

CULTURAL AND INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS AMONG ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) LEARNERS IN THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA (KSA)

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Abstract

The English language is considered as one of the crucial factors for success in today's world. Languages are the tools of conveying culture. Understanding the nature of the relationship between language and culture is central to the process of learning another language. The current paper aims at identifying cultural learning and Intercultural Awareness in ESL learners' classrooms. The sample consisted of forty female students pursuing their undergraduate course for Bachelor's in English with Translation as their specialization belonging to level 5, 6, and 7. The study applied a descriptive analytical approach of gathering information. One tool was used for collecting data; it was a questionnaire which aimed at investigating perspectives of ESL learners towards English language and culture of English and understanding of the concept of "intercultural awareness". This study supports the idea that the learners of English need to be trained in both language component as well as cultural component of English language and to appreciate the cultural diversities. The study further recommends that the stakeholders, planners, teaching material developers, text designers and teachers should aim at promoting in general and students in particular.

Keywords: English Language Learning, English Culture, Intercultural Awareness.

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of English language in today's world doesn't need to be greatly emphasized as English has been marked itself as "Global Lingua franca" (Crystal 2003). It is the language of science and technology, trade and commerce, academia, tourism, communication, entertainment in both formal and informal environments. Language learning is very intricately connected with cultural learning of that language. This issue becomes even more relevant for a country like KSA, can be described as one of very cultural sensitive nation.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia appreciates the importance of English Language and has geared up to adapt well to the language and make it a medium to mark its presence on the global map in all sectors of business, science and technology etc. The people of Saudi need English not only to reflect Saudi Arabia's vision and to play a pivotal role in world trade and politics as a strong nation while maintaining its own history and identity. English is required by the Saudi people to communicate with foreign experts in various fields, as a bridge language to many non-native workforces from both western and non-western nations and for their travels abroad for higher studies and for tourism also. English is also widely used in various mass media such as the print media, broadcast media and internet. In the education sector, English has found itself an important place, as it is the only foreign language taught in Saudi schools. It is also used as the medium of instruction at Universities in most of the departments.

Nevertheless, the introduction of this language in schools and colleges has raised questions from various sectors of the Saudi society and the concerns sound very important.

1.1. Problem of the Study

In language learning classrooms, Learners need to engage with the ways in which context affects what is communicated and how. Both the learner's culture and the culture in which meaning is created or communicated have an influence on the ways in which possible meanings are understood. This context is not a single culture as both the target language and culture and the learner's own language and culture are simultaneously present and can be simultaneously engaged. Learning to communicate in an additional language involves developing an awareness of the ways in which culture interrelates with language whenever it is used. Therefore, it is relevant to make a scrutiny of learners' attitudes and implication of using English language culture in English language classrooms in Saudi Context.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

The study aims at:

1. Identifying the learners' attitude towards learning of English.
2. Assessing whether the learners' are aware of the cultural aspect of English language in the English lesson they are learning and do they appreciate it.
3. Probing if the learners understand the concept of "intercultural awareness" and observe in their classroom.

1.3. Questions of the Study

1. What extent the learners prioritize learning of English?
2. Do the learners know any cultural aspect that they learn in English language classroom?
3. Do the learners know the concept of intercultural awareness and do they appreciate it?

1.4. Limitations of the Study

The study was conducted at the Faculty of Arts and Science, Al Ardah campus where only female students attended the college. The attitudes and opinion of one department students was collected and restricted due to non-availability of time.

1.5. Methodology

The present study investigates the opinions and attitudes of the Saudi EFL learners. The descriptive research methodology was adopted to understand the perceptions and implications of a foreign culture in the foreign language classroom. The study applied a quantitative analysis approach of gathering information through structured questionnaire. A questionnaire developed by the researcher was applied to forty students. The questionnaire consisted of three different sections. The first section of the questionnaire was devoted to understand the demography of the sample. The second section consisting open-ended questions and the third section consisting of close end, aimed at investigating attitude of learners towards English language and culture of a foreign language like English and understanding of the concept of "intercultural awareness".

1.6. The Participants

The sample consisted of forty female students of English and Translation undergraduate course belonging to level 5,6, and 7 and in their early twenties to late twenties.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Concepts of Culture

Culture in a broad sense means rituals, traditions, folklore, celebrations, dress code, social habits of food, greetings, ceremonies etc. It is transferred through generations and is recorded in books, artifacts, folklore and various forms in recent times. It also keeps changing owing to different factors. It is a heritage carried through generations and the biggest medium for this is language. It is not wrong to say culture flourishes and grows in and through a language. At the same time, a language is identified because of the culture it is associated with. Further studies in the field of Applied Linguistics and Sociolinguistics have clarified and established the intertwined relationship between language and culture. A language is part of a culture and culture is part of a language.

