

Nam Can Tho University English Major Students' Perceptions about the Significance of Culture in Learning English

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Abstract: Research has demonstrated that culture significantly influences the process of language acquisition, particularly in the context of learning English. This study aimed to examine the degree to which English major students at Nam Can Tho University assessed the impact of culture on their English language learning, specifically in the areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. A total of 117 students were asked to participate in the questionnaire, and out of those, only 10 individuals attended the interview. The findings indicate that the majority of students possess a strong awareness of the importance of culture in the process of learning English, particularly in relation to listening skills. Furthermore, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the various aspects through which students view the significance of culture in the process of learning English. Based on that, some consequences for instructional approaches are derived.

Keywords — students' perceptions, culture, learning English.

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, English language education has focused on cultural competence in language acquisition. Language is founded in culture and used for communication. Culture deeply affects language acquisition, altering perceptions, interpretations, and applications. Learning a language takes more than just grammar and vocabulary since it requires cultural understanding. All languages reflect a group's values, beliefs, traditions, and social norms; hence, language learners must understand and incorporate cultural differences when learning a second language like English (Nufus, 2022).

According to Egamberdiyeva and Tojiddinova (2023), due to the fact that language and culture are inseparable, teaching a language also means teaching culture. Learning a second language involves connecting with and comprehending the target culture with its own ideas and ways of being. Language learning is inextricably linked to cultural learning, so decoding a nation's language entails understanding its culture. Additionally, the cultural background of a language shapes its semantic and conceptual patterns. Learning a foreign language requires understanding the cultural context that shapes its meaning and form (Göçen & Özdemirel, 2020).

Prior research has shown the relevance of cultural awareness and receptivity in learning English, especially in contexts where students' mother tongue and cultural background differ from English. However, not many studies have examined how culture affects English-major students' language learning experiences. By studying Nam Can Tho University English-major students' opinions, this research should help us understand how culture affects English learning in academic and practical settings. Studying the impact of culture on Nam Can Tho University English majors' language learning journeys and understanding students' views on culture's importance in English learning can help develop tailored curriculum structures, instructional approaches, and support mechanisms that address the students' diverse cultural backgrounds. This study could improve English major education, boost intercultural competence, and improve Nam Can Tho University's English language education.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definitions of culture

Culture is what people must understand to function properly in society, according to Belli (2018). Culture is fundamental to anthropological research. Himonidi (2023) defined culture as "something learned, transmitted, passed down from one generation to the next through human actions, often in the form of face-to-face interaction and, of course, through linguistic communication". In addition, Himonidi (2023) calls culture "the collection of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, actions, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, conceptions of time, roles, spatial relationships, concepts of the universe, and artifacts acquired by a group of

people across generations through individual and collective efforts". In this study, culture is considered as a significant factor influencing the process of language learning.

2.2. The relationship between language and culture

Students cannot accurately learn a new language without understanding its culture, according to Abdulaziz Aldawood and Almeshari (2019). Therefore, cultural knowledge is needed for excellent foreign language proficiency.

According to Hürmüzlü (2020), language and culture are interdependent and mutually beneficial. In other words, every linguistic statement has designative, sociative, symbolic, or semantic consequences. Additionally, languages are tied to a particular culture, which is broader than language, so each language has different meanings. As a result, engaging with a language implies engaging with its culture (Kamaeva et al., 2022). Hence, a community's culture cannot be understood without its language.

Language and culture are so intertwined that separating them would devalue either language or culture (Egamberdiyeva & Tojiddinova, 2023). Thus, knowing a language is closely tied to knowing how it is used in everyday life, especially how it impacts and contributes to its native speakers' culture (Syaputri et al., 2021).

So, it is obvious that culture and language influence each other complexly. Specially, cultural factors shape language use and comprehension, while linguistic expressions reflect cultural values and identities. Linguistic communication helps people express their cultural heritage and affiliation, strengthening social relationships. Understanding the dynamic relationship between culture and language is essential for effective communication and cross-cultural understanding in our diverse global community.

2.3. The role of culture in learning English

In terms of listening comprehension, Hayati (2009) and Samian and Dastjerdi (2012) state that listening to foreign languages is complex and essential to improving proficiency. For English-language learners, cultural background influences listening comprehension. Kamaeva et al. (2022) say cultural background affects listening skills and motivation. Awareness of cultural variations helps people relate to other speakers' topics. Dewi et al. (2022) imply that cultural intelligence, which involves conscious understanding of cultural differences, may be associated to listening comprehension. Cultural intelligence comprises knowledge of various languages' grammar and vocabulary, so students with it may understand listening better. As a result, culture improves listening comprehension, especially in language learning situations. Culturally relevant listening tasks can help students understand oral communication. Understanding cultural backgrounds, dialects, and peculiarities helps interpret spoken language, making listening comprehension more engaging. Cultural awareness improves listening comprehension in ESL learners, highlighting the importance of adding cultural content in language acquisition to improve listening skills.

