

Exploring Student – Teachers’ Perceptions Towards Cultures in English Language Education

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Abstract

A language is a symbolic representation of cultures, and the language itself is shaped and mobilized by them. Thus, English learning is associated with its target cultures as well as learners’ host cultures. Given this complexity of cultural learning contexts, the researchers investigated perceptions of student- teachers of Faculty of Education, Phuket Rajabhat University towards cultural learning in English language education. 65 student- teachers from eleven majors responded a questionnaire, and six of them willingly participated in an interview. Written documents related to the English courses required in the curriculum for the student- teachers were also analyzed. Later, the quantitative and qualitative findings were critically analyzed and triangulated. The findings revealed that the student- teachers held positive perceptions towards learning cultures in English classes. They highlighted that such cultures could be English target cultures and Thai host cultures as the cultural differences would allow them to know appropriate social manners of different cultural contexts. In addition, they argued that the learning materials dealing with cultural matters in the university context are still insufficient even though the university is located in Phuket Province, where is regarded as the world’s famous tourist destination.

Keywords: Culture, Perception, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Student- Teacher, Cultural Awareness

Introduction

Cultures have been regarded as an emergent phenomenon in the learning processes which are oriented in the means of communication (Atkinson, 2004; Kramsch, 1993, 2013). To learn a foreign language efficiently, Moran (2001) mentioned that learners need to bring themselves into the cultural contexts to assimilate the ways in which a language is used in the same way as native speakers. This process is called a cultural experience of the target language which can help the learners develop their language learning better and faster comparing with memorizing vocabulary and rules (Omar, 2015; Ziegenfuss, Odhiambo & Keyes, 2014). In other words, cultural learning plays a direct role in learning a foreign language since having knowledge of foreign cultures can help students interpret the meaning of the cultural framework as well as to apply cultural knowledge to use in a daily life (Tzotzou and Kotsiou, 2015; Peterson & Coltrane, 2003; Farooq, Soomro & Umer, 2018).

Crossing the conceptual learning that target cultures are emphasized in the foreign language learning, several studies of Mackay (2000, 2002, and 2004) address the necessity of incorporating learners' local cultures in the process of teaching English as an International Language (EIL). This is because, as McKay (2004) argued, within the process of English learning, learners are not only required to understand their interlocutors' messages but also to express their own views, attitudes, and thoughts. She illustrated further that learning cultures in EIL classrooms can affect Asian learners' development of linguistic competence which consists of semantic, pragmatic, and rhetoric patterns. The semantic relates to the learning of lexical items that need cultural backgrounds of native speakers to understand such as Big Tree, Super Bowl, or yellow journalism. The pragmatic refers to the teaching of speech acts like giving and asking information, and making and refusing invitation. Meanwhile, rhetoric patterns are likely to be direct or indirect expression of ideas which tend to mismatch with the preference styles of the target language. Given this deep effect of cultures towards language learners' learning, considering similarities and differences of the target and local cultures of learners are essential as they determine the roles of teacher and learners as well as the achievement of classroom performances (Cortazzi & Jin, 2002).

Moreover, several scholars went thus far to highlight the significance of cultural learning in a foreign language education. For instance, Kramsch (1993) stated that the goal of cultural learning is beyond the learning of local, national, or global cultures. Rather, it is to enable learners to be culturally competent in communication as to respect and value the cultural diversity, participate and take a responsibility from communities to the global scales. Kramsch (2013) pointed further that cultures are 'transgression' as learners learn not only to use the language correctly and appropriately but also to reflect their own experiences and perspectives of a third place. The third place in this sense means learners are able to see themselves both from the inside and the outside without being hostage with a

specific perspective and worldview (Kramsch, 2009). This intercultural competence will lead the language learners to have “the process of meaning making itself” (Kramsch, 2013, p. 68).

To achieve intercultural competence, learners need to constitute of five capacities, as proposed by Byram (1997) in his Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) theory. They are (1) critical cultural awareness, (2) knowledge of social group and identities construction, (3) skills of interpreting and relating, (4) skills of discovery and interaction, and (5) attitudes as a mediator. Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2002) described further that knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to cultural appreciation of learners would be complemented by the values they held, and such values would represent their social identities. In other words, the ultimate goal of learning cultures in a foreign language education is to encourage learners to hold decent attitudes and willingness to reexamine their own values, beliefs and behaviors (Byram et al. 2002).

