

# The Effects of Studying English Language on the Cultural Identity of Algerian Students at Chadli Bendjedid University.

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## Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the notion of studying English at the university level and its effects on the Algerian cultural identity. It attempts to understand students' perceptions and the stratagem they may rely on to cope with the forces of change. It scrutinizes how language learners of English use it at the expense of their target language; it also examines how the acquisition of English influences one's cultural identity. To achieve the stated objective two research questions were raised to carry out the study and, hence, a questionnaire administered to Master students at the department of English was used as a data gathering tool. The findings showed that Master students are entirely aware of the effects of studying English on their cultural identity. Furthermore, results afforded more insights about the orientations needed to be adopted to preserve Algerian cultural identity. Some recommendations

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were provided to demonstrate the useful ways that would be implemented in teaching English and preserving Algerian cultural identity.

**Keywords:** English; cultural identity; students' perceptions

**Résumé :** Le but de cet article est de discuter l'idée d'étudier l'anglais au niveau universitaire et de ses effets sur l'identité culturelle algérienne. Il essaie de comprendre les perceptions des étudiants et les méthodes sur lesquelles ils peuvent s'appuyer pour préserver leur identité face aux forces du changement. L'étude vise à savoir comment les apprenants de la langue anglaise l'utilisent aux dépens de leur langue cible; il a également examiné l'effet de l'acquisition de la langue anglaise sur l'identité culturelle d'un individu. Afin d'atteindre l'objectif annoncé, deux questions de recherche ont été posées pour mener l'étude, puis un questionnaire destiné aux étudiants de maîtrise en anglais a été utilisé comme outil de collecte de données. Les résultats ont montré que les étudiants en Master sont pleinement conscients des effets de l'étude de l'anglais sur leur identité culturelle. De plus, les résultats ont permis de mieux comprendre les directions à adopter pour préserver l'identité culturelle. Certaines recommandations ont également été présentées pour clarifier les méthodes utiles qui peuvent être mises en œuvre pour enseigner l'anglais et préserver l'identité de l'étudiant.

**Mots clés:** langue anglaise, identité culturelle, perceptions des étudiants.

## **Introduction**

The need to learn languages has always existed in a form or another from a long time ago; studying English language is not an exception due to the globalization, and the recent status of English as the first spoken language around the world, it has been seen to play a pivotal role in facilitating communication between people of different linguistic background. People travel to other countries to study has also influenced the development of

English. Research points out that language plays a significant role in determining the identity of a person (Lobation, 2012). Acquiring English at university level means that one has to learn some of the cultural practices practiced by the English speakers namely Americans or British. This may push one to drop his/her culture in the process, at the same time trying to adapt the new culture brought by the new language acquired. Students may construct their identity in accordance to the requirements of the period; they need to learn how to preserve it in the light of structural changes that took place in the Algerian society. Hence, the aim was to bring forth answers to the following questions:

- a- Do Algerian university students feel that the use of English has affected their culture?
- b- Have the Algerian university students own attitudes been affected due to their knowledge of the English language and western culture?

### 1. Literature Review:

#### 1.1.English Language Use : An Overview

Most Algerian people can't speak English properly because the government wants them to learn the old colonial French which is ranked 17 in the world in 2016, so they have limited access to quality English. Well, consequently, this will hinder them from taking part and making their voice heard in a global world which uses English as the International language for communicating. Many years ago a minister of Education wanted to introduce English to Primary Schools, and parents were allowed to choose which language they want their children to learn in primary education English or French. It is now absolutely important for Algerians to master the English language. It is, after all, the most widely spoken language worldwide. The fact that English is a

**global language is something even the die-hard nationalists in Algeria cannot argue with, so, if we aspire to be more proficient in English, we are only trying to be better citizens of the world. Whether you like it or not, the whole world uses English. Learning English is not only a subject to go to school or university but also to use it outside.** Language is considered as one of the most effective ways of determining a person's identity and cultural background. This means that without language, it can be difficult to establish one's cultural identity. Again, many people use English frequently when they communicate; however, as Ged (2013) explains, second language acquisition may lead to the loss of some aspects or knowledge about the first language. In fact, according to Wenfeng and Gao (2008: 386), "many academic researchers are worried about whether the existing linguistic and ethnic diversity is seriously at risk in light of the national zeal for learning English". Students also need to learn how to express their feelings via language in different social situations. In 1980's the implementation of teaching culture within foreign language programs became a necessity and due to the technological development, culture aspects were visible in action i.e. video technology made features of any culture easy to be presented by foreign teachers in the form of films and documentaries. Thus, many scholars realized the close relationship between culture and language. Further, culture is not only indicates what and how people exchange speaking roles but it refers to the way persons encode the messages, understand meaning and the circumstances under which the message is interpreted. Also, if students have no knowledge about target culture traditions they would not able to communicate well .Another role is that when students acquired the target culture this may help them to understand better their native culture and being motivated to know about others.

