

The Impact of Learning the English Language on Cultural Identity: A Model for Iraqi Students at the University of Basrah

Researcher: Ali Mohammedridha Mahdi
Basrah Oil Company Ministry of Oil
Assistant Lecturer Kawthar Abdulabbas Nahi
Department of English/ College of Arts / University of Basrah

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the concept of learning English at the university level and its impact on Iraqi cultural identity. It strives to understand students' views and the strategies that they may choose to deal with the forces of change. It studies how English language learners utilize this language at the expense of their native language, as well as the impact of learning the English language on cultural identity of the individual. To fulfill the declared purpose, two research questions were posed to conduct the study, and an electronic questionnaire sent to undergraduate students at the Department of English Language - College of Arts / University of Basra was employed as a data collection method. The results indicated that undergraduate students have a full understanding of how studying English impacts their cultural identity. Moreover, the results of study provided additional insights into the orientations required to sustain Iraqi cultural identity. Some proposals were made to illustrate effective methods for teaching English while maintaining Iraqi cultural identity.

Keywords: English Proficiency, Cultural Identity, Relationship, Globalization, Cross-Cultural Communication.

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تأثير تعلم اللغة الانكليزية على الهوية الثقافية: نموذج للطلبة العراقيين في جامعة البصرة

الباحث علي محمد رضا مهدي

شركة نفط البصرة

المدرس المساعد كوثر عبد العباس ناهي

قسم اللغة الأنكليزية / كلية الآداب / جامعة البصرة

المستخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل مفهوم تعلم اللغة الإنكليزية على المستوى الجامعي وتأثيره على الهوية الثقافية العراقية. أنها تسعى إلى فهم آراء الطلاب والإستراتيجيات التي قد يتبنونها لمواجهة قوى التغيير. كما تبحث في كيفية استخدام متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية لهذه اللغة على حساب لغتهم الأصلية، إضافةً إلى تأثير تعلم اللغة الإنكليزية على الهوية الثقافية للفرد. ولتحقيق الهدف المعلن، تم طرح سؤالين بحثيين لإجراء الدراسة، وأستخدم استبيان إلكتروني أُرسِل إلى طلبة الدراسات الأولية في قسم اللغة الإنكليزية - كلية الآداب / جامعة البصرة كوسيلة لجمع البيانات. أظهرت النتائج أن طلبة الدراسات الأولية لديهم إدراك واضح لتأثير دراسة اللغة الإنكليزية على هويتهم الثقافية. إضافةً إلى ذلك، قُدمت نتائج الدراسة رؤى إضافية حول التوجهات اللازمة للحفاظ على الهوية الثقافية العراقية. وتم اقتراح بعض الأساليب الفعالة التي توضح كيفية تدريس اللغة الإنكليزية مع الحفاظ على الهوية الثقافية العراقية.

كلمات مفتاحية: إتقان اللغة الإنكليزية، الهوية الثقافية، العلاقة، العولمة، التواصل بين الثقافات.

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Introduction

The necessity to acquire language skills has been present for a significant period of time; this also applies to studying the English language. Because of globalization and the current prevalence of English as the primary global language, it is recognized for its crucial role in enabling communication among individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds. People travelling to different nations to study have also affected the evolution of English. Studies indicate that language has a major impact on shaping an individual sense of self (Lobatón, 2012). Learning English at a university level involves understanding cultural customs of English-speaking individuals, such as Americans or British people. This might lead to abandoning one's own culture while also attempting to embrace the new culture associated with the newly acquired language. Students can shape their identity based on the demands of the time, but must also learn how to maintain it in response to structural shifts in Iraqi society.

1. Literature Review

1.1. Overview of English Language Usage

Although the Iraqi government demands that people learn the English language and communicate with developed countries, most people cannot speak English properly because of their connection to traditional Arab culture. Thus, their access to high-quality English is restricted. Therefore, they will be unable to participate and express their opinions in a worldwide setting where English serves as the global communication language. A long time ago, both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research of Iraq introduced the English language to primary schools until university stages. Learning of English language skills by Iraqi students is becoming critical. It is, after all, the most commonly spoken language in the world. The English language is a global language that is used by everyone; it is something even the die-hard Islamists in Iraq cannot dispute; therefore, striving to improve our English only represents our attempt to become better global citizens. According to Alshammari (2018), learning English is useful outside the classroom, as well as for admission to world-class colleges and universities. One of the best methods for learning the identity of someone and their cultural heritage is usually through language.