Cultural perceptions in English learning and teaching

Several researchers stated that intercultural competence in English classes should be promoted throughout the learning of cultural diversity which might associate with target cultures of English, international cultures, as well as learners' host cultures (i.e., Cortazzi & Jin, 2002; Borkhorst- Heng & McKay, 2008; Hinkel, 1999; McKay, 2002, 2004). Within English learning and teaching classes, positive perceptions will be a starting point for teachers and learners to be culturally competent speakers or mediators. Deardorff (2009) identified the requisite attitudes of intercultural competence which were consisted of respecting and valuing other cultures, openness to people of different cultural backgrounds, and curiosity and discovery to tolerate ambiguity and learn uncertainties. These kind of attitudes will develop the perceptions of personal learners into interactive levels resulting in internal desired outcomes of adaptability, ethnorelative views, and empathy in behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately.

The study of Jabeen, Zahid and Sattar (2013) illustrated the effects of learners' perceptions of cultures to English learning achievement. This survey study revealed the contrasted perceptions of students living in two different Pakistani contexts. The students in urban communities held positive perceptions towards their target culture, whereas the students living in rural communities held some negativity. The cultural sensitivities that might cause the students in rural areas feel uncomfortable to learn the target cultures associated with homosexuality and funeral traditions. The researchers concluded that cultural perceptions of learners affected their target language learning success, and the learners with a positive attitude were likely to perform higher performances of English achievements.

The cultural perceptions in English classes do not affect only learners' performances but also teachers' decision- making process. Ding and Teo (2013) revealed that 211 Thai teachers of English in 55 Islamic private schools in five southern border provinces of Thailand positively perceived to include

cultural contents in their English classes. Focusing on the teachers' cultural backgrounds, the teachers preferred to use their own cultural identities of Thai Malay cultural contents in their English classes comparing with target cultures, Thai cultures, and international cultures. The teachers also perceived that the dimension of cultural perspectives should be mostly focused, but the cultural product dimension should be the least.

Likely, Fungchomchoei and Kardkarnklai (2016) revealed that 61 Thai secondary school teachers were aware of the significance of teaching cultures in English classes. The findings which were collected from a questionnaire, structured interviews, and journal entries reported that the teachers agreed to provide their learners diverse cultural knowledge. However, they perceived that their cultural environment lacked of diversity, and it obstructed themselves and their students to learn cultural differences. The teachers consequently tried to apply various kinds of communication technology such as Facebook, Instagram, and television programs to enable their learners to expose various cultural experiences. Regarding the teachers' training issues, the teachers reflected that they were unsatisfied and teacher professional development did not provide them enough of contents, knowledge, teaching techniques and strategies, and activities implementation dealing with intercultural competence. Yeganeh and Raeesi (2015) similarly found that learning cultures in English classes in Pakistani contexts were underestimated. In this study, 291 questionnaires were administered to EFL teachers at the secondary school level. The findings revealed that even though the teachers realized of the teaching cultural differences between target cultures and learners' host cultures, there was still a gap between the teachers' perceptions and their instructional practices in dealing with cultures.

Given the significance of cultural perceptions of learners and teachers towards English learning achievement and intercultural competence, this study aims at examining perceptions of the student-teachers of Phuket Rajabhat University. In the study, the student- teachers are focused since they are expected to work in primary and secondary education levels where the global citizenship and intercultural competence are required as identified in Basic Core Curriculum (2008). This research question helps frame the study: What are student- teachers' perceptions towards learning culture in English language education?

The participants

The overall participants of the study were 65 student- teachers studying in faculty of Education, PKRU. The participants were consisted of nineteen English major students, seven Thai major students, nine Social Studies major students, three Physical Education major students, ten Music major students, seven Mathematic major students, one Science major student, two Chemistry major students, four Computer major students, and three Early Childhood Education major students. The participants were in year three and were purposively selected since they exposed some learning experiences of English

classes at least three English courses required in the curriculum: English for Communication, English for Presentation, and English for Teachers.

