D believed some aspects of the English culture were not moral and he did not like to follow them and there were some other aspects which were good although they did not exist in the Iranian culture. He said he would follow them but not openly. Student E tried not to practice the English culture although he liked to know about it.

Next, the participants in their first year and last year of studying English at university were asked whether they thought language and culture were interrelated. All of them considered language and culture to be interrelated.

The participants were also asked in their first year and last year at the university whether they thought English cultural values had to be removed from thei r textbooks at the different educational levels. Students A and B claimed they changed from first to last year and became open to English culture. They believed some awareness of the differences was good as it expanded their world view. Student C and E did not change from first to last year at university as they were always open to cultural differences. They believed bad things must be removed. Student D said he was not in favor of English culture in his first year because he did not know much about it and had no reason to reject or accept it. In his fourth year, he believed there were taboos and immoral aspects in English culture which must be removed from the course books, but students must be familiarized with the English culture.

Then, the participants were asked if their behavior really changed and they became English-like in all aspects of thinking and behavior as a result of studying English materials loaded with content on English culture at the university. Four of the participants (students A, B, C and D) claimed they respected their own culture, were proud of it and loved it more than before. However, they believed studying English made a different person out of them and allowed them to have a better understanding of others'

culture. The fifth participant (student E) felt some changes in some areas (e.g., punctuality) and tried to be English-like.

The participants also contributed their views at the end of the interview. Student A mentioned that as a result of studying English, she felt a need to know more about her ancient Iranian culture. Student B thought he needed to learn English for communication and studying English would improve his world. Next, student C expected Persian teachers to speak more about native Persian and Islamic cultures. He claimed he did not know about ancient Iranian culture and how to explain when asked about it. Another participant, student D believed that familiarity with foreign culture helped him to protect his culture better and helped to detect their problems and remove them. Lastly, student E claimed that as a result of learning about English culture, he could protect himself better, for example, he claimed to behave well in a foreign country without losing his cultural identity.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of the study showed that there was a positive relationship between the knowledge of and loyalty to one's own culture. There was no significant difference between the stages of intercultural sensitivity with knowledge of and loyalty to native culture among Iranian EFL learners, and there was no significant difference in ethnocentrism from first year to last year of studying at the university. However, in terms of ethnorelativism, there was a significant difference from first year to last year of studying at the university as students were more ethnorelative in their attitudes toward cultural differences in the last year.

The qualitative phase of the study shed more light on the quantitative findings. With regard to the reasons for studying English, three out of the five students interviewed said they were interested in English culture and wanted to know about it. Even though so, all the students seemed to be uneasy practicing cultural differences when they were in their first and final year of studying at university. Student A would try to follow aspects of the English culture if they were better. Students B and D did not follow the English culture as they believed respectively it was against the Islamic culture and some aspects of the English culture were not moral. Student

C preferred his Iranian and Islamic cultures whereas student E tried not to practice the English culture although he liked to know about it. All the students in their first and last year of studying at university believed that language and culture were interrelated. As for changes in attitude from first year to last year of studying at university with regard to their reflection of English culture in textbooks, students A, B and D claimed there was a change from first to last year as they became open to English culture and their awareness of the differences expanded their world view. However, students C and E did not change from first to last year at university as they were always open to cultural differences. Meanwhile, changes in behavior and thinking and becoming English-like, as a result of studying English materials loaded with English culture at university did not happen to students A, B, C, and D who loved their culture and were proud of it. However, student E felt some changes, from first to last year, in some areas (e.g., punctuality) and tried to be English-like. As for further explanations of the issue, student B and student E thought learning English culture would respectively improve his world and help protect him better, for example, by behaving well in a foreign country without losing his cultural identity. Student A felt studying English made her more aware of her ancient culture and student D said that being familiar with the foreign culture helped him to protect his culture better and alleviate its problems. Meanwhile, student C expected Persian teachers to speak more about Persian culture.

From these findings, it is concluded that learning English as a foreign language which is a necessity for developing learners' competencies in today's rapidly changing world does not necessarily alienate Iranian EFL learners from their own cultural values. The study showed that even if the participants become ethnorelative and are open to other cultures through the passage of time, they still stay loyal to their native culture and would like to remove their L1 cultural problems, if any. Thus, awareness of other cultures does not necessarily imply disloyalty to or rejection of one's native culture.

The development of cultural awareness and intercultural skills is a by-product of learning a foreign language. Crozet and Liddicoat (1999, p. 115) state that students need to "distance themselves from their native language/culture environment to see it for the first time as what it really is, as just one possible world view and not the only world view". Bennett, et. al. (2003) argue that at lower levels of language proficiency, learners move

from denial to defence, then move from ethnocentric to ethnorelative stages at intermediate level and develop the higher levels of the ethnorelative stages at an advanced level. The findings of this study are in line with Schumann's (1986) acculturation theory which is defined as learning to function in the new culture while maintaining one's own identity.

However, there are studies which draw different conclusions about culturally loaded educational materials in foreign language learning in Iranian context. Kasaian and Krishna (2011) showed that exposure to the incompatible aspects of Western culture was resisted by parents and the Iranian education officials. The teaching of English in its western cultural context was formerly thought to be a neutral language and the means for the expression of culture, or cultures (Richards, 2003). Many ELT practitioners consider English as a vehicle through which some superpowers transfer their ideologies and social values to other nations of the world. Phillipson (1992) calls this "linguistic imperialism" and Cooke (1988) uses the metaphor 'Trojan Horse' for the harmless-looking expansion of English to many areas of the world.

In line with the above, two viewpoints about cultural differences can be considered. According to the findings of Kasaian and Krishna (2011), Holmes (2003), Phillipson's (1992) linguistic imperialism, and Cooke's (1988) metaphor of Trojan Horse, our EFL/ESL learners should not be in touch with Western culture through textbooks and learning materials. However, this view equals lack of familiarity with cultural differences with cultural safety for language learners. If we conceive advantages for removing culturally-loaded texts from text-books, disadvantages can also be conceived, one of which is that our EFL learners become vulnerable to the negative aspects of cultural differences and will not know how to deal with them independently. From the findings of the present study, it is concluded that learning about a foreign culture does not necessarily result in disloyalty to or rejection of one's own culture. Bada (2000) asserts that awareness of cultural values does not necessarily invite learners to conform to such values.

One of the benefits of learning about other cultures is that one becomes more familiar with one's own cultural capacities and beauties. Therefore, instead of moving to the two extremes of free use or total non-

use of culturally loaded materials, we should enlighten our EFL learners of the cultural discrepancies and differences between the two languages. This awareness raising should not necessarily be done in English language courses, and the role of Persian language teachers, as shown in the interview, is also undeniable as they will illuminate our students about our own ancient and contemporary cultural attractions.

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