Language and culture are so “intricately interwoven” that the two are inseparable (Brown, 1994). Therefore, culture can be said as an important characteristic of language. It is apparent that language is part of the bigger picture of culture, which every individual in a given society associates oneself with. This fact holds a strong ground especially when it comes to teaching and learning of English language scenario.

The English language teaching and learning is not mere development of linguistic listening, speaking, reading and writing (LSRW) skills but developing new skills set. The language instructors, researchers are talking about “culture” as the new “fifth skill”. It is discussed as a life skill and essential part of English language teaching. It is also referred as the “Mind’s software” and the “Big C”. Experts in English Language Teaching (ELT) have raised discussions on language learning alongside the teaching of target language culture. Their argument is that mere developing linguistic competence i.e. structure and form of language may not suffice mastery of a language. At the same time developing communicative competence i.e. understanding various functions of language may not guarantee success in communication especially with the native speaker of the foreign language.

The introduction of culture in language class gives the learner of the language a mindset and adaptability to use the language successfully with the native speaker, in a given situation and to the complete benefit of the very purpose of the use of the language. Therefore, ignoring the cultural nuances of the language leaves the learner of foreign language at a disadvantage of losing communication due to a gap build for lack of cultural knowledge of counter parts.

Robert Lado (1964) explains the goal of learning a foreign language as “the ability to use it, understand its meaning and connotations in terms of the target language and culture and the ability to understand the speech and writing of natives of target culture in terms of their meanings as well as their great ideas and achievements.”(Lado, 1964, cited in Shuand Sun). Language learning is often culture-learning and that cultural competence is an integral part of communicative competence. Cultural awareness is

the first step in this learning process, leading to a high level of communicative competence. The discussions of “culture” and “cultural awareness” to teaching in English classroom moved further with the introduction of the term “intercultural awareness”.

The language class now added a new dimension of critical thinking to language learning encouraging the language learner to learn the new language through comparing and contrasting the cultural aspects of both the languages i.e the First Language (L1) culture and culture of English language.

Another argument for cultural learning as part of language learning is to make students aware of “alternative ways if interpreting personal and social experiences”. An analysis of specific social behavior in two different languages helps the learner discover the cultural values that lie underneath the two languages.

The result of this analysis will help learners develop a cross cultural awareness which in turn enhances cultural competence among the learners. This also adds the learner to realize mother tongue(L1) culture and lead to identity construction besides appreciating the differences in the two cultures. Intercultural awareness helps students/learners remove the generalization, stereotypical view, pre conceived ideas, judgments towards a culture.

3. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTLS

The first section of the questionnaire consisted of open ended questions.

The first question of the section intended to measure the average time the responding group spent in learning English and it showed that the average time of the group was 6 to 7 years including high school time.

The question 2, 3and 4 aim to investigate the respondents confidence in English and usage of language.