Data collection

At the beginning, an online questionnaire were administered to all eleven groups of student majors following the purposive selection. In total there were sixty-five student- teachers responded the questionnaire. Moreover, the participants were asked their willingness to participate in the interviews. Six students from three different majors (one Thai majored student, one Computer majored student, and four English majored students) were willing to participate in the interview. In addition, the written documents related to the required English courses were collected. These three resources of the research findings were later triangulated to seek its validation and reliability.

The research instruments

To study the perceptions of student-teachers towards cultures in English language education, three instruments were used in collecting data including a questionnaire, a semi-structured interview, and written documents.

1. Questionnaire

In this study, the questionnaire of Rostami (2016) was borrowed. The reliability index of the questionnaire was determined at 0.77 through the utilizing Cronbach's Alpha procedure. The questionnaire was translated into Thai to collect the perceptions of student-teachers toward learning culture in English language education. The questionnaire is divided into three parts: (1) general information, (2) 20- question dealing with learning cultures in English language education, and (3) additional contact information in case the participants were willing to participate in the interviews.

2. Interview

To collect additional information, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews which dealt with four issues: the students' perspectives of language and culture relationships, cultural learning exposures, cultural learning resources, and accessibility. The interview questions were open-ended which sought information on the student-teachers' perceptions regarding learning cultures in English language education. In total, there were six student-teachers from three different majors (one Thai major student, one Computer major student, and four English major students) who were willing to participate in the interviews. Each session of the interview lasted about fifteen minutes.

3. Written Document

The written documents were useful and objective sources data as some data contained in the documents might not be found in other sources (Merriam, 2009). In this study, documents relevant to the student- teachers' English learning practices were used such as English course descriptions of English for Communication, English for Presentation, and English for Teachers, the scope of the contents, teaching methodology and strategies used in the courses, the textbooks and handout implication, learning resources, as well as the learning assessment. These documents helped validate the findings of the study and displayed some actual learning practices of English language education.

Data analysis

The quantitative data obtained from 65 questionnaires were analyzed with descriptive statistics which were \bar{X} and S.D. The levels of the student- teachers' agreement towards the statements in the questionnaires were defined based on five Likert- Scale (Nemoto & Beglar, 2014) as shown in the Table 1.

Table 1: The definitions of levels of agreement

Range	Level of agreement
4.21-5.00	Strongly agree
3.41-4.20	Agree
2.61-3.40	Neutral
1.81-2.60	Disagree
1.00-1.80	Strongly disagree

In terms of the qualitative data, the content analysis was used to codify and categorize the contents generated from the semi- structured interviews and written documents. Then, the groups of the findings from three different resources of questionnaire, interview, and written documents were triangulated by comparing and contrasting to categorize again. Pseudonyms were used to substitute the name of all participants. Three themes of findings were generated which were (1) the student- teachers' perceptions in cultural learning, (2) the cultural awareness between host cultures and target cultural differences, and (3) the opportunities and recommendations in learning and teaching cultures.

Findings

As the findings of the study were obtained from three different resources, the findings were compared and contrasted and generated into three themes as followed:

(1) The student- teachers' perceptions in cultural learning

Regarding the student- perceptions in cultural learning, the participants perceived learning cultures in English language education in a positive ways as the average mean of the total questionnaire responses were at 3.77 (S.D. 0.85). In addition, when considering the perceptions of the participants towards the inseparable relationship between language and culture, as reflected in the nine of twenty statements in the questionnaire shown in the table 2, the participants rated in overall in an agree level with \bar{X} = 3.92 (S.D. 0.82). Particularly, two statements: #1 *There is close relation between language and culture* and #4 *I see social manners of culture of great importance*, were rated in a strongly agree level. Whereas, the other six statement items #7, #5, #6, #2, #14, #3, #9 were rated in an agree level, and only one item of #9 statement was rated in a neutral level.

