



**YOUR LANGUAGE, YOUR IDENTITY:  
THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL IDENTITY IN TEACHING  
ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

**Waquar Ahmad Khan<sup>i</sup>**

Assistant Professor, Dr.,  
Department of Languages and Translation,  
College of Science and Arts, Taibah University,  
Al-Ula, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

**Abstract**

Language is part of one's identity. Many a research has been conducted to prove that there is a strong relationship between language and identity. Nelson Mandela in his appease quotes once said, *"If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his mother tongue, that goes to his heart."* We all acknowledge, language is a means of communication, words establish meanings within the discourses and discourse vary in power. Language is having one of the powerful objects which completely shape one's personal Identity. Without language, no culture can maintain its existence. Language is one of the primary and powerful means to explain us what we want, expect, and convey to the counterpart. In this changing world language is the one which identifies total ins and out of a speaker and listener. Today's world is based on multilingualism; however, the scope of the mother tongue cannot be undermined. It is the mother tongue which established our identity, who we are, and from where we come from. It is the mother tongue which reveals about me and my location in macro and micro level. This paper discusses about how our language related to our identity, and the impact of cultural identity in teaching English as a foreign language.

**Keywords:** global language, cultural identity, cross cultural communication

**1. Introduction**

The character of a language in the development of cultural identity varies in a greater length across societies. This is one of the reasons probably why at the time of migration some communities keep their language for many generations while some of them change into the language which has been spoken in and around in a short span of time. By studying and learning a language, the speaker gradually develops another language and

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<sup>i</sup> Correspondence: email [drwaquara@gmail.com](mailto:drwaquara@gmail.com)

adapts to make certain changes in their personality. This indicates the speaker started grasping many a thing from the society of the people who speak the target language of a learner. There are various aspects which force a speaker to adapt to the target language to sustain in their day to day composition. Therefore, our mother tongue personality changes into a different personality when we speak English, or Arabic.

At a time when everything is getting globalized, we can see millions of speakers are moving from one place to another for the sake of better education, offer, and opportunity every year. We cannot put immigration in one box, there are many more reasons to immigrate from one area to another, one reason to another, one city to another, one state to another, and nevertheless one country to another which directly affects speakers/ emigrates mother tongue. The aspects which are part of our identity are tested at all levels. Another fact is that we speak what and how we think. On the other hand, our thinking is attracted by the environment where we were born and brought up, like beliefs, culture, education, economy, family, and friends.

In our view, giving respect to the mother tongue means, you are giving respect to yourself, your traditions, your region, your country and your people. By forgetting your mother tongue, you intend to forget yourself and all the above. In fact, learning an additional language other than the mother tongue is not at all a big deal, but keeping intact your mother tongue is a big deal in today's global world. This is also established fact that the moment you evade your mother language you are going to evade your identity, tradition, region, and your people. Speakers always wedged between two simple aspects: the language he/she speaks and his/her real identity. A speaker might, for instance, speak English but at the same time he is pleased of his/her mother language; this shows his understanding on his own language and a foreign language.

From the time of birth, a child observes and develops the atmosphere of his family, relatives, neighbors and through this observation the child comes to know about caste, class, creed, religion, and language. This is also the fact every human being is different from person to person, they gradually develop the knowledge of the mother tongue, the cultural environment of their family. This is also a universal fact that The GOD has given mother tongue/ first language free of cost to every human being. Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist and semiotician describes, "*language structurally as a system of signs used for communication*". The signs are inconsistent/ unpredictable, and language is a social prodigy.

## **2. Objective of the Study**

Arabic (Semitic language family) is the official language of Saudi Arabia, and English (West Germanic language family) is having the status of a foreign language. English language teaching is still a challenge in many universities across Saudi Arabia and is perceived as a hazard to students and teacher's cultural identity in different parts of the Arab world. In order to achieve that purpose, the following objectives have been set and consistent questions in this study have been ascertained.

- 1) Is there any importance of cultural identity when teaching English as a foreign language?
- 2) Is it necessary to learn culture while learning and teaching English?
- 3) How does the local culture create hindrance learning and teaching English as a foreign language?

### 3. Literature Review

There are many strong evidences accessible which signifies that culture has successively been an important component in English language learning and teaching. It was throughout the 1960s when psychologists, linguists and educators instigated to fortress cultural education at the front side of any language learning. Maximum number of experts considered that artistic education in language learning must focus on teaching and learning about the target language or foreign language (English language teaching). Hinkel, E. (1999) presented the *“upcoming model of language learning that ascertained six classes of effect for language learning; the primary class was culture, and his replica stipulated an outline for English language teachers to include inclusive cultural education in the English language classroom”*.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, an Australian based philosopher once said, *“the limits of my language are the limits of our world”*. That does not mean to create restriction for thinking. Instead *Wittgenstein* is setting out to show that by mapping the possibilities and impossibilities of thought. In this competitive world it's really a challenge to keep our mother tongue intact. On the other hand, we are aware English is the international language since late 18<sup>th</sup> century, become prominent in business, commerce, science, medicine, tourism, at the level of diplomacy and many more key areas. It has also been proved by many sources that most of the English speakers are practical, and smart having good understanding in their respective field.