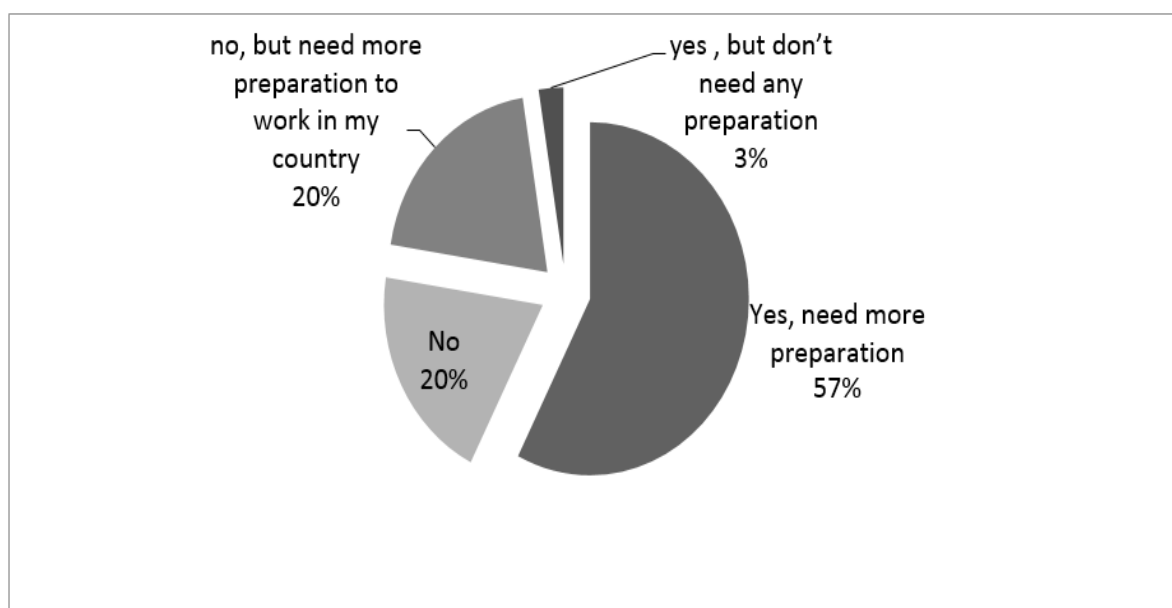


Figure 1: Preparation in English Language

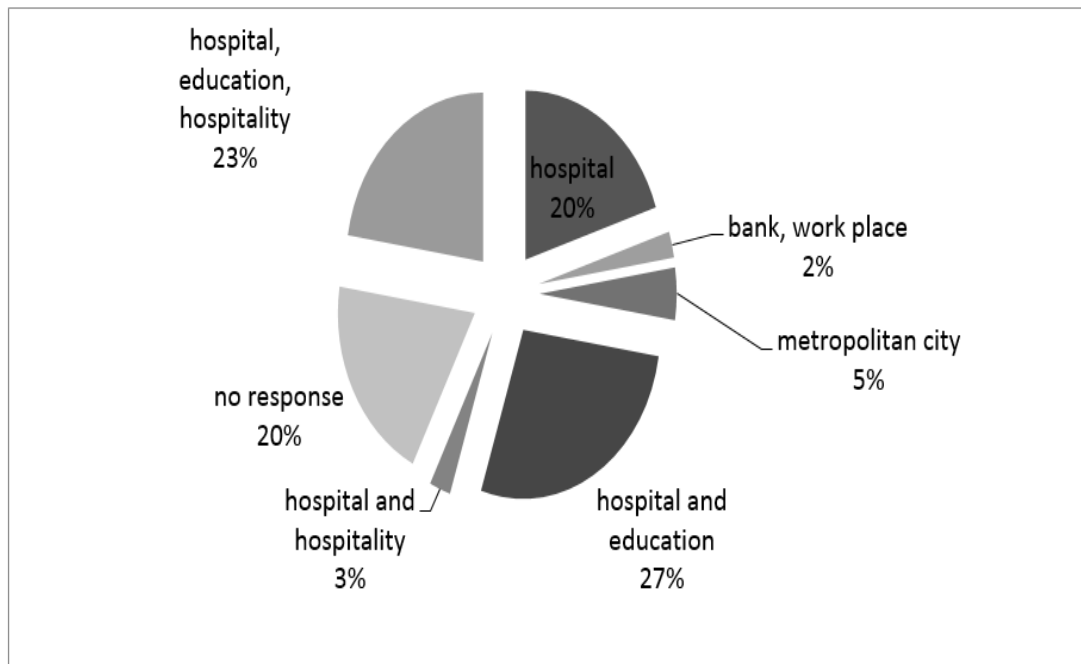


Figure 2: Places where English is used in KSA

The respondents as represented in figure 1 clearly showed that they have a realization that they need more preparation in English language for higher education both within the country and abroad. The figure 2 shows the respondents' awareness of use of English in KSA, a country where Arabic language as mother tongue is predominant and common to all subjects.

The respondents showed that they knew that English language at present is used in their country, in medical, education and hospitality sectors identifying by combination of the following terms "hospital", "colleges", "workplace", "restaurants", "malls", and "metropolitan" city. An overall view indicates that English is used in places where there are expatriate encounters with the local people.

The 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 questions focused on learners' awareness on cultural and intercultural component of English language classroom. The figure 3 shows that the respondents are not much aware of any cultural aspect in their English language text books.

The questions on learners' "intercultural awareness", the respondents, as shown in figure 4, were not clearly aware of the concept. Intercultural awareness is appreciation of similarities and differences between two cultures and in English learning class, it implies understanding the differences and similarities of English language culture and the learners' own culture.

There is a possibility that they draw comparison but this is by coincidence and not intended. The respondents, as shown in figure 5, were of divided opinion on agreement of presence of their own cultural component in English text books