Table 2: The student- teachers' perceptions in cultural aspect learning

Items	Statements	\bar{X}	S.D.	Level of agreement
#1	There is close relation between language and culture.	4.44	0.74	strongly agree
#4	I see social manners of culture of great importance.	4.44	0.76	strongly agree
#7	We should get familiar with all aspects of target culture.	4.13	0.69	agree
#5	Learning some aspects of culture is challenging.	4.12	0.66	agree
#6	I see cultural component as an inseparable part of language teaching program.	3.90	0.75	agree
#2	I spend long time studying about customs of target culture.	3.89	0.80	agree
#14	I encourage my classmates to explore target culture outside of the classroom.	3.72	0.81	agree
#3	My classmates are eager to receive cultural instruction.	3.66	0.89	agree
#9	My classmates find culture teaching very boring and irrelevant.	3.01	1.24	neutral

Similarly to the quantitative findings, the analysis of the interviews revealed that the student-teachers were really aware that a language and its cultures are inseparable. In other words, they perceived that knowing the target cultures of English would help them communicate more effectively. For instance, Malee mentioned that knowing cultures could benefit her in making a relationship with others. She said:

"You have to get to know her/his culture first so that you will be able to speak [the target language] properly and have a smooth relationship."

Likely, Elizabeth and Daniel highlighted the cultural perspective in learning English. In Elizabeth's own words,

"I think without culture, language didn't rise."

Daniel also stated that

“I learn Thai cultures because they reflect our life. And, I have to learn the target culture (English) to understand and accept the cultural differences of each society. This brings me to communicate properly and reduce cultural conflicts.”

The findings obtained from the analysis of the written documents were not or less the same. It found that two of the three English courses, English for Presentation and English for Teachers, some parts included cultural matters in the scope of the courses as identified in the course descriptions;

English for Presentation: development of English skills for communication with foreigners in local contexts, presentation of basic information of Thailand, communities, development of personalities in communication and presentation, responding questions of foreigners

English for Teachers: usage of English for communication, listening, speaking reading, and writing skills, vocabulary, reading English passages, news, documents, course book, asking questions, demonstration of English conversation, English for teacher professional development, study of native speaker's backgrounds and cultures, and cultures of living together in peace.

(2) The cultural awareness between host cultures and target cultural differences

The average mean of the perceptions towards the cultural awareness was rated in an agree level at 3.72 (S.D. 0.85). As the findings of the statement #13, #15, #17, and #19 shown in the table 3, they reflected that the majority of the student- teachers were aware of their own interests and goals of learning cultures. They could critically analyze the target cultural sensitivities in their Thai cultures, as well as they pursue to learn more about the target cultures.

Table 3: The cultural awareness between host cultures and target cultural differences

Items	Statements	\bar{X}	S.D.	Level of agreement
#17	I know my own cultural interests and goals.	3.96	0.82	agree
#19	I know there are some sensitivities to target culture in our cultures.	3.81	0.80	agree
#13	We give feedbacks on our awareness of target culture	3.58	0.80	agree
#15	I keep myself updated new developments of target culture.	3.53	0.97	agree

The qualitative findings obtained from the interviews went along with the level of perceptions towards the cultural awareness of the participants. The student- teachers illustrated their awareness of cultural differences between Thai and target cultures of English in several issues. The cultural issues were both seen and unseen cultural aspects such as greeting norms, eating manners, social power distance, and gender roles existed in different societies. Suchart stated his views regarding the greeting norms in this way,

“English native speakers usually greet by hugging or shaking hands, but Thais greet by saying Sa-wat-dee and do Wai. We do not touch, so I think the culture of English speakers is sensitive to Thai society.”

Suchart elaborated more about the causes of sensitivity to hug each other in Thai society that Thai people usually have high power distance especially people who have far different social status and different genders. Likely, Malee argued that she tended to do Wai to elderly as it was a sign of respect. In her own words,

“In Thai society, we have to respect the elderly, but I think this is different from British society as there people are treated equal.”

Likely, as the analysis of English for Presentation course syllabus revealed, task-based approaches were employed throughout the course design. The students were required to create a video production introducing attractive places especially in Andaman coastal regions of Thailand, history, ways of living, cultural fests, and traveling suggestions for foreigners. Within these processes of studying their own cultures, the learners were naturally encouraged to examine the cultural gaps, cultural misunderstandings, and create traveling guideline for foreigners. Meanwhile, in English for Teachers course, the cultural learning is likely involved in the text reading such as in the topics of Fashion Statements, the Vote, and Local Hero. Moreover, throughout the analysis of text reading in the course book, intercultural communicative competence were promoted under the topics of Bullying, A Good Job, and Positive Psychology.