This suggests that, in the absence of language, defining cultural identity for someone might be difficult. Again, a large number of people speak English; nevertheless, as Ged (2013) illustrates, learning a second language might cause one to lose some characteristics or understanding of the first language, as well as some familiarity with it. Indeed, as per the findings of Wenfeng and Gao (2008), "many academic researchers are concerned about whether the existing linguistic and ethnic diversity is seriously threatened in light of the national zeal for learning English". Students must also learn how to communicate their emotions through words in various social contexts. During the 1980s, it became essential to include cultural teachings in foreign language courses. With the advancement of technology, culture could be effectively demonstrated through tools like video technology, allowing foreign teachers to easily showcase various cultural aspects through films and documentaries. Furthermore, Ahtif and Gandhi (2022) explained that culture relates not only to what and how individuals trade speaking roles but also to how people encode communications, grasp meaning, and interpret messages in different contexts. Additionally, students who are unfamiliar with the target culture and traditions will struggle to communicate effectively. Another function is that by gaining an understanding of the target culture, students may also improve their grasp on their own culture and feel motivated to explore other cultures further.

1.2. Identifying the Concept of Culture

Culture is described as "the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features that characterize a society or social group" by participants at the 1982 World Conference on Cultural Policies in Mexico City. It encompasses not just literature and the arts but also lifestyle choices, human rights, value systems, customs, and beliefs." (UNESCO, 1982). Cultural identity for a person may be described as their personality, which encompasses their upbringing, experiences, abilities, beliefs, values, and knowledge; in simpler terms, the identity of individual and the role within various settings, such as family, school, work, community, and nation (Alisa, 2021). Additionally, the visible and unseen aspects of the self that influence how one's personality develops might be defined as identity (Crocetti et al., 2015). These include physical and intellectual prowess, gender, country,

ethnicity, and skin color. Identity parameters are not stable nor predictable; rather, they respond to both a certain time period and a propensity to change. Language is a method by which an identity of individual can be identified. As Wyatt (2009) defines it, “identity is who we are”. Identity is what makes people common or the same. For example, when someone claims to be American or a Christian, they must share some trait or quality with other Americans or Christians. According to Wyatt, identity may be interpreted in various dimensions. One such dimension is social identity, which leads an individual to identify with a broader group. Wyatt (2009) defines social identity as the values, beliefs, opinions, and information shared by a broader community.

1.3. Culture in the Western World and the English Language

There is always a connection between teaching English and teaching American or British culture. In many nations worldwide, it is believed that learning English involves understanding its accompanying cultures to protect cultural heritage of students. Some argue that teaching American or British culture alongside English is a type of imperialism that results in students becoming disconnected from their own culture. On the other hand, educators believe that exploring the cultures of English-speaking nations such as Britain has improved pupils' language skills. As Lobatón (2012) suggests that studying English leads to the creation of diverse social identities among students. Once again, their diverse cultural identities lead to different styles of arguing, largely influenced by their unique positions and identities formed through the learning of another language. Hatoss (2003) contends that pupils may absorb new cultures without losing their original ones. However, according to Lobatón (2012), the acquisition of a new language may lead to the loss of cultural aspects of the original language due to the uncertainty it brings. In agreement with Johnson (2009), individuals aspire to identify with modernity and will go to any length to do so, even forsaking their traditional traditions. As a result of globalization of the language, English learners create a new culture. Everyone nowadays wants to become familiar with new technology, which is mostly connected to English. Consequently, learning English as a second language may eventually result in a loss of cultural identity. Hatoss

(2003) says that when there are several cultural groups engaged, it becomes a significant difficulty to choose which culture is ideal for everyone. He goes on to claim that the dominant culture will almost always persuade minors to embrace it. The same concept is applied when acquiring English as a second language. Students exclusively speak their native tongue at home; English is the primary language used in the Department of English Language at College of Arts. Since students spend the most of their time in university, the mainstream culture, which is English culture, takes precedence over the traditional culture.

1.4. The Relationships between Language and Culture

According to Saussure, language is a system of signals (Danesi, 2022). Additionally, Crystal (2003) represents language as "the systematic, conventional use of sounds, signs, or written symbols for communication and self-expression in a human society." Language is the means by which people communicate and express certain emotions through signs and symbols, while culture is the intricate combination of the language of a group, customs, values, and beliefs. Ahtif and Gandhi (2022) indicated to scholars who studied the link between language and culture decades ago that language alone is unable to provide learners with a complete understanding of many concepts in the absence of culture. Without their language, learners cannot be exposed to any culture. According to other social psychologists, culture cannot originate or exist without language. Furthermore, a language is seen as a symbolic depiction of the lives of people because it primarily addresses their beliefs, customs, and values. Brown (2007) asserted that the link between language and culture is as follows: "A language is a part of a culture, and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven, so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture" Wyatt (2009) believes that a language may distinguish between personal and social aspects of identity dimensions. The author also demonstrates how language is linked to cultural identity. The social identity dimension concerns culture, which may also be communicated through language. People are always influenced by how others see them, and Wyatt (2009) explains that this is what causes the clash between culture and language. The author goes on to explain that culture may be conveyed via language; therefore, in