As for speaking skills, Derakhshan et al. (2016) and Parmawati and Inayah (2019) believed that speaking goes beyond language knowledge because in speech meaning is created and received through mutual understanding in which culture understanding plays a crucial role (Parmawati & Inayah, 2019). Consequently, good English communication requires understanding these cultural differences, so students need cultural knowledge as well as vocabulary and grammar to speak English. Additionally, cultural references, humor, and social norms assist minimize misunderstandings and improve communication. Effective English cross-cultural communication requires cultural knowledge (Derakhshan et al., 2016; Yang, 2014).

Regarding reading comprehension, Bijani et al. (2022) describe reading as a cognitive process including a dynamic reader-writer interaction. The goal of reading proficiency is to understand meanings and concepts. This process of comprehension, intricacy, and cognition includes a crucial cultural aspect. Erten and Razi (2009) and Thirunavukarasu and Harun (2021) say that readers who are aware of cultural norms and references in a book are more likely to understand and draw conclusions. Readers use their cultural schema to interpret the material beyond literal comprehension. Cultural schema is background information on a culture's customs, traditions, social norms, and shared experiences. Bensalah and Guerroudj (2020) also stressed the need of reading comprehension for EFL students. EFL students at university receive extra attention since they read more complex materials than ever before. Since cultural experience affects reading and understanding culturally relevant content, students with relevant cultural schemata will quickly grasp the material. Hence, cultural background is crucial to reading comprehension, especially for second language learners. Students' text comprehension and reading skills increase when cultural factors are integrated into reading education and cultural awareness is promoted.

In writing skills, culture strongly influences writing styles. Writers and readers must be aware of these cultural factors to express and understand ideas in an international scholarly context (Fitriana, 2023; Zhu, 2022). Communication and writing often reflect cultural values, assumptions, ideas, norms, and perceptions. These

elements create message encoding and decoding codes. In summary, culture shapes writing style, impacting vocabulary and rhetorical framework. So, students should be encouraged to explore their cultural backgrounds through writing activities and embrace cultural variance in writing pedagogy to create richer, more real, and more influential writing.

Acquiring a new language involves more than just rote memorization of vocabulary and grammar principles. Culture significantly influences the development and expression of language and communication. In order to communicate effectively when studying English, students must understand the cultural context in which the language is used. It is very vital for students majoring in English at Nam Can Tho University.

Although the importance of culture in language acquisition is widely recognized, there is a lack of studies explicitly examining the perspectives of English major students on this issue. The majority of previous study has focused on English learners in general or students from other countries. The objective of this study is to investigate and provide new perspectives on how culture influences the learning of English in the Vietnamese context. The findings of this study have practical relevance for teaching approaches.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research questions

The aim of this study is to examine the perceptions of English major students at Nam Can Tho University on the importance of culture in the English learning process. So, the research question is:

“What is the perception of Nam Can Tho University English major students regarding the significance of culture in the English learning process?”

3.2. Research design

The research is carried out as a descriptive study, employing both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Data will be collected through the use of questionnaires and interviews.

3.3. Participants

The research would especially focus on students who are pursuing a major in English language at Nam Can Tho University. Participants, encompassing a cohort of 117 students ranging from freshman to senior year, would express their viewpoints on the significance of culture in the process of acquiring English language skills. Based on their perception, 10 questionnaire respondents, including six men and four women, were invited to the interview.

3.4. Research instruments

The questionnaire comprises four clusters aimed at examining participants' perception of the following: (1) the influence of culture on listening comprehension, (2) the influence of culture on speaking skills, (3) the influence of culture on reading comprehension, and (4) the influence of culture on writing skills. The questions were formulated using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree", to measure agreement. Students select a single alternative based on their perspectives.

Moreover, a set of semi-structured interviews consisting of 5 questions was translated into Vietnamese to ensure participants' comprehension and facilitate meaningful responses. Finally, the questionnaire responses were analyzed using the SPSS software. The qualitative interview data were analyzed by identifying and categorizing reoccurring themes and subjects.

TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Cluster	The number of items	Items used
1. The influence of culture on listening comprehension	6	1,2,3,4,5,6
2. The influence of culture on speaking skills	6	7,8,9,10,11,12
3. The influence of culture on reading comprehension	6	13,14,15,16,17,18
4. The influence of culture on writing skills	6	19,20,21,22,23,24

TABLE 2
SUMMARY OF THE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Questions
1. To what extent do you believe culture has a significant role in the acquisition of the English language?
2. Have you encountered any situations in which cultural misconceptions hindered your process of acquiring the English language?
3. What is your opinion on the influence of exposure to diverse cultures on the process of language acquisition?
4. Could you provide specific examples of how cultural comprehension has bolstered your proficiency in the English language?
5. In what ways do you believe the cultural context of English-speaking countries affects the learning process for non-native speakers?

