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# The Effect of Teaching English Culture on EFL Saudi Learner's Comprehension

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## Abstract

This research evaluated English language learning and cultural incorporation in learning strategies for students learning English foreign language (EFL) in Saudi classrooms. With a survey sample of 98 students and 17 teachers from the English Language Institute at Jazan University, we found that universities largely utilize an examination-centric teaching framework rather than one focused on holistic teaching strategies to incorporate culture. Beyond Reading, Speaking, Listening, and Writing, universities should include a fifth skill: Target Culture as a vital motivator for teaching English. Thus, incorporating culture and contextual learning within classrooms will provide a strong motivation for acquiring the target aim and integrating students in global work settings that require one to be updated on cultural references. Students agreed that exposure to Native-English culture is essential in motivating them to learn and comprehend English successfully. The main findings of this research conclude that culture is vital to the contextual understanding of EFL.

**Keywords:** Classrooms, Culture, English Language, Saudi Arabia, Teaching Strategies

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## Introduction

Language and culture are very closely intertwined. They are inseparable because they constantly impact one another, and this circular process of influence and change develops over time. Yufei (2025), in his study, mentioned that language is both a product and a symbol of culture [1]. Culture thus becomes a crucial element of learning English as a Foreign (EFL). Though these findings have been prevalent in research and academic perspectives, reports of teachers' traditional and outdated language teaching techniques still prevail in Saudi Arabian classrooms. Their application of updated language pedagogies has still not been properly integrated into classrooms and in EFL textbooks available [2].

According to Neff & Apple (2023), for L2 (second language) learners, understanding culture can help students communicate more effectively and avoid miscommunication. This is especially important given cultural differences in tone, intonation, gestures, and other schema forms that native learners naturally absorb [3]. Second language pedagogical methods in Saudi

Arabia still focus on subsets of discrete skills like reading, writing, speaking, and listening, emphasizing grammar and vocabulary. Examination-centric approaches to teaching and learning also drive these skill sets but fail to incorporate a holistic approach to evaluating students' progress on English testing as a foreign/second language [4].

There is limited research on EFL learning strategies for Saudi Arabian students, and those that exist fail to be incorporated properly within Saudi schooling classrooms. Given this information, we conducted a study using questionnaires for 98 students and 17 teachers from Al Jazan University, Saudi Arabia, from December 2022 to January 2023. These surveys and questionnaires aimed to investigate EFL learners, teachers' perspectives on existing pedagogical methods, and the potential for incorporating cultural knowledge and awareness within EFL classrooms. The teacher's questions inquired about their demographics, cultural importance within EFL, and various aspects of cultural learning like body language, syllabus, and classroom activities. The students' questionnaire inquired

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about their cultural awareness, mental associations of English with different English-speaking countries, and experiences with the EFL textbooks.

### ***Objectives, Rationale, and Research Questions***

The main purpose of this paper is to evaluate the importance of incorporating cultural elements in an EFL classroom in the context of Saudi Arabia's EFL textbooks, conflicting cultural relations with the West, and its examination-centric approach to teaching EFL. In the process, we will assess whether cultural elements are crucial to processing meanings associated with the linguistic aspects of EFL learning. To what extent does foreign culture need to be incorporated into ESL learning, and could it be more helpful for students to utilize Middle Eastern English sources as culture learning? What exactly does target culture teaching entail, and how can we gauge which cultural sources are beneficial for helping students develop acquaintances with professional work environments vs. simply understanding cultural entertainment sources and slang that are considered unprofessional? Which cultural sources can help students develop their reading, speaking, listening, and writing skills and learn to incorporate syntax, grammar, and punctuation? Will being exposed to contemporary sources serve as an additional layer of entertainment that could motivate EFL learners to take an interest in learning the language, thus increasing their cultural awareness and linguistic competence?

This study is set up as an attempt to achieve the following objectives:

- To investigate the relationship of English culture to L2 English language learning in Saudi Arabia.
- To evaluate the effect of English culture exposure from various sources on EFL learners.
- To evaluate techniques and strategies for effective EFL classroom learning processes.

### ***Literature Review***

Alifuddin and Widodo (2022) wrote that culture is people's acquired knowledge to interpret experience and generate behavior [5]. Older definitions of culture are a collection of social behaviors, norms, and institutions. These include habits, language and meanings, religion and beliefs, food, art, music, laws, and economic and societal norms [6-8]. These definitions have primarily been geographical in associating these aspects with a particular geographical location where people shared similar

characteristics and attributes.