order to become a member of a certain community, one must first learn its culture and language. Additionally, the bias against students who are learning a second language in schools leads to their rejection of their traditional culture. Because language and culture cannot be separated, Wyatt (2009) notes that if a person loses their language, they also lose their culture. Language is a means through which we share culture; the two cannot be separated. As a result, when someone loses their language, they also lose their cultural identity, as they are no longer able to identify with any culture. Barber (2013) stresses that a culture cannot be claimed without a language. According to Seppälä (2011), the language individuals use mirrors the impact their community has on the world they inhabit. Seppälä goes on to say that comprehending language entails more than simply learning the grammar and vocabulary; it also involves learning about the culture of the society in which it is used. During learning a language, individuals may become deeply involved in the culture, resulting in a transformation of their identity. Alshammari (2018) indicated that language and culture are closely related, and acquiring a language necessitates exposure to the language culture. They are dependent on one another and are inseparable. Therefore, people use symbols to express their culture, and one may learn about a society by observing how people speak and behave. Accordingly, language is a means for conveying beliefs, attitudes, and sentiments. In these contexts, language and culture are representations of each other.

2. The Practical Side

2.1 Research Questions

The objective of this paper is to provide solutions to the following research questions:

- I. Do Iraqi students at universities sense that their culture has been impacted by the use of English?
- II. Has the English language and Western culture taught Iraqi university students any impact on their own attitudes?

2.2 Participants

This study involved thirty undergraduate students who are presently learning English at the Department of English Language / College of Arts at the University of Basra. The students have been learning English for four years. The participants have agreed to respond to the survey in

order to share their opinions and attitudes on how studying English impacts cultural identity.

2.3 The Questionnaire Design To answer the research questions and investigate students' perspectives on the consequences of studying English on cultural identity, a questionnaire was sent via papers to fourth-stage undergraduate students. This questionnaire includes thirteen questions, both open and closed, created to collect data on how studying English impacts cultural identity (see Appendix). In this study, we relied on questionnaires to ensure that all participants had the opportunity to openly share their views and illustrate the impact of learning English on cultural identity without any missing details.

2.4 Results of Questionnaire The questions focused on understanding the students' views on how studying English impacts Iraqi cultural identity. Question One of the questionnaire is "How long they have been studying English". All participants have studied English for not less than eight years (from primary school until university), regardless of gender. In the Second Question, all students unanimously acknowledged the significance of learning the English language. Question Three is "Have you observed any alterations in your cultural identity from learning English?" The question has two response choices, "yes" or "no," followed by an open-ended question asking for details if the answer was "yes." The findings are extremely intriguing regarding "yes" and "no" answers. Even though 90% of the survey participants answered affirmatively, they listed lifestyle modifications, mindset shifts, Western celebrations like Christmas and Valentine's Day, as well as unintentional adoption of Western culture as reasons for their response. The majority of participants perceived their cultural identity as having changed rather than just being their own. Students realized that the English language had an impact on their cultural identity in Question Five, particularly by altering their outlook on life and Iraqi traditional practices. They stated that if Western culture were superior, they would choose it. If yes, in Question Six describe how ignoring Iraqi culture and accepting Western customs like Valentine's Day, Easter, and Christmas. In relation to Question Seven, "Do you think that gaining knowledge about English and Western culture has changed your view of the West?" One hundred percent of those surveyed said it affected their perception of Iraqi

culture. Regarding Question Eight, "Do you believe that it is still necessary for Iraqis to study English today?" The overwhelming majority of participants respond "yes." For Question Nine which is "If they think that speaking English will have an impact on their future in any manner, respondents answer "yes," and they give us the following responses for Question Ten:

- Improve and widen employment prospects.
- Increase your study opportunities by accessing world-class education systems and establishments.
- Make you explore the world with confidence.
- Increase cognitive ability and cultural understanding.
- Improve communication with English-speaking friends and colleagues.

Question Eleven asks, "Have you decided to study the English language to gain insights into the culture of native speakers of English?" The students state that they learn English not only to understand American and British cultures but also to explore other cultures around the world. In response to Question Twelve, "Does learning English necessarily imply learning its culture?" all students answer "yes." Finally, when asked about cultural parallels between Iraqi and English civilizations in Question Thirteen, the respondents assert that there are no such connections between them.