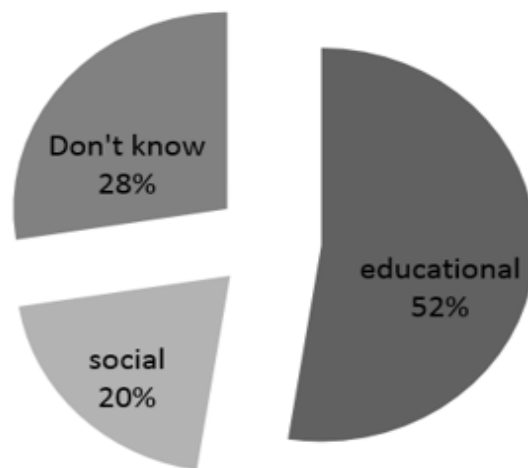


Figure 3: Cultural Aspect in English Text Books

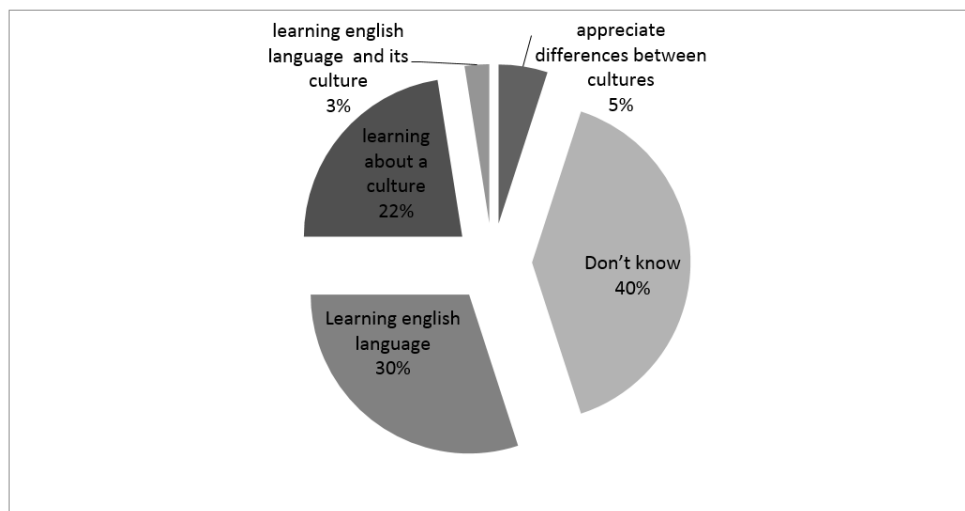


Figure 4: "Intercultural Awareness"

with half of them agreeing and remaining half reflecting disagreement or they were not sure.

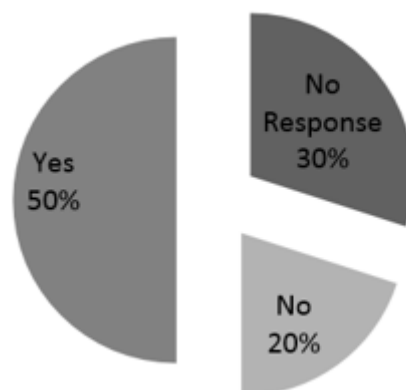


Figure 5: Learners' Understanding of their own Cultural Aspect

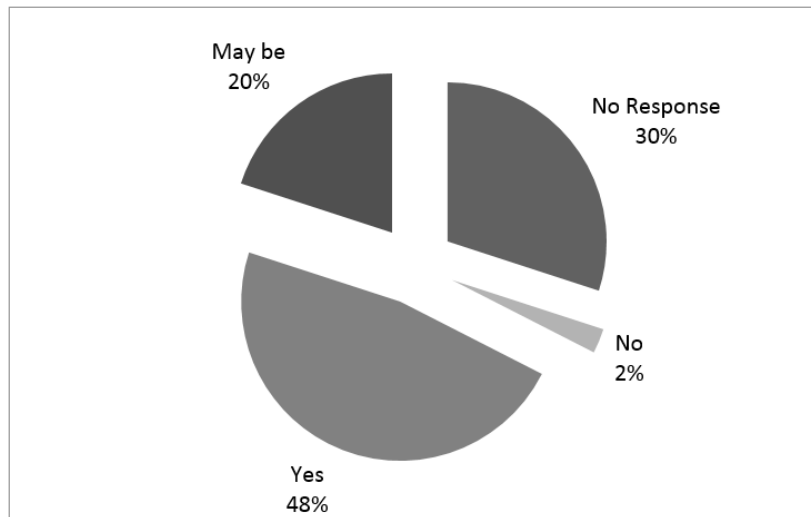


Figure 6: Showing Intercultural Awareness

The figure 6 shows that a few respondents were able to make comparison or identify the differences in culture of their country and English language culture in their English language text books, while many others did not clearly find it or they did not understand it.

The second section consisted of close end questions. The first question in this section queried the attitude of learners towards English and its usage for them. Almost all the respondent showed interest in learning English language and agreed that learning of English is crucial as shown in the figure 7. Regarding the knowledge of English being status symbol, the opinion varied with almost half of them agreeing and other half was disagreeing. The kind of English used and preferred, the respondents showed preference to British and American English almost equally as shown in figure 8.

