

EFL Learners' Perceptions of the Impact of Cultural Knowledge Background on Listening Comprehension. The Case of LCI Private School Learners in El-Eulma –Sétif

تصورات متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية حول تأثير المعرفة الخلفية الثقافية على مهارة الفهم والاستماع. دراسة حالة متعلمي المدرسة الخاصة LCI بالعلمة - سطيف

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Abstract:

Culture-language relationship has led to numerous debates on its role in English skills learning proficiency, particularly listening comprehension skills in different non-native speaking countries. The present study aims to explore Algerian EFL learners' perceptions of the impact of cultural background knowledge of the target language on their listening comprehension. To achieve this purpose, twenty English language learners, females, and males, from the intermediate level class at the private school of languages (LCI) in El-Eulma, Sétif are selected using purposive sampling. Data is collected through a Likert scale questionnaire webbed to the sample and then analyzed by using SPSS. Participants are given 21 statements based on the agreement Likert scale option on the impact of cultural knowledge on their listening comprehension abilities. The findings reveal that the majority of learners consider having a weak grammar, vague pronunciation, and lack of practice as the cause for having difficulty in understanding the listening material. However, a significant number of learners find it difficult to get the meaning of the listening material when they don't have the cultural awareness of the topic no matter how easy is the language.

keywords: EFL learners; perceptions; listening comprehension; cultural knowledge

ملخص باللغة العربية

أردت العلاقة بين الثقافة واللغة إلى نقاشات عديدة حول دورها في إتقان تعلم مهارات اللغة الإنجليزية، وخاصة مهارات الفهم والاستماع في مختلف البلدان الغير الناطقة بها. تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى استكشاف تصورات متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية حول تأثير المعرفة الخلفية الثقافية للغة الإنجليزية على مهارة الفهم و الاستماع. ولتحقيق هذا الغرض، تم اختيار عشرين (20) من متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية من الإناث والذكور من فئة المستوى المتوسط في المدرسة الخاصة للغات (LCI) في العلمات بسطيف. باستخدام طريقة التعيين المقصود. تم جمع البيانات عبر شبكة الانترنت من خلال استبيان مقياس ليكرت تم تحليلها باستخدام SPSS. أعطيت للعينة المشاركة 21 عبارة حول تأثير المعرفة الثقافية على قدراتهم السمعية بناء على خيار مدى الموافقة/ عدم الموافقة حسب مقياس ليكرت. تشير النتائج أنه غالبية المتعلمين يجمعون سبب صعوبة فهم مادة الاستماع إلى مستواهم الضعيف في القواعد النحوية و النطق الغير الواضح للكلمات و نقص الممارسة. ولكن يعتقد عدد كبير من المتعلمين أنه صعوبة فهمهم معنى مادة الاستماع سبب عدم وعيهم الثقافي بالموضوع بغض النظر عن مدى سهولة اللغة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية; تصورات; الفهم السمعي; المعرفة الثقافية

1. Introduction

The main purpose of learning English as a Foreign Language is comprehension. Listening comprehension is one of the major four skills of English Language and one of the most important skills for second language learners. Nunan (1998) counts listening as the most basic skill in teaching and learning and contends that without listening, learners will never learn to communicate effectively. Despite its importance, teachers tend to favor teaching language forms and syntactic structures over the listening comprehension skill. Mastering the listening skill is a challenge, and one of the reasons is the lack of sufficient cultural background knowledge of the target language. Therefore, culture plays a significant role in language learning as “culture and language are inseparable” (Brown, 1994, p. 165).

Culture has a close connection with a particular language and is significant in the language teaching-learning process. Traditional language teaching-learning has been concerned with only developing linguistic ability. Yet, Language is not a mere vocabulary and syntactic forms and structures. Language reflects the culture of its users because every time we speak we perform a cultural act (Kramsch, 1993). As regards language

teaching and learning, to teach a foreign language is to teach another culture, and to learn a language is also to learn another culture. Thus, teaching language along with its culture is inevitable. Thereof, apart from the linguistic component of the language, cultural knowledge is a basis for language proficiency as well.

Culture-language relationship has led to numerous debates on its role in English skills learning proficiency, particularly listening skills in different non-native speaking countries. Improving Algerian learners' listening skills is of a need of paramount importance. Any study conducted in this context can contribute to the theoretical or implementations of culture teaching to improve listening comprehension skills. Thus, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are Algerian EFL learners' perceptions of the impact of cultural background knowledge on their listening comprehension?
2. What are Algerian EFL learners' perceptions of the impact of the lack of cultural background knowledge on their listening comprehension?