3. Discussions of the Study

This study aims to examine the influence of the English language on the cultural identity of students at the Department of English Language / College of Arts at the University of Basra. The findings reveal diverse opinions on the increasing prominence of English in Iraq. A significant proportion of the participants expressed dissatisfaction and concern about the inevitable spread of Western traditions in the country. However, most respondents viewed learning English as a means of securing better job opportunities in the future, demonstrating predominantly instrumental attitudes toward the language. For many participants, English was also seen as essential for accessing information, underscoring its value as a tool for gathering knowledge in

another language. The spread of the English language in Iraq is inseparably linked to the proliferation of Western culture, creating a dynamic that cannot be disentangled. While the participants acknowledged that Westernization has contributed to improved living conditions and advanced technologies, they also expressed concerns about the gradual erosion of traditional Iraqi culture. Nevertheless, as one participant indicated in the questionnaire, globalization generally entails an increasing interconnectedness in social, cultural, and economic aspects across countries. According to the results obtained, the responses to the questionnaire clearly demonstrate the paradoxical attitudes of the University of Basra students toward the English language and Western society, as well as their efforts to redefine their cultural identities in response to these influences.

4. Conclusions

Worldwide, society has several obstacles in its process of maintaining and protecting culture, but there are also enormous opportunities associated with it. The international community may advance its efforts to develop and uphold peace and security throughout the world by tolerating varied cultural practices. Given the increasing significance of Iraq in the global arena, particularly in the economic sphere, it is imperative to examine the ways in which the swift changes impact Iraqi society. The findings of the questionnaire completed by students at the University of Basra suggest that teaching foreign culture should be paired with prior understanding of their own culture and strategies to maintain it amidst changes. This research highlighted the importance of incorporating culture into the teaching and learning process to help students acquire and develop language. By doing so, students can improve their understanding of various cultural elements and develop critical thinking skills when comparing the differences and similarities between their own culture and the one being studied. Thus, the impact of learning English on cultural identity is not inherently positive or negative but rather depends on how individuals and societies choose to navigate this interplay between language and cultural identity. This process fosters multilingualism and cultural awareness, ensuring that English

becomes a tool for empowerment and not a force for cultural homogenization.

5. Recommendations

The results of this study indicate that further investigation is necessary to explore how the English language influences the cultural identity of Iraqi students. Based on the findings of this research, we propose the following recommendations:

1. Learning and teaching the English language are prominent topics in this field, as they play a crucial role in enhancing language proficiency. Teachers should first establish positive relationships with their students to understand their needs, proficiency levels, and individual differences. This understanding enables them to determine the most effective strategies and approaches for managing their classes, ensuring that students comprehend lectures more effectively.
2. We propose that future research focus on the social and cultural aspects of the dissemination of the English language in Iraq.
3. We recommend enhancing the capabilities of our teachers through team teaching. In the Department of English Language, fostering a collaborative teaching culture should involve not only teachers of the English language but also lecturers and educators from other disciplines.
4. It is imperative that instructors of foreign languages inform their students of the significant influence that culture has on the process of learning by telling students and broadening their minds that even though they are heavily impacted by the culture of the English language they speak, they retain their identity, core values, and ideals.

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Appendix

The Impact of Learning the English Language on Cultural Identity: A Model for Iraqi Students at the University of Basra

We would like to ask you to participate in a research study by answering the following questions of the questionnaire. Your contribution is much appreciated by us. We are really grateful.

1- For how long have you been learning English?

2- Do you believe that every Iraqi should learn English language?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes
<input type="checkbox"/>	No

3- Do you believe that the cultural identity of Iraqi students would be altered by the necessity for and utilization of the English language in Iraq?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes
<input type="checkbox"/>	No

4- If the answer is "yes", then how?

5- Has learning English impacted your cultural identity in your opinion?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes
<input type="checkbox"/>	No

6- If the answer is "yes", then how so?

7- Has your perspective on the Western world shifted as a result of learning about the English language and Western culture?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes
<input type="checkbox"/>	No

8- Do you think that learning English is extremely important in present-day Iraq?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes
<input type="checkbox"/>	No

9- Will using English have an impact on your future in various ways?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes
<input type="checkbox"/>	No

10- If the answer is "yes", then how?

11- Have you decided to study English language in order to gain insights into the culture of native speakers of English?

11- Does acquiring knowledge of a foreign language inherently necessitate learning its culture?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes
<input type="checkbox"/>	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	Maybe

12- Do you believe that the English and Iraqi cultures are:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Totally different
<input type="checkbox"/>	Partially different
<input type="checkbox"/>	Alike