## 1.2. Identifying the Concept of Culture

At the World Conference on Cultural Policies in Mexico City (1982), participants defined culture as “the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs.” (UNESCO, 1982). Cultural Identity means that one perceives himself with integration into cultural traits that include habits, values, beliefs, behaviors, ideologies, ways of life and inherited concepts system which help people to communicate, behave, think and choose his life aims (Abd Alkader 1998, 52). Language is one of the ways that one’s identity can be determined. As Wyatt (2009) defines it, “identity is who we are” (P. 6). Identity is what makes people common or the same. For example, when some says he/she is a Christian or American, there must be something or characteristic that makes him/her same with the Christians or American. Wyatt explains that identity can be understood in various dimensions; for example, the social identity which makes people identifies themselves with a larger group. The social identity includes the values, ideas, opinion, and knowledge shared by a larger group (Wyatt, 2009).

## 1.3. Western Culture and English Language

Teaching English language is always linked to the teaching of either British or American culture. In many countries around the world, learning English is regarded as inseparable from learning theses cultures in order to preserve students’ cultural identity, and those who think that teaching English British or American culture is a form of imperialism which leads to the alienation of students from their own culture. However, teachers think that studying

cultures of the English-speaking countries like Britain enriched students' knowledge of the language.

According to Lobaton (2012), Students who study English have different social identities created by the acquisition of the new language. Again, they also have different ways of arguing about their cultural identity because of their different positions and identities that are mainly created by the acquisition of another language. Hatoss (2003), argues that students can adopt new culture without necessarily losing their first culture. However, as Lobaton (2012) claims, the confusion that emerges as a result of the acquisition of the new language may lead to loss some cultural aspects of the first language. Johnson (2009) explains that people try to associate themselves with the modernity; therefore, they may do anything to relate with the modernity including abandoning their native cultures. Therefore, the new culture that is formed by the second English learners is as a result of the globalization of the language. Everyone nowadays wants to familiarize with the modern technology that can mainly be related to English. Therefore, English as a second language at some point can lead to loss of cultural identity. Hatoss (2003) explains that in a situation where there is more than one cultural group involved, it becomes a great challenge to which culture is preferable for everyone. He further argues that in most cases the dominant culture will always influence the minor to adopt its culture. The same concept is what is applied in English acquisition as a second language. The dominant language used in schools is English, and students only use their traditional language when they get back home. Since they spend most of their times in school, the dominant culture which is English takes its course and subdue the traditional culture.

#### **1.4. The Relationships between Language and Culture**

According to Saussure language is a system of signs, It is also represented by Crystal (1972,1992) as “the systematic, conventional, use of sounds, signs or written symbols in a human society for communication and self expression”. Language refers to the use of symbols and signs in order to communicate and express certain one’s feelings and culture is the complex whole which includes: language, traditions, values, beliefs of one group. Decades ago, scholars discussed the relationship between the two concepts in which they stressed that without culture language is not sufficient for learners to get a full explanation of different concepts. They can not be exposed to any culture without its language .Other social psychologists states that without language culture would not exist and it cannot be formed. In addition, it considered as symbolic representation of peoples’ life ,since it deals basically with their way of thinking, their traditions, values...ect.(as cited in Brown describes the relationship between the two as follow: “A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot the two without losing the significance of either language or culture.”(1994),the two are inseparable(as cited in Jiang,2000,pp,328-329). According to Wyatt, the difference between the two identity dimension aspects can be determined by a language. The author further explains that language is connected to cultural identity. The social identity dimension is about culture which can also be expressed through a language. People always get carried away by how other people look at them; and this according to Wyatt (2009) is what brings the conflict between culture and language. The author further explains that culture can be expressed through the language; therefore, for one to become a member of a certain society he/she must first understand their culture and language. The discrimination that the second language learners face in schools also contributes to their abandonment of