IV. FINDINGS

4.1. Quantitative findings

Table 3 presents the students' overall perceptions of the significance of culture in the language learning process, measured by a Descriptive Statistics Test. As shown in table 3, the mean score was high ($M = 3.75$). It could be inferred that the students highly recognized the significance of culture in learning English.

TABLE 3
THE STUDENTS' OVERALL PERCEPTIONS OF CULTURE ON ENGLISH LEARNING (N=117)

Variable	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Overall perceptions	3.03	4.53	3.75	0.34

(Note: M =Mean, SD =Standard Deviation)

Subsequently, a Descriptive Statistics Test was implemented to ascertain the most significant aspect of the English learning process that students perceived to be influenced by culture. Table 4 illustrates the results.

TABLE 4
THE ASPECTS OF ENGLISH LEARNING INFLUENCED BY CULTURE

The aspects of the English learning influenced by culture	Min	Max	Mean	Sd
The impact of culture on listening comprehension	2.67	5.00	3.9	0.45
The impact of culture on speaking skills	2.33	4.50	3.5	0.51
The impact of culture on reading comprehension	2.60	4.80	3.8	0.47
The impact of culture on writing skills	2.67	5.00	3.7	0.51

It is evident that the mean score for the impact of culture on listening comprehension was the highest ($M = 3.9$), while the mean score for the impact of culture on speaking skills was the lowest ($M = 3.5$). The results were in accordance with Samian and Dastjerdi (2012) and Hayati (2009) assert that the process of listening to foreign languages is intricate and indispensable for the enhancement of one's proficiency. Meanwhile, listening comprehension is influenced by the cultural context of English-language learners. According to Kamaeva et al. (2022), motivation and listening abilities are influenced by cultural heritage. People are better able to relate to the topics of other presenters when they are aware of cultural differences.

4.2. Qualitative findings

Furthermore, a qualitative analysis of data was employed to enhance comprehension of the particular features of English acquisition that are influenced by culture. The findings derived from the process of thematic analysis were presented in the following manner.

4.2.1. The impact of culture on listening comprehension

In terms of listening skills, most of the participants approved the significant influence of culture on listening comprehension. For instance, student 5 and 9 expressed their ideas when answering to the question: "To what extent do you think culture impact your listening ability?"

"Well, I personally think it's extremely important because to understand what foreign speakers say we not only need a wide range of vocabulary but also the understanding of their culture..." (student 5)

Like wise, students 9 expressed her thought that:

"In my opinion, understanding the target culture plays a vital role in listening comprehension. By that I mean with the understanding of culture, the listeners can understand better the context in which the conversation occurs and gain exactly the intended message. So, I think language learners should be more encouraged to get exposure in cultural experiences". (student 9)

From students' perspectives, it could be seen that culture is a significant factor in the process of understanding spoken language because it influences how people communicate and understand messages. Effective communication extends beyond mere comprehension of the explicit definition of words; it also entails acknowledging the cultural subtleties and conventions that shape interpersonal communication. This finding is consistent with the finding of Kamaeva et al. (2022) and Dewi et al. (2022) that cultural background influences both listening skills and motivation and cultural intelligence includes knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of other languages, allowing students to better understand listening. Cultural awareness enhances listening comprehension in ESL students, emphasizing the need of incorporating cultural information into language acquisition to improve listening skills. Therefore, it is crucial to gain an awareness of diverse cultures in order to improve listening skills, as this enables listeners to comprehend the context and intentions behind the

transmitted message. Exposure to a variety of cultural experiences can help cultivate this knowledge. By recognizing and appreciating these cultural differences, individuals can enhance their ability to understand and effectively react in different communication situations.

4.2.2. The impact of culture on speaking skills

For the influence of culture on speaking ability, most of the students showed their agreement that culture has a strong impact on their speaking skills, specifically students 4 and 8 shared:

“Well, I believe that to speak English well, we need to have a proper understanding of the culture of English – speaking countries. This is because it helps us choose the correct words to use in particular situations to make sure that we can communicate well...” (student 4)

In addition to this, student 8 also agreed that culture knowledge played a significant role in speaking skills because it could assist him convey his message in a polite way by using the correct norm of language.