(3) The opportunities and recommendations in learning and teaching cultures

The student- teachers were likely to agree that studying in Phuket Rajabhat University, where its location is regarded as one of the world famous traveling destination, created opportunities in learning various cultures. As the average means of the statement #8, #11, #16, #20, #18, #12, and #10 were shown in the table 4, the student- teachers rated the perceptions towards the opportunities of learning culture in an agree level at $\bar{X}=3.60$ (S.D. 0.92).

Table 4: The opportunities and recommendations in learning and teaching cultures

Items	Statements	\bar{X}	S.D.	Level of agreement
#8	The Institute where I learn English is supportive regarding inclusion of target culture in the class.	3.73	0.82	agree
#11	When I struggle in learning cultural aspects in class, I receive help from my teacher and classmates.	3.83	0.75	agree
#16	My teacher and classmates are a source of encouragement for me.	3.70	0.83	agree
#20	My Institutes managers provide us with the cultural resources.	3.66	1.05	agree
#18	I can share my problems and concerns with culture teaching with my institute managers.	3.40	0.85	agree

#12	I use many cultural materials such as magazines and realia for learning culture.	3.53	1.08	neutral
#10	I try to learn about the art masterpieces created by target culture artists	3.36	1.06	neutral

Even though the quantitative findings reported that the participants rated in agree level towards their learning opportunities in learning culture, the qualitative results revealed some contradictions. There are two groups of perceptions towards learning culture opportunity. The first group of perceptions was retrieved from two students of Thai and Computer majors. They stated that they did not use English materials for improving their cultural knowledge except when teachers assigned tasks. As Supot stated, *“I will study and pay attention to culture only if I have to make a report to submit to the teacher”*.

Contrastingly, students of English major perceived that they are not hesitated to learn cultures when they have opportunities to learn. They mentioned that they like to watch video logs and YouTube channels presented in both Thai and English versions, and most of the times they learn when they are out of classrooms.

More importantly, the student- teachers raised problems happened in the university as lacking of accessibility and opportunity in learning target cultures of English. Rosie, one of English majored student, shared her problem in this way,

“Although I am an English student, I have hardly studied with English native teachers. Unluckily, other major students faced the problems too.”

Similarly, Sofia reflected her opinion about the ways that the university tried to solve the problems of students’ English proficiency. In Sofia’s own words,

“Even though the university provided English Discovery program, I couldn’t find that it is interesting enough. It is better if the university provide high- speed internet or lend some users of entertaining applications or channels so that the students could access the learning resources based on their own interests.”

Discussion

Regarding the student- teachers’ perceptions in cultural learning, the researchers could sum up that the participants held positive attitudes towards learning cultures which reflected the perceptive foundation of intercultural competence (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2009). The participants were aware of the interwoven relationships between cultures and English learning, open- minded, and interested in learning other cultural differences. These positive perceptions and values, as Byram (2009) argued, were grounded in developing the learners’ characteristics of global citizenship. He described further that to cultivate global citizenship and intercultural competence the teachers in different subjects should interactively collaborated, and a language teacher should be the main agent of the collaboration. The

instructional practices might be designed to encourage the learners to compare their own country with cultures of other countries as well as to have learners involve in activities in and out of the schools.

As the participants of the study are the student- teachers who are expected to be primary or secondary education teachers in the future, their positive perceptions were not only a good signal in building their intercultural competence and global citizenship but also their self-perceived instructional practices. Likely, Estaji and Rahimi (2018) revealed that cultural awareness of the teacher participants represented their beliefs and consequently affect the skills of teaching monitoring and strategic choices in instructional practices. Within Estaji and Rahimi's study (2018), 111 EFL teachers were purposively selected, and 12 teachers were interviewed.

Even though the student- teachers of the study held positive perceptions towards learning cultures, the researchers of the study could not firmly conclude that the participants held the right understanding of intercultural competence since the findings revealed only the participants' awareness of the cultural differences and advantages in their communication. Whereas, intercultural competence required much more constituents of knowledge and skills dealing with cultures such as critical cultural awareness, knowledge of social group and identities construction, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and attitudes as a mediator (Byram, 1997). Moreover, regarding the association of the intercultural competence with linguistic competence (McKay, 2004), there were not enough evidences pointed out that the participants fully understand it. Rather, the participants only realized the significance of intercultural competence in communicative levels.