However, contemporary evaluations of culture as a concept have moved towards globalization, with generations of families that migrated and with Transnational Education (TNE) frameworks aimed towards higher education setting up overseas branches and campuses worldwide [9]. Cross-cultural exchange has also been made possible through trade and consumption, mobility, travel, and the advent of online platforms for cross-cultural communication [10]. Thus, classroom educational strategies vary and are no longer merely localized. The significance of recognizing that requires a holistic approach to teaching that focuses less on exams and more on preparing students to assimilate in different cultural working environments and English-speaking regions worldwide [11].

Language is a system of symbols and meanings with four dimensions, according to Douglas (2000): competence and performance, comprehension and production, nature and nurture, and universal grammar. He asks three questions about the sounds of a language, how these sound sequences generate meaning, and how these sounds can be strung together [12, 13]. Furthermore, as per Pauzen (2024), Krashen's theory argues that language is naturally processed, so when new language learners encounter different languages, they are confused and disoriented but are still capable of learning the structure of new languages at any age [14].

In their research, Khaerudin and Chik (2021) stated that textbooks are vital for classrooms as teaching tools and standard models for practice [15]. Saudi Arabian teachers argue that most EFL textbooks largely represent foreign cultures but rarely represent the local cultures of the EFL students. The contents of these books are also generated by foreign educational institutions from America or Britain and largely rely upon events or norms that are representative of their own cultures [16]. As a result of globalization, the need to learn EFL has become crucial, but Alshenqeeti (2019) argued that the effects of globalization can also be seen as a way of promoting Western interests through cultural and political agendas [16]. These cultural agendas can directly or indirectly permeate student's cultural understandings of language, which, in the context of textbooks through EFL learning, can often alienate students from the language they are attempting to learn [17].

Target cultural learning is defined as a specific targeted culture and language whose cultural references need to be understood and incorporated into L2 teaching to ensure

that students become familiar with not just the language but also the norms and practices of other cultures [18]. This is helpful if a student is to prepare for his studies and exposure to working environments in other English-speaking regions. Moreover, it enables the development of an appreciation of different cultures among the learners so that they do not fall victim to the confusion brought about by cultural differences in the mode of communication. When target culture is taught along with language learning, the students can learn the social uses of the language and, as such, be more conversant when they get into real-life situations [19].

### Method

This study evaluated the impact and role of culture in English Language learning. Teachers and students were given questionnaires inquiring into their relationship to teaching or learning EFL.

### Participants

Al Jazan University has more than 50,000 students in various programs. This research was carried out within the Bachelor of Arts and Humanities program in the Department of English Language. Though the program has 150+ students, we acquired 109 surveys with students and 17 surveys with teachers from Al Jazan University's English Language Institute.

### Instruments

The questionnaire generated for Al Jazan University teachers consisted of seventeen survey questions, and the questionnaire generated for Al Jazan University students consisted of 19 survey questions. Regarding publishing and privacy laws, informed consent was obtained from the teachers and students. We collected no names, and the data was evaluated collectively.

The purpose was to investigate classroom strategies for addressing culture and language teaching. This included an overview of the curriculum, textbooks, oral exams, and teachers' perceptions of the learners and their attitudes toward English-speaking cultures.

### Procedures

The teacher's survey was generated and distributed through an online link attached to an email sent to the faculty members within the English Language Department. For the students, however, the teachers took surveys on paper and delivered them to us afterward. Informed consent was obtained from the study itself. We utilized SPSS to analyze the datasets through simple charts and regression analysis. This study followed the descriptive analytical method, led by qualitative and quantitative analysis. The questionnaires were divided into sections by dividing variables in the teaching/learning process.

The teachers' questionnaire, consisting of 17 questions, was based entirely on the Likert Scale with five values: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Uncertain, Agree, Strongly Agree. The first 4 questions, after the 5 demographic questions, inquired about their opinions on incorporating cultural awareness within EFL learning classrooms. The next 4 questions asked about the contents of their syllabus. The 4 questions after that, investigated classroom dynamics like conversational practice with first-language English speakers and the relevance of textbooks on whether they are current or outdated.