From the sharing, it is obvious that culture exerts a substantial influence on individuals' speaking ability by shaping language usage, communication methods, and social conventions. The relationship between language and culture is complex, as cultural norms not only impact the choice of terminology but also shape the structure of thoughts and the articulation of ideas. This is consistent with Derakhshan et al. (2016) and Parmawati and Inayah (2019) argued that speaking extends beyond linguistic knowledge because meaning is formed and received by mutual understanding, which includes cultural understanding. As a result, recognizing cultural differences is necessary for excellent English communication, thus students must have cultural knowledge in addition to vocabulary and grammar in order to speak English. Additionally, cultural understanding is necessary for effective English cross-cultural communication (Derakhshan et al., 2016; Yang, 2014). Therefore, understanding these cultural subtleties is crucial for effective communication, since it allows individuals to adapt their speech patterns to different cultural contexts and audiences. By recognizing the impact of culture on speaking proficiency, individuals can enhance their communication aptitude and forge connections with others.

4.2.3. The impact of culture on reading comprehension

Regarding the impact of culture on reading comprehension, most of the participants approved that culture influenced significantly on their reading skills, for example students 1 and 3 said:

“Well, for me, with the understanding of culture I can improve my reading comprehension. For example, I can interpret the meaning based on the context given in the text...” (student 1)

Similarly, student 3 shared her idea that:

“umm, in my opinion, cultural background has helped me a lot in doing reading task because I can guess unknown words like idioms based on the cultural context and understand the implication of the text...” (student 3)

So, it is evident that cultural background plays a crucial part in reading comprehension since it greatly affects how individuals interpret, relate to, and extract meaning from written texts. The readers' interaction with texts is shaped by their cultural familiarity, beliefs, and experiences, which in turn impacts their ability to absorb and interpret information effectively. Furthermore, readers from varied cultural backgrounds may encounter difficulties due to the presence of cultural nuances in language, such as idiomatic expressions, metaphors, and cultural references. The result is consistent with the findings of Bijani et al. (2022), Erten and Razi (2009) and Thirunavukarasu and Harun (2021) in terms of reading as a cognitive process that involves a dynamic reader-writer relationship. Because cultural experience influences reading and comprehension of culturally relevant content, students with relevant cultural schemata will easily absorb the topic. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the cultural context in which a text is situated in order to achieve accurate comprehension. This allows readers to grasp not just the literal definition of words, but also the hidden cultural connotations embedded within the text.

4.2.4. The impact of culture on writing skills

In terms of the influence of culture on writing skills, most of the participants presented that culture impacted greatly on their writing skills, for example students 10 and 2 said that:

“Well, I think cultural knowledge helped me a lot in writing skills. I can know how to express my thoughts in formal and informal context.” (student 10)

In the same case, student 2 agreed that with the understanding of culture, he was able to use a complete paragraph or essay expressing his thoughts and even emotions accurately.

It can be seen that culture exerts a substantial impact on writing styles, as it moulds the way individuals express their thoughts, ideas, and emotions via written language. Moreover, cultural perspectives on social structure, courtesy, and societal norms might influence the level of formality and the use of respectful titles in written communications. The finding is consistent with those of Fitriana (2023) and Zhu (2022) that writing styles are significantly influenced by culture in the context of writing abilities. In an international scholarly context, it is imperative that writers and readers are cognizant of these cultural factors in order to effectively communicate and comprehend ideas. Cultural values, assumptions, ideas, norms, and perceptions are frequently reflected in communication and writing. These components generate encoding and decoding protocols for messages. In conclusion, the rhetorical framework and vocabulary of writing are influenced by culture. Therefore, it is imperative that students are motivated to investigate their cultural heritage through writing exercises and to adopt cultural diversity in writing pedagogy in order to generate more authentic, influential, and richer writing.

V. CONCLUSION

In the end, this study has focused on the intricate relationship between culture and the learning of the English language. Through a comprehensive analysis of viewpoints, it is evident that culture plays a pivotal role in shaping the process of acquiring and mastering a language. Language learners recognize the significance of understanding different cultures in enhancing their English language skills, as it enriches their communication with context, complexity, and authenticity. Moreover, the findings emphasize the need for educators to integrate cultural components into language curricula in order to foster a more holistic and effective learning environment. The study also emphasizes the essential role that culture plays in multiple facets of language acquisition and communication. It emphasizes the importance of cultural understanding in attaining advanced abilities in hearing, speaking, reading, writing, and translation. Each of these language abilities is closely linked to cultural customs, values, and life experiences, which shape how individuals communicate and understand information. By acknowledging and valuing cultural disparities, individuals can enhance their capacity to comprehend, react to, and communicate proficiently in diverse linguistic and cultural settings. A comprehensive comprehension of culture ultimately facilitates the acquisition of language and fosters significant relationships across cultural and linguistic barriers. Recognizing and accepting cultural variety allows English language education to overcome language obstacles and promote intercultural comprehension and communication.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Le Huu Tri and Ho Nguyen Thien Trang are novice researchers currently working at Nam Can Tho University. They are interested in performing studies pertaining to English culture and English education.

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