their traditional culture. Therefore, as Wyatt (2009) explains, if one loses the language then he/she loses the culture as well because the two are impossible to separate. One cannot separate the language from the culture; we share the culture through the language. Therefore, once a person has lost his/her language then it means that he/she has also lost the cultural identity because there will be no culture that that person identifies with. As Barber (2013) explains, without a language one does not claim to have a culture. According to Seppala (2011) explains, the words people utter refer to their community's authority towards the world they live in. Seppala further claims that language is more than just understanding the grammar and vocabulary used, but rather, it also includes understanding the culture it comes from or where it is used. In the process of learning the language, one may get involved in the culture; thus, giving him/her a new identity.( as cited in Brown describes the relationship between the two as follow: "A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot the two without losing the significance of either language or culture."(1994), the two are inseparable (as cited in Jiang, 2000, pp, 328-329). To sum up, there is a close relationship between language and culture, learning a specific language requires the exposure to its' culture .Both of them are inseparable and they are dependable on each other. Therefore, individual's use some symbols to convey their culture , from the way of talking and behaving one can know its culture. Thus, the language is the tool to express values, thoughts and expressing feelings, emotions. The two are representations of each other in contexts.

## **2. The Method**

### **Participant**



The participants of this study include twenty master students who are currently studying English. Those students have been studying English for five years. In effect, those participants accepted to answer the questionnaire from which they can provide their view points and attitudes towards the effects of studying English on cultural identity.

### **Procedure**

In order to attain the research goals and examine the students' views about the effects of studying English on cultural identity a questionnaire was administered to the abovementioned Master students. This questionnaire is made up of 13 open and close-ended questions that are provided to get information about the effects of studying English on cultural identity. It would be wiser in this research to use an interview with this small sample population, but the focus was to rely on a questionnaire for giving each respondent the opportunity to express his/ her view points freely and to show the effects of studying English on cultural identity without forgetting any detail.

### **3. Results**

The questions of which were aimed at finding out attitudes and perspectives of the informants towards the effects of studying English on the Algerian cultural identity. The questionnaire started off with the informants years of studying English in question (Q1), all respondents have studied English for ten years (from middle school till university) both gender male and females. In question (Q2) all the informants agreed on the importance of studying the English language. In question (Q3) do you think that learning English has changed your cultural identity? For this question, the given answer option "yes" or "no", which were followed by an open answer "if yes, how?". As far as "yes" and "no" answers are concerned, the results were rather interesting.

It seems that all the respondents were willing to assess the cultural identity as a whole as changed rather than that of their own; while 90% chose “yes” they gave the following answers: change in life style, ways of thinking, western festivals (Christmas, valentine’s day), knowledge and communication, western behavior) as they have been changed without a conscious effort. Informants felt that the English language affected their cultural identity in (Q5), especially by changing the learners’ attitude towards life, Algerian traditional customs; they believe that if the western culture is better, they would prefer the western one. In question (Q6), if yes, how. Following western habits like Christmas, Easter, Valentine’s Day and total ignorance about the Algerian culture. In question (Q7) do you think that studying English language and western culture have changed your view about western world. The majority of respondents 100% stated that it had an effect on their opinion about the Algerian culture. In question (Q8), do you think that learning English in Algeria today is important? The clear majority of informants answered “yes” to this question.

In question (Q9), do you think that using English will affect your future in some ways, informants answered “yes” and they provide us with the following answers:

- Future career (to help them in competition for jobs).
- Leverage to getting into company of their preference.
- Being certain of continuing studies abroad.
- Getting to know foreign cultures more thoroughly.
- Contact foreign people on a personal level.

In question (Q11), respondents were asked about the choice of learning English to know the culture of native speakers, the agreed on the fact that

they learn English to know the other cultures around the world and not only American or British cultures.

Learning English implies necessarily the learning of its culture question (Q12), all informants replied that leaning a foreign language must be accompanied learning its culture. The question Q13) asking the similarities between Algerian culture and the English culture, the respondents responded that the two cultures are totally different.

#### **4. Findings and Discussion**

Due to Algeria's growing importance in the international, especially economical, arena, inspecting how the rapid changes affect the Algerian society is highly relevant. This study was performed in order to find out how the English language has affected the cultural identity of the Algerian university students who are majoring in English. The results of the study clearly show contradictory attitudes towards the spreading of the English language in Algeria. A large part of the dissatisfaction expressed by the participants was due to the inevitable spreading of Western cultures in Algeria. Also the participants' perceptions towards the English language were mainly instrumental, a clear majority of them regarding English as a means to a good job in the future. To many of the informants the English language played also an important part in getting information. As it turned out, being able to access information in another language.