The students' survey consisted of a total of 19 questions. These questions were largely based on multiple-choice, or "yes" and "no" questions. Four questions consisted of short or long answers. After the first three demographic questions, the next seven investigated their relationship to English linguistic and cultural awareness. The next 3 questions inquired about their linguistic mental associations with English-speaking countries, and the final 6 questions inquired about their classrooms, including their teachers, syllabus, and textbook references. The results of the questionnaires are discussed below, and the questions are included in the appendix.

### Results

The following two tables overview the demographics sections for the teachers and the students survey.

*Table 1: Demographics table for Teachers survey*

Gender	Male	52.9%
	Female	47.1%

Age	18-25 years	17.6%
	26-30 years	17.6%
	31-35 years	17.6%
	36-40 years	23.5%
	41-45 years	17.6%
	45+ years	5.9%
Qualifications	College	29.4%
	Bachelors	41.2%
	Masters	23.5%
	M.Phil.	0%
	Ph.D.	5.9%
Teaching Experience	0-2 years	11.8%
	2-5 years	23.5%
	6-10 years	17.6%
	10-15 years	29.4%
	15+ years	17.6%
Educational Medium	English only	29.4%
	English and Arabic	17.6%
	English and Urdu	17.6%
	English and other language	11.8%
	English, Arabic, and Urdu (and/or others)	23.5%

**Table 2: Demographics Table Students Survey**

Gender	Male	46.94%
	Female	53.06%
Age	15-18 years	15.3%
	19-21 years	35.6%
	22-24 years	37.67%
	25-27 years	9.3%
	27-29 years	2%
	30+ years	0%
Year	1	30.6%
	2	25.5%
	3	22.44%
	4	21.4%

### ***Teacher's survey***

The first 4 questions after the demographics survey were about teachers' opinions on English culture and EFL learning. They were asked if English culture should be a prerequisite for effective English learning if EFL learners should be familiar with current expressions and cultural aspects, if EFL learners are influenced by their norms, which affects the English learning process, and whether familiarity with body language is an important factor for students to understand.

For the first two questions, 63% and 57% chose "agree" and "strongly agree" about whether English culture (Q6) and current expressions (Q7) should be important in ESL/EFL learning, leaving 37% and 43% to disagree or be uncertain for questions six and seven. Only 27% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that EFL learners are influenced by their norms, values, and traditions, which affect their English learning process.

For the syllabi section, the 4 questions inquired whether the target cultural context was included, along with all aspects of culture, metaphors, and proverbial expressions. For question 13, "Dynamic equivalence is adopted in the current syllabus such as idiomatic, metaphoric and proverbial expressions to facilitate the learning process," 100% chose to agree or strongly agree. However, for questions 10, 11, and 12 inquiring about cultural integration within the syllabus, there was greater variation, with as much as 43% disagreeing that culture was sufficiently integrated into the syllabus and 28% selecting uncertain, leaving 29% to agree or strongly agree. These percentages varied across the three questions, but the pattern of higher percentages disagreeing remained. For the question "A bicultural student can enhance the accuracy of learning English," 79% agreed or strongly agreed, 12% were uncertain, and 9% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

### ***Students' survey***

After the first section on students' demographics, the second section of the student questionnaire inquired about students' use and familiarity with English, along with some opinions on the importance of learning elements of ESL/EFL, such as body language. The third section consisted of questions on students' mental associations of English with particular regions and their corresponding cultures. The fourth section investigated students' exposure to English entertainment, political, and cultural references like jokes, songs, and English expressions.

Of the students, 36% agreed or strongly agreed that they understand English and Arabic jokes. In comparison, 4% agreed or strongly agreed that they understood English and Arabic proverbs.

When asked to associate the English language with a specific country, 89% wrote the United States of America in varying terms like "America" or "USA," and 8% wrote Britain. However, they used the terms "British," "England," "London," "Great Britain," "United Kingdom," and "UK." 1% selected Australia. There were no selections for Canada. When asked if they could go to the country of their choice to practice a language, answers varied greatly amongst USA, UK, Canada, and Australia, with a greater percentage choosing the UK (37%) and Australia (28%) than those choosing USA (23%), or Canada (12%).