Dai L. (2011) affirms *“Culture and language learning strongly link to each other”*. However, there is always a debate that why and what level we need to teach culture while teaching English as a foreign language. Academicians, linguistics, sociolinguistics, and other stream discussed on this aspect and reached on a consensus. Mainly there are three views of it.

- A. Teaching target language culture along with the target language,
- B. Teaching English without making focus on culture, and
- C. Explanatory approach of teaching culture.

#### **A. Teaching target language culture along with the target language**

Numerous academicians recognize the significance of cultural education in English language learning. Erdogan Bada (2005) wrote *“the need for cultural literacy in (English Language Teaching) arises mainly from the fact that most language learners, not subjected to cultural components of the society in question, appear to face considerable lack in conversing significance to native speakers.”* Supplementary reports have backed his proclamation that

an absence of both the cultural knowledge, native as well as target language causes to weak learning results for English language learners.

Culture is an extremely significant aspect of English language learning/teaching. after all, once we look at the language, it is far more than speech and writing abilities. Language is the entry point into grasping and conversing with a new and different group of persons. Whether students are learning an English language for enjoyment, for school, or for business, for service, or for any other purpose, they ultimately use English as a tool to interact with other people. If a speaker is having an understanding about that language culture which he is learning, he/she can demonstrate his/her objective in a greater length. According to Byram and Flemming (1998), *"Focused language culture should be imparted along with English. In their views, learning a language without culture is a recipe and flattering"*. Gary B. Silberstein (2001); believed that *"grammatical knowledge is not enough to guarantee good and appropriate communication. Consequently, studying a language also needs studying about its culture, as culture reflects and transfers deeply embedded knowledge from one generation to the next through language"*.

### **B. Teaching English without making focus on culture**

Once we compare with the first view, researchers who approved this drift manage to evade imparting focus ethos and culture inside the classrooms in the countries where English is an existing variety. Two views disallowed the thought of teaching the focus language culture along with English. Though the primary view backed the teaching of local culture in English Language Teaching. Kramsch & Sullivan (1996); McKay (2003) states *"the supplementary view has been maintained and English has turn out to be a lingua franca and should be communicated in a culture-free situation"*.

Robert Lado (1997) affirms *"signified to the need of understanding our individual culture before contrasting it with others"*. Atherton (1984) emphasized *"the resources used in text must be included in the text of English and Arabic concise stories, novels, and plays for testing and judgment"*. Eli Hinkel (1999) an anthropologist, *"specified students should be inspired to make conversation about their culture using such resources and to be alert on their own cultural distinctiveness"*. Though, using similar cultural substance while imparting English might minimize, what Winfield and Barnes-Felfeli (1982) called *"the processing load"*.

Cultural identity is the characteristics of a group of people, defined by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. Cultural identity is what a country and a person make unique. Culture is more than just a significant material, that is the things a culture makes and creates. Culture is also the attitude and standard of a person. It also covers the way a person observes and understand about the world and their lives. It also varies within a region and outside region, within the society and external part or sub group.

### **C. Explanatory approach of teaching culture**

Explanatory approach was put into practice in 1980s, is altogether different from above two. Crawford (1980) claims that *"the world surrounding a person is not alien to him, as it is*

*created by humans' beliefs".* Valdes, 1986. Dunnett, Dubin, and Lezberg (1986) explained *"students and teachers should be alert about the pitch replica, actions, movements of the body, structure of the grammar, and outlawed topics to inspect and examine their culture and the concentrating culture depicting to such criterion"*. This approach can lead students to think together on both cultures, what Mike Byram (1991) called *"a modification of mono-cultural awareness"*. Learners should be inspired to understand cultural codes and senses suggested in other cultures to measure their knowledge and expand an analytical retort. Moran, P. (2001) (Language and culture) stated *"highlighted information of a cultural which considers on dissimilarities between the student's culture and the culture which they are studying"*. If this procedure of obtaining culture and language is thriving, students should be intelligent enough to use English to successfully convey in a way that reproduces their individual local culture and individual beliefs.

### **3.1 The correlation among language and culture in teaching**

Language and culture are mainly two direction of a same destination. Scarcella, Oxford, (1992) stated that language and culture are being recognized as synonyms. On the one hand, language is expanded to express persons cultural opinion, attitudes; on the other hand, culture is entrenched in the language. The interwoven association between language and culture can be abridged by Brown, Keith (2000), *"a language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are tortuously interwoven so that one cannot distinct the two exclusives in misplacing the importance of language or culture."*

### **3.2 The idea of culture in English language teaching**

To discover the role of culture in EFL teaching, several studies were conducted and reviewed. Some studies cherish the importance of cultural education in English language learning and teaching. In contrast, other studies supported the other view that calls for teaching English away from its culture.