When discussing the spreading of the English language in Algeria, it is impossible to separate it from the spreading of the Western culture. While the participants of this study felt that Westernizing equaled better living conditions and more advanced technology, they also expressed regret for the gradual diminishing of the traditional Algerian culture. Although the overall

view on the matter of globalization seemed to be, as expressed by one of the informants.

As far as the results of the study go, I find that this research served its purpose. The questionnaire answers clearly demonstrate the contradictory feelings that the Algerian university students are harboring towards the English language and the Western culture, and how they are trying to redefine their cultural identities accordingly.

### **5. Recommendations**

The findings of our study suggest that more research is needed on the spreading of English on Algerian students' cultural identity. Therefore, based on the results of this study, we may put forward the following suggested orientations.

- 1- I would suggest that further studies put more emphasis on the cultural and societal aspects of the spreading of the English language in Algeria.
- 2- The English language learning and teaching seems to be the most widely covered area of this subject, and indeed it is an area worth studying – especially in order to develop the ELT in Algeria. However, the Algeria people are such a huge and versatile nation, and globalization and Westernization are hitting Algeria with such a force that ignoring the cultural and societal aspects could prove to be devastating. Algeria and Algerians are undergoing great changes, and with them one of the oldest cultures in the world is being reshaped, alongside the Algerians people's cultural identities.
- 3- It is essential to foreign language teachers to make their students aware of the big role that culture plays in learning process. First it is better for them to build a good relations with learners in order to know their levels, needs , and their differences ,hence they can decide the effective management to their

classes through using suitable methods, techniques that will help students in understanding courses

4- The importance of foreign culture in learning English is so crucial.

5- The Arabic language should be avoided in explaining foreign language culture.

6- The explanation that even students are much influenced by foreign language culture, but this doesn't mean they forget about their identity and principles.

7- Empowering our teachers through team teaching would be the most afforded recommendation. In the department of English and in teaching culture specifically, coordination should not be confined to English teachers only, but it should also include lecturers and teachers of other subjects.

8- I for one would be more than happy to continue studying the effects of the English language and the western culture, globalization and westernization on the Algerian culture and people.

## **6. Conclusion**

Protecting and preserving culture is an issue that holds many challenges for the international community, yet the issue also holds tremendous opportunity. Through tolerance of diverse cultures, the international community can further the efforts to establish and maintain peace and security in all regions of the world. The results obtained from students' questionnaire support the belief that if students at Chadli Bendjedid University taught foreign culture with pre knowledge of their target culture and the way to preserve it on the waves of change. This study demonstrated that culture should be integrated in teaching/ and learning field for the benefit of both students and teachers, on hand learners will enhance their abilities to make sense of other cultures' aspects and it gives them a critical thinking about

differences and similarities between their culture and the target one. On the other hand, teachers will change their approaches in teaching in order to make learners attracted to the delivered lessons for this, they need to implement the effective approach which is the intercultural one and give it too much importance .

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**The Effects of Studying English Language on the Cultural Identity of Algerian Students at Chadli Bendjedid University.**

You are kindly invited to fill in the following questionnaire as part of a research. Your contribution is of a great help for us. Thank you !

1- How many years have you studied English? -

.....  
 .....

2- Do you think that all Algerians should learn the English language?

Yes  
 No

3- Do you think that the need for and use of the English language in Algeria would change the cultural identity of the Algerian students?

Yes  
 No

4- If "yes", how

.....  
 .....

5- Do you think that learning English has affected your cultural identity?

Yes  
 No

6- If "yes", how

.....  
 .....

7- Do you think that studying English language and western culture have changed your view about the western world?

Yes  
 No

Do you believe that learning English in Algeria today is so crucial?

No

8- Using English will affect your future in some ways.

No

9- If "Yes", how

10- I choose to learn English because I want to know about the culture of English native speakers.

Yes

Maybe

No

11- Learning a foreign language implies necessarily the learning of its culture.

Yes

No

Maybe

12- Do you think that the English culture and the Algerian culture are:

- Totally different
- Partially different
- Alike

Thank you very much for your cooperation!