Students were asked in a short essay which culture they wanted to learn most about and why. Though quantifying these answers was a task, we found that 72% selected the country associated with their extended family, relatives, and occasionally even friends living in their chosen country abroad. Thus, 72% answered that the culture they wanted to learn most about was where they desired to visit their relatives or friends. Beyond that, answers varied across entertainment and celebrity references, work opportunities, and personal discussions with their families over plans. A select few wrote that they would be willing to study some or all of these cultures if possible.

Students were asked if their teachers had ever been to an English-speaking country before and whether they discussed their lives there. 32% selected "no" for that question, while 56% selected "uncertain," and 12% selected "yes." When asked if they practice real-life examples in the classroom, 78% of students selected "yes," 17% selected "no," and 5% selected "uncertain." 98% selected yes when asked if they understand English songs, but only 45% selected yes when asked if they use English expressions beyond the basics of okay, please, thank you, hello, goodbye, etc.

### *A comparison of students' answers vs. teachers' answers*

**Table 3: Results showing Teachers' and Students' perceptions of the importance of body language**

	Teachers Frequency	Teachers Percentage	Students Frequency	Students Percentage
Strongly Agree	0%	0	9	9.18%
Agree	41.18%	7	29	29.59%
Uncertain	35.29%	6	34	34.69%
Disagree	17.65%	3	26	26.53%
Strongly Disagree	6%	1	2	2.04%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>98</b>

**Table 4: Results showing teachers' and students' answers to the question "Are English entertainment, political, and cultural references in textbooks and syllabi applicable, current, and up to date?"**

	Teachers Frequency	Teachers Percentage	Students Frequency	Students Percentage
Strongly Agree	6	35.29%	6	6.12%
Agree	4	23.53%	13	13.27
Uncertain	4	23.53%	22	22.45%
Disagree	3	17.65%	33	33.67%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%	24	24.49%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>98</b>

Interestingly, when both students and teachers were asked if their syllabus and cultural references were up to date, 59% of the teachers voted that they agreed or strongly agreed. Still, only 19% of the students agreed or strongly agreed. 18% of the teachers disagreed, while 58% of the students disagreed or strongly disagreed that the linguistic teachings in class utilized current references.

## **Discussion**

### ***How are Language and Culture intertwined?***

Alptekin defines culture as a socially acquired knowledge framework through which our perception of reality is filtered [20, 21]. It plays a central role in our cognitive processing and interacts with our schema of acquired linguistic, image, and mental

associations [22, 23]. Understanding the systemic network is very difficult without full access to the schematic network. In this, the systematic network is language and its rules. In contrast, the schematic network is in-built associations with language that first-language learners associate with their context, environment, and culture [24]. Kamaeva et al. (2022) mentioned that culture thus plays a significant role in linguistic comprehension, particularly for writers. EFL textbooks are primarily from America or Britain, and examples of textbook references include the royal family for Britain and the Whitehouse for America [25].

Language affects culture through evolution, wherein words with a different meaning centuries ago would have a distinct contemporary meaning and essentially



play a role in redefining culture. Culture affects language through people's habits and behaviors, wherein old words can slowly vanish out of use as newer words develop in newer contexts, influenced by aspects like pop culture [26].

### ***Target Language Culture Learning and Teaching***

Target Language Culture is a term for a particular culture of a particular country, targeted as the main source of the language. A group of students may be taught English specifically from an Australian context to acquire a cultural awareness of how English is spoken and utilized in its current form within Australia. Language can be learned out of context, which is especially common within classrooms designed to teach English through examinations and vocabulary testing rather than focusing on pronunciation and cultural references like expressions and metaphors. Moreover, traditional teaching styles often focus on direct translation from the native language to English or vice versa ("Challenges of Translating Arabic into English," 2016). Cultural teaching strategies can improve L2 learners' communication patterns by highlighting cultural-linguistic differences (Ali et al., 2015; Khouni & Boudjelal, 2019). Some English words include "moot point, facepalm, cheesy, spam." Some phrases include "beating a dead horse, getting cold feet, butterflies in the stomach." Some sayings include "ball is in your court, pulling someone's leg, breaking the ice." These words, phrases, and sayings are commonly used and difficult to translate unless one knows their implicit meanings. Many of these terms and sayings vary across regions, requiring teachers to specify the language they are teaching in terms of the cultures associated with it. Thus, the term and the significance of Target Language Culture teaching or learning.