2. Review of literature

Various studies on second language learning skills about cultural background knowledge have been conducted. However, few empirical studies examined the relationship between listening comprehension and cultural background knowledge. Long (1990) investigated the relationship between background knowledge and L2 listening comprehension. Her sample was third-quarter Spanish students. She provided them with familiar and unfamiliar passages. The assessment of students' listening comprehension was based on recognition measure, a recall protocol in English and a true-false checklist referring to the content of the passages was given. The results indicated that English summaries revealed a higher proportion of correct idea units for the familiar topic; however, according to the recognition measure, there were no significant differences between the familiar and unfamiliar passages.

Similarly, Erwin (1992) investigated the listening comprehension of Scottish and Texan American students with relation to familiar and non-familiar texts. The study of the "Effect of Culturally Related Schemata and Instruction Using Thematic Units on Comprehension" aimed at exploring the effect of familiar content on students' understanding and the role thematic units in building cultural background knowledge. The subjects, contained 25 Scottish pupils and 21 Texan students aging between 8 to 10

years, were pre- and post-tested. The pupils listened to two passages about their own culture and another culture and answered a 10-item multiple-choice test for both passages. Then, the group was given a one-week other-culture thematic unit and took the other-culture test again. The results indicated no significance between same-culture and other culture pre-test for Texan group. Yet, the Scottish group scores were significantly higher on their own-culture test than the other-culture test.

In the same vein, Schmidt-Rinehart (1994) investigated the effects of topic familiarity on second language listening comprehension of Spanish university students. Students at three different course levels listened to two passages, one contains familiar information and another contains unfamiliar and novel information. The passages represent a spontaneous Spanish native speaker speech. Students' listening comprehension was assessed through a native language recall procedure. As a result, the subjects scored higher on the familiar topic than on the new one.

Moreover, Tsou (2005) examined the effects of cultural instruction on foreign language learning. The study used a combination of anthropology process and task-oriented approach to conduct cultural lessons. The researcher implemented cultural instructions for teachers within two elementary EFL classrooms in Taiwan for one semester. The results of this study suggest that the effect of culture instruction on language learning was positive. Students' learning increased with the culture instruction more than the students in the control groups. Besides, the results of the interviews indicated that including culture instruction in the language classroom could help increase students' motivation towards language learning.

Also, Hayati (2009) conducted a study on the impact of cultural knowledge on the listening comprehension of EFL Iranian learners. The subjects of the study were pre-intermediate language learners who were selected based on their scores of listening comprehension test and were randomly assigned to four groups. The three groups were exposed to different kinds of cultures, target language culture, international culture, local culture, and the fourth group was not exposed to any sort of culture. After the exposure, a post-test was conducted to examine the changes. As a result, students exposed to cultural content performed differently on the post-test indicating that familiarity with cultural content may improve learners' listening proficiency.

Finally, Mahmoudi (2017) attempted to find the possible relationship between listeners' cultural schemata and its activation and their performance in EFL listening comprehension. The participants of this study were two

groups of 37 Muslim Iranian students and were divided according to their proficiency (low and high) to two groups. The students listened to two audio files about mosques and the other about cathedrals. The purpose was to see the effects of listening to a culturally unfamiliar topic (cathedrals) on activating low-level learners' schema of the culturally familiar topic (mosques). The results showed that an unfamiliar text, even if it is conceptually similar, cannot activate a culturally familiar schema in the low-level students.

As indicated in the literature, various studies argued the importance of integrating culture in language learning. Some of the aforementioned studies revealed the significance of culturally based content on improving learner's listening comprehension. Such studies were conducted on EFL learners from different parts of the world; however, few, if none, that has been made on the case of Algerian EFL learners. The cultural content of English language materials in Algeria has rarely been thoroughly tested, neither theoretically nor experimentally, its impact on the learner's listening comprehension. Accordingly, this study is to explore EFL learners' perception of the impact of cultural background knowledge on their listening comprehension.

3. Methodology

3.1 The sample

The participants of this study comprised of 20 English language learners, females and males, from the intermediate level class at LCI private school of languages in El-Eulma. They were 11 males and 9 females aging between 17 and 34. The study opted for the non-probable (non-random) purposive sampling technique, which entails a non-random selection of participants based on the researchers' knowledge of the population. It is also called homogenous sampling in which groups of similar characteristics are chosen (Chohen et al., 2007, p.176).

For this study, the intermediate level was chosen among the four levels of the English File book series, namely elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, and upper-intermediate. This level has been chosen because in elementary and pre-intermediate levels main focus of textbooks is on developing students' basic language skills. So, in the elementary level, culture and cultural aspect learning have a very slight role. However, it is at the intermediate level that English language teachers start to familiarize learners with different aspects of the target culture.