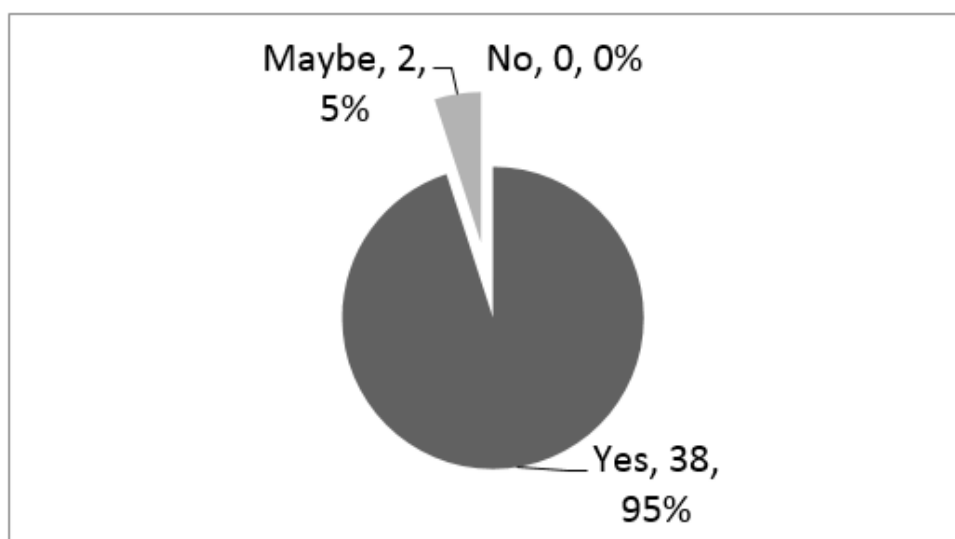


Figure 7: Interest in Learning English

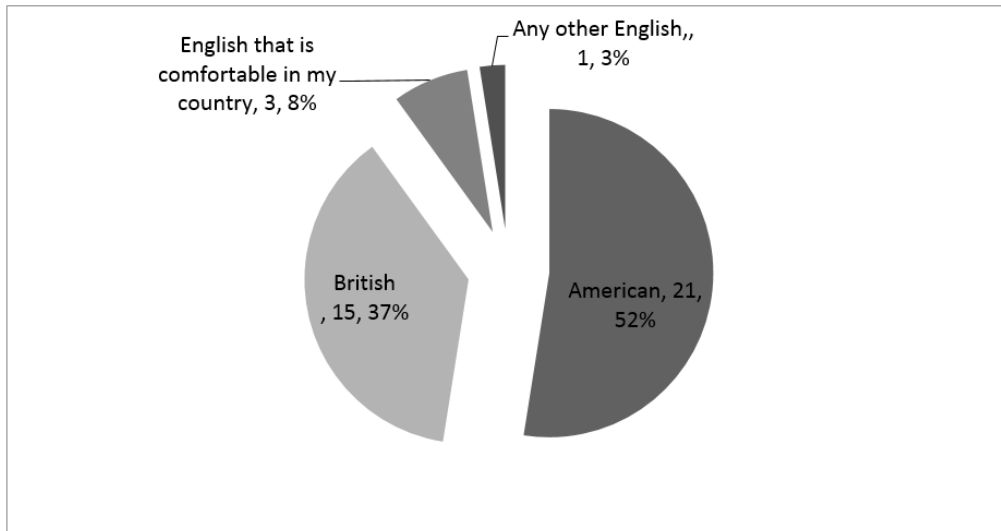


Figure 8: The Type of English Preferred

There was agreement among the respondents regarding English as an important element for personal and national growth. The figure 9 and 10 respectively show 70% agreeing its relevance for national development and a 95% agreeing for individual growth.