Another example illustrating the student- teachers' misconceptions of intercultural competence was they believed that native English speakers are the main resources of cultural learning. Whereas, building intercultural communicative competence were the process of making meaning, and such competence will be applied in any contexts of local and international cultural environments. As Byram et al. (2002) underlined, intercultural competence is "not the transmission of information about a foreign country" (p. 14) rather it emphasizes on helping learners to understand how intercultural communication takes place in their life, seek their own cultural identities, and how they learn more to reflect their own identities. Hence, the needs of the university to facilitate the learners' learning of cultures are not only the native speakers of English but the culturally competent teachers who are able to systematically design cultural experiences in English language education. Byram et al. (2002) highlighted this issue in this way, "What is more important than native speaker knowledge is an ability to analyse and specific training in systemic cultural analysis is an important aid in becoming a foreign language teacher, regardless of the teacher's mother-tongue." (p.18).

Apart from the positive perceptions and cultural awareness of the participants, the opportunities and recommendations in learning and teaching cultures proposed by the student- teachers were far significant. The student- teachers argued that even though the university is located in cultural diversity

contexts, the university is likely to provide insufficient cultural learning environments. This problem was also stated in a number of English teachers' teaching records that the university provision of the learning equipment and budgets for outdoor activities should be promoted. Under these circumstances, on the one hand to enhance cultural learning environments, the infrastructure action plans of the university should emphasize on the process of internationalization (Deardorff, 2016). The university might create cultural learning of aesthetic and sociological dimensions by providing various kinds of media, cinema, and literature, as well as to promote international interpersonal relations, various leisure activities and customs within the institutions. Such cultural environment will eventually shape the movement of learners' interactions, thought process, social skills, and interpersonal relations to conform to the new environment of the learning contexts (Adaskou, Britten & Fahsi, 1990).

On the other hand, the cultural learning practices in classrooms is still crucial. English teachers who are culturally competent in designing cultural learning exposures should be regarded as teaching qualification requirement. Furthermore, to promote learners' intercultural competence, the authentic cultural diversity of local cultures of Phuket Province should not be marginalized such as the dominant cultural groups of Russian and Chinese business groups, Indigenous Morgan people, Myanmar labors, and other European or Asian people who have been living in Phuket for decades. This cultural knowledge of minority people should be involved in the process of English learning so that Thai learners will understand the authentic complexities of Thai cultural society not only through the lenses of tourism but sociocultural as well as to promote a tolerance towards other cultural differences (Yuso, 2018).

Conclusion

This study aims to investigate the student-teachers' perceptions towards learning cultures in English language education. Given this, a questionnaire of learning culture in English language education was administered to 65 student-teacher learners' perceptions as well as semi-structured interviews were elaborated with six student- teachers who were willing to participated. The analysis of student-teachers' responses to the questionnaire revealed their positive perceptions towards learning culture in English language education. Moreover, the responses from interview questions and written documents were analyzed and triangulated.

In overall participants' responses indicated that learning culture is a part of their learning of English. The student- teachers perceived that cultures cannot distinguish from language learning and learning culture attracted them to learn English more effectively even though they found the limitation of their learning target cultures in their daily lives.

Regarding the triangulated findings on the perceptions of learning cultures in English language education, the student- teachers interestingly reflected their voices to educators and administrators of the university. They argued that the university contexts did not provide enough opportunities for

learners to learn cultures in their everyday life even though the university is located in the world-famous tourist destination. They asserted that they were interested in learning both Thai cultures and target cultures and persisted that cultural awareness is important in learning a foreign language. The student-teachers realize of power distance in Thai society resulting in different traditions, ways of living, and thinking concepts.

Limitation of the study

This research was conducted to investigate only sixty-five student-teachers' perceptions throughout the questionnaire and six student-teachers' interviews. To increase the numbers of participants of each major must provide more sufficient findings and rounded dimensions. In addition, the perceptions of the student- teachers towards understanding of intercultural competence should be investigated in deeper levels.

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