3.2 Data collection

To collect data for this study, a five-item Likert questionnaire, coded as follows: (strongly agree= 5, agree =4, neutral =3, disagree = 2, and strongly disagree =1), has been adapted to explore learners' perceptions of the impact of cultural background knowledge on their listening comprehension skill. It measures perceptions by asking learners to respond to several statements about the impact of having and lacking cultural background knowledge on their listening comprehension in terms of the extent to which they agree or disagree. The questionnaire was piloted and then webbed to the participants via a Google-doc form.

3.3 Validity and reliability measures/ questionnaire

3.3.1 Internal validity (Spearman)

Validity has to do with the extent to which a given instrument measures what it is supposed to measure (Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle, 2006). The scores of the questionnaire were used to calculate the internal consistency of the instruments and its items, and the correlation of these items to each other using the Spearman correlation coefficient as the table below shows:

Table 1 *Results of Internal Validity Test*

	Correlation	significance
internal validity	0.700	0.05

The validity index of the test and most of its items is statistically significant with .70 across the whole questionnaire. This shows that the questionnaire is consistent and therefore valid to be used for research.

3.3.2 Reliability using Split-Half

According to Wallace (1998), the term reliability refers to the degree to which a test is stable and consistent in measuring what is intended to measure, viz. it deals with the consistency, stability, and accuracy within the test itself and across time. In this research, the reliability is calculated using the Split-half method. This technique functions by dividing the questionnaire into two equal parts, then both parts are given to one group of learners at the same time, calculating their correlation, and applying the Guttman formula to determine their overall stability. The results are shown in the table as follows:

Table 2 Results of Split Half Reliability Test

Item number	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
	F %	F %	F %	F %	F %
1	15	3	3	8	5
Guttman Split-Half Coefficient					0.837

As shown in the table above, the index stability of this questionnaire is .83, which is highly satisfactory and confirms the reliability of the questionnaire to be used as a study instrument.

4. Methods, procedures and data analysis

The methodology of this study is quantitative and a case study. It involves collecting data in numerical form and analyzing statistical methods (Mackey and Gass, 2011). Also, the population consisted of only a sample of the population, a small group of participants from the whole population of EFL learners at LCI private school. The participants were given 21 statements about their listening comprehension ability in relation to culture. They select the response that best describes their ability according to the Likert scale agreement option. The study used a statistical method to number the frequencies and their percentages of the participants' choice. The results of the questionnaire were analyzed by using the statistical model SPSS version.22.

5. Findings and Discussion

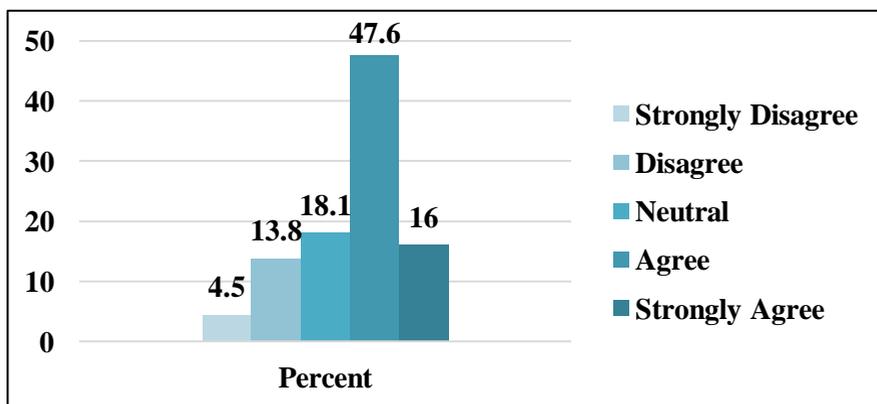
The table below summarizes the frequencies and the percentages of learners' responses to the questionnaire.

Table 3 Frequencies and Percentages of Learners Responses

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			15		15		40		25	
2	2	10	3	15	6	30	5	25	4	20
3	3	15	10	50	3	15	4	20	0	0
4	5	25	1	5	2	10	8	40	4	20
5	1	5	3	15	2	10	8	40	6	30
6	1	5	4	20	4	20	10	50	1	5
7	1	5	2	10	5	25	10	50	2	10
8	1	5	5	25	3	15	9	45	2	10
9	0	0	5	25	3	15	10	50	2	10
10	1	5	2	10	4	20	11	55	2	10
11	1	5	3	15	5	25	9	45	2	10
12	0	0	7	35	5	25	7	35	1	5
13	0	0	0	0	5	25	12	60	3	15
14	0	0	1	5	4	20	12	60	3	15
15	0	0	0	0	0	0	15	75	5	25
16	0	0	1	5	1	5	15	75	3	15
17	1	5	1	5	6	30	8	40	4	20
18	0	0	3	15	5	25	10	50	2	10
19	1	5	1	5	5	25	9	45	4	20
20	0	0	0	0	1	5	11	55	8	40
21	0	0	3	15	4	20	9	45	4	20
Total	19	4.5	58	13.8	76	18.1	200	47.6	67	16