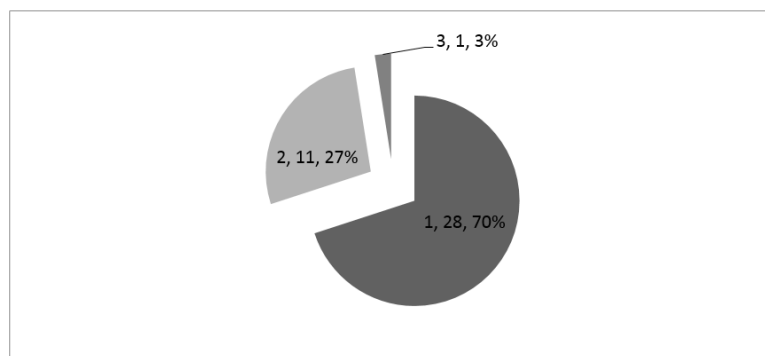


Figure 9: English Important for Personal Growth

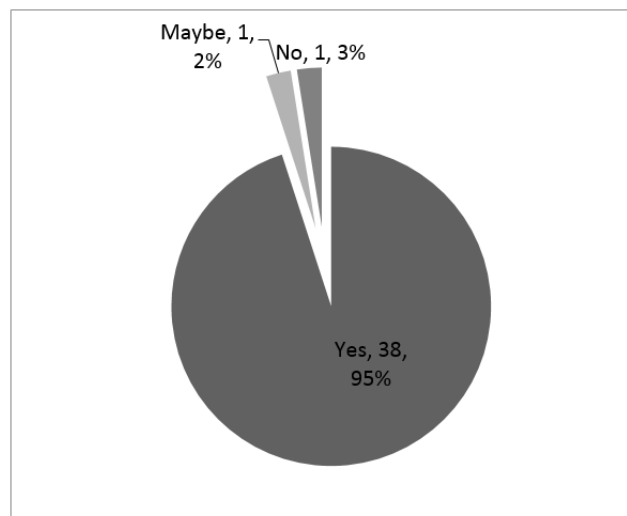


Figure 10: Is English Important for National Growth?

The questions aimed at diagnosing the respondents' attitude for cultural element in language class and if they were actively involved in the concept of "cultural" and "intercultural awareness". The responses, as shown in figures 11 and 12, showed that the respondents were interested in knowing the culture of English language and that this learning will help develop English language but were not much aware of "intercultural" element of language learning.

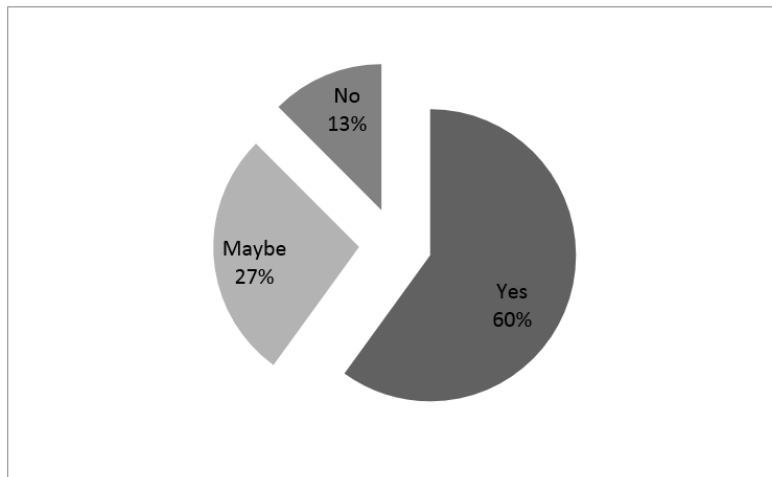


Figure 11: Like to Learn English Culture

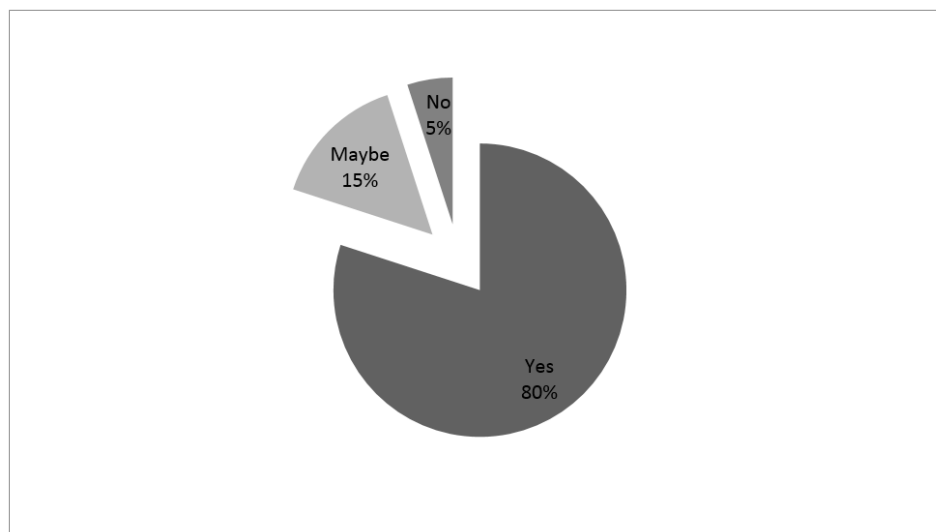


Figure 12: Learning a Culture Help Learning that Language

The figure 13 shows the response to the question on the influence of learning a foreign culture on the learners' of English language, that the cultural difference will be appreciated and will help realize their own identity by understanding their own culture but a few were doubtful about its influence. The response for "learning English culture with English language ensures success against learning just English language ensures success, showed most of the respondents preferred learning English language alongside its culture ensures success as shown in the figure 14.