### ***Listening and Speaking***

Developing strong listening and speaking skills involves recognizing enunciation and sound sequences to form meaning. Developing proficiency in listening and speaking English involves 4 strands:

"meaning-focused input," "meaning-focused output," "language-focused learning," and "fluency development" [27]. These strands can help teachers build an appropriate and balanced curriculum for their EFL students [28].

The significance of ensuring that Target Language Culture is incorporated as a fifth element of language learning curriculums also ensures that students practice their listening and speaking skills accordingly. British pronunciations and cultural contexts vastly differ from Scottish, Canadian, Irish, and American [29]. Students are less likely to get confused when exposed to various cultures, compared to target language cultural learning, wherein they are taught according to a particular region, especially one that aligns with their entertainment interests. 89% of the students at Jazan University noted that the USA was the language most associated with English for them. In comparison, 37% selected the UK when asked which country they would like to visit to practice their language skills. Facilitating students to learn to listen to British or American English will help them develop their speaking skills accordingly.

### ***Reading and Writing***

Reading comprehension can increase exposure to systemic and schematic knowledge regarding culture and linguistic comprehension [30]. However, reading content also includes books that contain stereotypes about diverse readers, wherein cross-cultural perspectives are largely dismissed. Exposure to reading materials incorporating stories and representations of non-native English speakers is crucial to generating interest and motivation to learn the language about and amongst foreigners [31]. Regarding Target Language Cultural learning, students exposed to reading books are more acquainted with English terms, metaphors, similes, and phrases than students who rely on translation. As such, curriculums should make a concerted effort to incorporate Target language learning to ensure students read more and are motivated to write about them [32]. School curriculums also need to ensure that books are

representative of student cultures with sufficient Arab representation but from English speakers' perspective [33]. Diasporic Arab communities situated within the Target cultural country can be extremely beneficial in helping students utilize their language skills effectively. One of the best ways to facilitate this is through pen pals, a technique designed to allow cross-cultural communication, which would help students immensely if they were assigned Arab students situated within their target country [34].

### ***Limitations***

A limitation of this study is that the sample size was relatively small, especially regarding the frequency of teachers. Therefore, the results cannot be fully generalized to other education contexts. Also, the study is limited to only the perceptions derived from participants in Saudi Arabia. Hence, the findings may not generalize the situations EFL teachers from other regions met. Another limitation is that it is based on participants' self-reports, and people might give socially desirable answers. Lastly, the study does not investigate the effects of implementing TLC in curricula in the long term, hence, the impact that it has on language acquisition.

### ***Future Implications***

Additional research can be conducted to justify how incorporating TLC in teaching and learning enhances the four skills and fosters the development of cross-cultural competencies in and out of the classroom. Furthermore, Future research could extend the current findings to cover more diverse locations and encompass more participants to discover more generalizable results. This could be achieved by incorporating computer technology and real-life interaction with native speakers as potential ways of improving the learning process.

### ***Conclusion***

Strategies to improve EFL begin with the teachers and then the coursework materials, such as the syllabus, curriculum, textbooks, and classroom

tools. Non-native teachers who are Native-English speakers have historically been shown favoritism, and this lack of learning among the teachers can also be a major barrier to teaching students. This aligns with our findings in our teachers' survey, where 67% of the teachers selected "agree" or "strongly agree" when asked if English teachers should also learn about English cultures. 33% disagreed or strongly disagreed, which may align with the 37% who believe that English culture should not be a prerequisite for effective English learning. Suppose teachers are not convinced of the importance of teaching students about English culture. In that case, they are unlikely to learn from Native-English speakers on current references from which their students can learn.

The next strategy is the importance of textbooks that incorporate a balanced mix of local and foreign cultures that are not only Saudi Arabian, American/British but also other cultures worldwide. These balanced representations in textbooks can help students connect through cross-cultural understandings of language from a global perspective. Other effective classroom strategies include role-playing conversations with Native-English speakers through online chatrooms and video calls to help students acquire a linguistic context. Access to online platforms to acquire cultural references is another factor wherein teachers can ask students to share their cultural exposure to entertainment and politics in English.

Ultimately, the objective of this article was to evaluate the significance of effectively utilizing English in Saudi classrooms by analyzing students' and teachers' existing perceptions and biases surrounding English and the resulting methods used in classroom settings. Cultural learning can help radically improve the context of English language learning and help facilitate students' integration efficiently within working environments abroad.

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This is to certify that this research is entirely original.

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