- Lado, Robert (1957) describe culture as *"cultures are structured systems of patterned conduct."* This definition signaled two categories that are significant in the notion of culture: (A) Structured, and (B) patterned.
- Robinson, Jacob (1988); describes at culture from four viewpoints:
  - a) Behaviorist's approach - Culture is a set of pattered behaviors,
  - b) Functionalist approach - Culture is to make sense of the behaviors,
  - c) Cognitive approach - Culture is a process of interpretation, and
  - d) Symbolic approach - Culture is the product after interpretation.

Therefore, cultural significance is shaped after learners' internal interpretative process. Culture is both process and products. Culture must be examining and explain as a procedure and product (Crawford-Lange & Lange, 1984; Moran, 2001).

- Kramsch C. (1993) describes that *"culture is a social construct, the product of self and other perceptions"*. The meaning indicated that culture is not shared but also separable.

- McCarthy and Carter (1994) absorb that culture from a social discourse perspective. It indicates to *“social knowledge and communicative skills which are required in addition with the relationship of the language and its method.”*

#### **4. Research Methodology**

The present study is quantitative in nature. The study was organized and conducted between four public sector university in Saudi Arabia to identify the link between the impact of cultural identity in teaching English as a foreign language.

##### **4.1 Instrumentation**

The questionnaire for the study was developed after reviewing literature applicable for this topic. The questionnaire was divided mainly on three points:

- Importance of cultural identity.
- Is it necessary to learn culture?
- Local culture and its hindrance.

##### **4.2 Participants**

As mentioned earlier, all the data has been collected from four public sector university in Saudi Arabia. Questionnaire were distributed to 33 teachers. A total of 26 teachers participated in this study. All the participants are known to the researcher, having doctorate degree in English and Linguistics. Out of 26 participants, 7 participants are female, and rest 19 are male. All the questionnaire is sent to the teachers on their Email address. After receiving their response, researcher conducted a semi-structured interview with them to ascertain informants' views. Five main points were discussed in the questionnaire and in the interviews.

- a) Personal Data,
- b) Educational Background,
- c) Cultural Identity,
- d) Cultural Identity in the Classroom, and
- e) Ambition.

Interviews lasted somewhere from 10 to 15 minutes.

##### **4.3 Data Analysis**

The testing and analysis of data was examined via SPSS statistics and the results and conclusion are displayed in the descriptive tables on percentile, showing the mean value and standard deviation for each of the items in the questionnaire.

#### **5. Results and Findings**

The findings of the questionnaire and the semi-interviews were stipulated as follows: All the analysis has been made in percentile value.

**Table 1:** Importance of cultural identity in EFL teaching

S. No	Variables	Male Faculty	Female Faculty	Arabic Speaker	Non-Arabic Speaker
1	Importance of cultural identity in EFL teaching	86%	81%	92%	96%

Cultural identity is the identity/uniqueness or emotion of belonging to a group of people. It is part of a person's personal idea and self-perception and is related to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality or any kind of social group that has its own distinct culture. The data shown in the table 1, suggests that 86% of the male teachers believes that the importance of cultural identity in EFL teaching exist. Among female faculty, this percentage is slightly coming down to 81%. On the other hand, 92% of Arabic speakers believes that culture is a basic part in teaching EFL where as 96% non-Arabic speakers believe in this. This indicates that there is a need and requirement of cultural teaching in the EFL classroom while teaching any foreign language.

**Table 2:** Cultural identity on listening

S. No	Variables	Male Faculty	Female Faculty	Arabic Speaker	Non-Arabic Speaker
2	Cultural identity on listening	71%	78%	87%	75%

Every culture has unusual styles and design of communication that can be able to deter operational listening if the auditor is either not familiar with the orator's model or holds a wrong view about them. The data shown in the table 2, suggests that 71% of the male teachers believes that cultural identity on listening in EFL teaching exist. Among female faculty, this percentage is slightly coming up to 78%. On the other hand, 87% of Arabic speakers believes that cultural identity on listening is a basic part in teaching EFL where as 75% non-Arabic speakers believe in this. This indicates that there is an impact of culture on listening, understanding and responding among learners.

**Table 3:** Cultural identity on speaking & reading

S. No	Variables	Male Faculty	Female Faculty	Arabic Speaker	Non-Arabic Speaker
3	Cultural identity on speaking & reading	96%	98%	100%	100%

The way we use and speak words, sentences and phrases considerably influences persons thinking, character, and personal identity. The data shown in the table 3, suggests that 96% of the male teachers believes that cultural identity on speaking and reading in EFL teaching exist. Among female faculty, this percentage is slightly coming up to 98%. On the other hand, 100% of Arabic speakers and non-Arabic speakers believes that cultural identity on speaking and reading is a basic part in teaching EFL. This indicates that there

is an impact of culture on speaking and reading is deep rooted and need to carry the EFL classroom while teaching any foreign language.