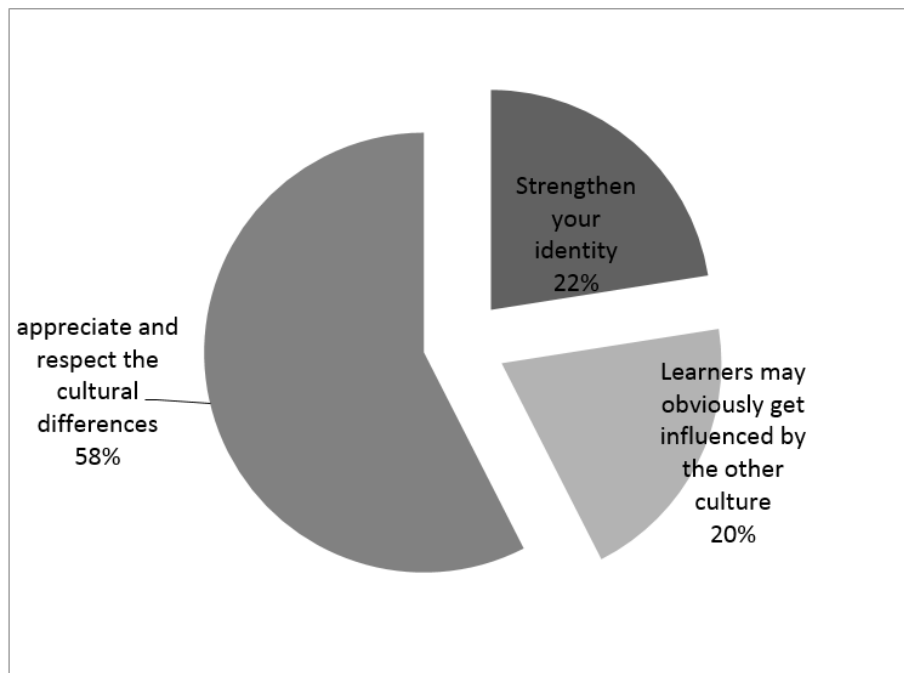


Figure 13: Influence of Learning a Foreign Culture

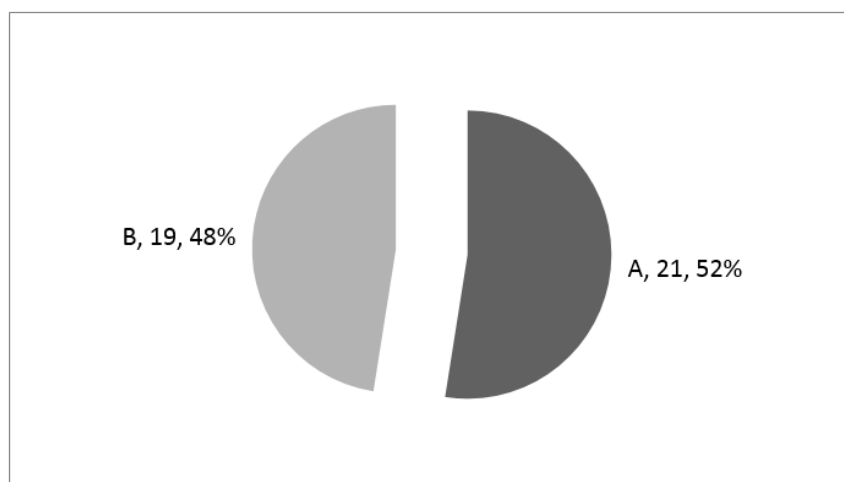


Figure 14A: English and English Culture Ensures Success Vs B- Just English will Ensure Success

The figure 15 shows that the respondents agreed that Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing (LSRW), grammar and vocabulary skills improve with the cultural input of the language.