Figure 1 *Frequencies and Percentages of Learners' Responses*



To answer the research questions of learners' perceptions of the impact of the absence and presence of cultural background knowledge on their listening comprehension, different statements were set to measure the issue. First, the results show that the majority of learners (40% agree and 25% strongly agree) think that listening comprehension skill is difficult for them. While 30 % of them were neutral, 15% disagreed and 10% strongly disagreed, only 45 % of them perceive it difficult due to a lack of vocabulary. All of the learners, (75 % of them agree and 25 % strongly agree), believe that knowing the structure and the vocabulary of the sentence heard may help them understand the listening material. Thus, learners seem to find it difficult to understand the listening material when they don't know the meaning of the words heard. According to Azmi, Celik, Yidliz and Tugrul (2014), learners easily understand the listening passage when they know the meaning of the words even if the theme is unfamiliar. Azmi et al. (2014) suggested that student's motivation is high when he knows the meaning of the words heard, in return, this can affect his listening comprehension ability positively.

Additionally, the results reveal that learners consider vague pronunciation as the reason for having difficulty in understanding the sentences heard. On the one hand, most of the learners show disagreement (50 % disagree/ 15% strongly disagree) with the fact that the listening material is difficult because of their weak grammar. On the other hand, learners have much agreement on the fact (from 60 % to 70%) that vague pronunciation and lack of practice may be the reasons for having difficulties in comprehending the listening content. In this regard, Underwood (1989)

suggested that listeners miss the next part of the speech because they face vague words which can stop their concentration throughout the whole speech. Goh (1999) claimed that 66% of learners identified a speaker's accent as one of the most significant reasons that affect their thorough comprehension of the listening passages. He further maintained that unfamiliar accents, both native and non-native make it hard for the listeners to understand the pronunciation of the words, which can cause serious problems in listening comprehension. So, familiarity with an accent helps learners' listening comprehension.

As a result, learners perceive a lack of grammatical knowledge, vague pronunciation, and hard vocabulary as the reason for interrupting their thorough understating of the listening material. A percentage of 65% of learners, ranges from agree to strongly agree, behold that the listening material is easy when the language is easy even if they don't have cultural background knowledge of the topic. Graham (2006) confirmed that some other factors increase learners' listening comprehension problems such as restricted vocabulary, poor grammar, and misinterpretations about listening tasks.

Also, learners' perceptions towards having cultural background knowledge of the listening material are significantly positive. While 25% are negative, 55% of them agree that having a lack of cultural background knowledge as the reason for listening comprehension difficulties. The majority of learners (75% agreed 15% strongly agreed) believe that knowing the cultural meaning of the sentence heard may help them understand the listening material. A significant number of learners (60%) agree that it is easy for them to understand the listening material when they have cultural knowledge of the topic even if the language is hard. Finally, learners (60% agree, 15% strongly agree) find it easy to understand the listening material when they have cultural background knowledge of the events no matter what they are. If students do not have related knowledge about different topics in their mind, they will not comprehend the new listening passage well (Meinhof, 1998).

In the same vein, almost all of the learners, with a percentage of 55% agree and 40% strongly agree, view that the more they develop their cultural awareness of the listening material topic, the more their listening comprehension improves. Successful listening will occur when listeners can associate new listening texts with prior knowledge in their minds (Bilokcuoglu, 2014). At last, with 15 % of them disagreeing and 20 % being neutral, 65% of learners perceive that they have high scores in listening

comprehension tasks when they have cultural background knowledge of the listening material topic. If the listening task involves completely different cultural materials then the learners may have critical problems in their comprehension. To support that, Azmi et al. (2014) maintains that learners should be familiar with the cultural knowledge of the language that has a significant effect on the learners' understanding.

6. Conclusion

The findings above show learners' positive perceptions towards the fact that listening comprehension ability is the most difficult skill for them. They perceive the lack of vocabulary, weak grammar, vague pronunciation and lack of practice as the reasons for having difficulties in understanding any listening material provided. Yet, a significant number of learners consider the lack of cultural background knowledge as one of the reasons as well. While some see easy language as the key to understating any listening material, a considerable number of learners find it difficult to understand the culturally bound language even if the language is easy. Sometimes the listening material may be clear and they can get the pronunciation and structure and the vocabulary of the words heard but the lack of necessary cultural background knowledge may hinder their thorough understanding of it. All in all, the study at hand reveals that EFL learners lay great importance to the relationship between having cultural background knowledge and their performances in the listening comprehension.

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