**Table 4:** Cultural identity on writing

S. No	Variables	Male Faculty	Female Faculty	Arabic Speaker	Non-Arabic Speaker
4	Cultural identity on writing	61%	68%	66%	59%

Writing is not just about expressing substance but also concerning the representation of own personality. The data shown in the table 4, suggests that 61% of the male teachers believes that cultural identity on writing in EFL teaching and learning exist. Among female faculty, this percentage is slightly coming up to 68%. On the other hand, 66% of Arabic speakers believes that cultural identity on writing reflects in teaching EFL where as 59% non-Arabic speakers believe in this. This indicates that writing does not make much impact in the EFL classroom while teaching any foreign language.

**Table 5:** Cultural identity on grammar

S. No	Variables	Male Faculty	Female Faculty	Arabic Speaker	Non-Arabic Speaker
5	Cultural identity on grammar	44%	47%	42%	49%

Grammar stipulate us with the arrangement we need in order to arrange and put our messages in a correct form. On the other hand, a grammar of a language is nothing but only a group of observations, typically composed by academicians and linguists, concerning how the language works. The data shown in the table 5, suggests that 44% of the male teachers believes that cultural identity on grammar in EFL teaching and learning exist. Among female faculty, this percentage is slightly coming up to 47%. On the other hand, 42% of Arabic speakers believes that cultural identity on grammar reflects in teaching EFL where as 49% non-Arabic speakers believe in this. This indicates that grammar does not make much impact in the EFL classroom while teaching any foreign language.

## 6. Conclusion

Since the inception of mankind, creator (the GOD) arranged a language (Mother tongue) for everyone for communication which covers listening and speaking. For reading and writing, students/learners need to make an effort and follow desired process in learning any other language apart from mother tongue. More precisely any additional language learning is an intercultural procedure meanwhile it normally implicates contact between other groups of people.



Culture and language teaching are two side of a coin. It is indivisible, and culture is always implanted, mixed into language learning context (Menurut Nault, 2006). Though, researcher believe, we need to be extremely cautious and thoughtful not to generalize and essentialize the association between language and culture. This is exceptionally true for a universal lingua franca, "English". In EFL teaching it is not at all defined which culture learners need to adapt, if any. Many a cultural dissimilarity sway an English language learning in the classroom. The common effect is the language of the indigenous culture; a learner brings to the teacher in the classroom grammar, composition, sentence structure and language rules from the mother language which is not always similar to the English language. Making morphological word order, grammatical gendered language, and structure of the sentence is one of the primary mistakes a non-native speaker faces when learning English. Another cultural effect is learning or teaching style and curriculum design. In curriculum design, it is proposed that combined learner's local substance into communicative actions on mutually improve learner's inspiration and motivation in studying the language and train students on ethnographic learnings. Languages are generally assessed in receptive and productive skills. Finding suggests there is a prominent role of culture in learning and teaching EFL in the classroom.

## 7. Suggestions

Cultural teaching is the significant step in easing the possible cultural disagreement that might happen in an EFL classroom. Teachers must be taught in expanded teaching and training that answer to an English language learners' separate requirement in terms of teaching, appraisal and comments. Classroom time must be devoted to precise cultural education and training for English language students; classes on body language, eye to eye contact, confidence, academic language and formal and informal language must be included while designing the curriculum.

### **Conflict of interest statement**

I, Dr. Waquar Ahmad Khan declares that, I don't have any conflict of interest. This research is not sponsored by any company or institution. The topic has been selected by the researcher for the academic research and can be used for enhancement and betterment academic learning. The data of this research has been analyzed/examined on the scientific basis, there is no conflict of interest is kept in the mind.

Dr. Waquar Ahmad Khan certify that the submission is original work and is not under review at any other publication.

### **About the Author**

I, Dr. Waquar Ahmad Khan was born on March 01, 1977, in a small village of East Champaran District, (Motihari), Bihar state, the work place of [Mahatma](#) Gandhi. After schooling at local village school, graduated in Linguistics (BA Hons) from the [Aligarh](#)

Muslim University in 1996. Subsequently, I have secured my master's degree (MA) in [Linguistics](#) from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi with first division in 1999, and continued my studies to obtain a Ph D from Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh in the year 2011. My major for the doctoral studies was Socio Linguistics and the minor in Applied Linguistics. Currently associated with Taibah University, Al Ula Campus, KSA as an assistant Professor, Linguistics at the department of languages and translation, College of Science and Arts.

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