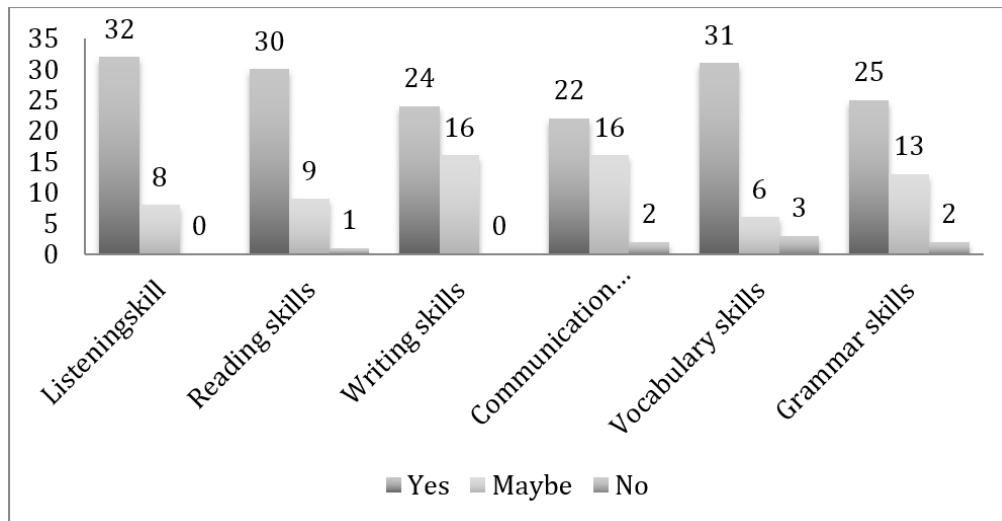


Figure 15: Opinion on Learning of English Culture, Helps Develop Language Skills

4. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The research is an analytical attempt to understand the attitudes of EFL learners and implications of using foreign culture in foreign language learning. The research focused to initiate a discussion on the platform of English language learning which is multifaceted and multidimensional. One of the dimensions being “cultural learning” in English language classroom and “intercultural awareness”. It is expected that this discussion may further lead to study of direct classroom implications, the role of the teachers and the study materials.

The findings for the attitudes of learners from both the open end and close end questions section showed that the students are greatly motivated and are interested in learning English as foreign language for their personal as well as national growth. The interest is derived from positive attitude for learning English language for its “social and instrumental gains”. The students’ response in both the sections supports the view that English is preferred in KSA for success in academics both in the country and abroad, also in their daily life encounters with expatriates in common places like the airports, hospitals, restaurants, malls. The findings hence forth support the view by Al-Abedalhaq and Samdi (as cited in Khalid Al-Seghayer, 2011) that learning English language is a matter of “social prestige and a means of enriching one’s personality and cultural experience, in addition to enhancing the economic development of Saudi Arabia”. The findings also reflected that the learners are aware that they are not fully prepared in English for their further studies and the instrumental gains they aim yet. The response for the kind of English the students preferred supported both British and American English.

The findings for the cultural component of EFL classrooms in both the open end and close end question section showed that students are very much positive for learning a foreign culture as they identified that it will help them in their future employment and travels.

The responses on cultural element in English language text books in closed end and open end questions reflected that the learners are aware of presence of cultural aspect but could not identify all the cultural aspects in the textbook. They just identified

educational and social aspects whereas various aspects of business, lifestyles, were included in the English language text book. This shows that the learners are not able to make the distinction in identifying the cultural aspect. One argument in this regard could be that the language element is given more priority in the textbook than cultural element.

The responses in close end questions can be further summarized that a majority of the sample supported to learn English language through English language culture and showed agreement that English language can be best learnt and used with cultural input of the language. A majority of the respondents supported the view that learning English and its culture will ensure success. The responses for the question on development of language skills through cultural input reflected that most of the students agreed that Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing (LSRW), grammar and vocabulary skills improve with the cultural input of the language. The responses from the students on influence of English culture in English classroom reflected that the differences in culture will be appreciated and it will help the learners identify strengths of their own culture. A very few were skeptical that the learners will be influenced by the foreign culture.

The response for questions on concept of “intercultural awareness” showed that most of the sample students did not know or understood it wrongly as “learning English language”, “learning English language and its culture”. Only a five percent of them describe it as “appreciating difference in cultures”. The responses on the learners’ awareness about presence of either their own cultural component or English language culture showed a clear divide in opinion with half of the students agreeing for presence of their own culture and remaining half divided in disagreeing or preferring not to answer the question. The response for making any comparison between their own and English language cultural aspect, almost half agreed for comparison but a majority showed no clarity of thought as they indicated “may be” and “no” besides preferring to not answer the questions.

The above responses reflect that the students do not clearly understand the concept of “intercultural awareness”. The learners have failed to identify their own cultural element or foreign cultural element in their text books or draw any kind of comparison between the two.

4.1 Recommendations

This study reveals that the learners of English need to be trained in language component as well as cultural component of English language. It also supports that the learners should be trained in critical thinking to understand and appreciate the cultural differences. There is a need to activate “culture compare-contrast system” in the students’ thinking for the students to appreciate and respect the differences in two cultures and to draw a strong identity of “self”. This will help them to be not just productive citizens of the nation KSA but strong contributive “global citizens” who are flexible to forge conveniently through the cultural passages of different nations and at the same time carry their own identity successfully. The study further recommends that this aspect of intercultural awareness needs a reboot with the stakeholders, planners, teaching material developers, and teachers.

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