

**The learner's culture: an impedier or facilitator of learning foreign languages and developing intercultural awareness.**

الثقافة الأم للطالب: مسهل أم عائق لتعلم اللغات الأجنبية و تطوير الوعي الثقافي

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**Abstract:**

This paper aims at inquiring into the meaning of culture, its different types and its impact on its adherents. Also, it attempts to answer the following query: "is the learner's culture an impedier or a facilitator to learning foreign languages and accepting culture differences?". It uses a questionnaire which has been randomly administered to a sample of (100) students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at Batna-2 University. The analysis of results asserts that Algeria is a multicultural context where a variety of ethnic groups coexist. Additionally, it suggests that the native culture could be a prominent barrier to the process of learning a foreign language and its culture. Thereupon, this paper fervently recommends the necessity of developing both cultural and intercultural awareness to equip the learner with the appropriate knowledge that could effectively facilitate the process of learning a foreign language.

**Keywords:** Native culture, intercultural awareness, foreign culture, foreign language.

الملخص:

يهدف هذا المقال لتعريف الثقافة و تحديد أنواعها وأثرها. كما يسعى إلى إجابة السؤال التالي " هل الثقافة الأم عائق أم مسهل لتعلم اللغات الأجنبية و قبول الاختلافات الثقافية؟" من خلال استطلاع مجموعة تتكون من 100 طالب بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة باتنة 2. تحليل النتائج اظهر بأن الجزائر في حد ذاتها وسط متعدد الثقافات، بالإضافة إلى أن الثقافة الأم قد تكون حاجز لعملية تعلم اللغة الأجنبية و ثقافتها. في هذا الشأن، يقدم هذا البحث التوصية بأهمية تطوير الوعي الثقافي و الوعي بين الثقافات لتسليح طلاب اللغة الأجنبية بالكفاءات العلمية التي تسمح لهم بتطوير عملية التعلم الكلمات المفتاحية: الثقافة الأم، و عي ما بين الثقافات، الثقافة الأجنبية، اللغة الأجنبية.

**Introduction**

It is consistently acknowledged that language and culture are intimately interrelated. Therefore, it would be very unlikely to teach/learn one without the other. Hence, learners of foreign languages would certainly be exposed to the foreign culture which would assuredly impact their conceptualisation and perception of the surrounding world.

Actually, most of the researchers in the field have the propensity to scrutinise and concentrate more on the target language and its culture on learners. They focus on the effective strategies and techniques that would enable learners to inquire into the different aspects of the foreign culture. Also, they recommend the necessity of equipping the learner with the knowledge that permits him to accept this culture and appreciate cultural differences. On the other hand, the empirical research that examined the tremendous effects of the presuppositions, stereotypes, prejudices and modes grained in the identity of the learner, is scant to the author's best knowledge. Furthermore, the amount of literature in the field tends to ignore and discount the mode of thinking used by adherents of a given culture. Prominent questions should be posed here: "what is culture?", "What are the criteria that differentiate one culture from another?", "Why some adherents of particular cultures tend to easily accept otherness?", "On the contrary, why do some cultures have the propensity to avoid and refuse the collaboration and cooperation with the other?", "To what extent does culture influence its members?" and "Could culture be an impedier or a facilitator for the individual to learn foreign languages and accept culture differences?"

This paper aims at examining and critically analysing the above questions to provide a lucid conceptualisation of culture. Also, it highlights the different types of culture and their major impact on their adherents. Finally, it determines the extent to which the learner's culture could manipulate, guide, and affect the process of learning a foreign language.

### **What is Culture?**

Culture is one of the concepts that has assorted meanings. Defining culture witnessed various shifts to the extent that it has been approached by specialists from different fields. Indeed, one of the very first usages of culture was initiated by Arnold (1869) who identifies it as a set of artistic products yielded by individuals. A critical speculation of this definition propelled many researchers to reject it. Unfortunately, Arnold (1869) concentrates only on the elites who are able to produce intellectual and artful masterpieces and neglects those who are not (Oatey, 2008). According to Arnold's (1869) approach, culture is possessed only by a specific tranche of society which has specific criteria. This endeavour leads to further consideration and contemplation that result in new definitions. For instance, Hofstede (1994) proposes that culture is a "collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of group or category of people from another"(p.5). Consequently, culture could be described as the blueprint that depicts all aspects of the life of a specific group of people (Kramsh, 1998). It encompasses values and norms that rule the life, and identify prohibitions and good behaviours (Rose, 2004). Hence, culture is " an all-inclusive system which incorporates the biological and the technical behaviour of human beings with their verbal and non-verbal systems of expressive behaviours" (Trinovitch, 1980, p.550). Thus, culture comprises language and body language which are the core elements that perpetuate the existence of a given culture (Bassnett, 2004). As reported by Oatey (2008), culture is "a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence but do not determine each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the meaning of other people's behaviour" (p.3). Accordingly, culture forms its adherents' conceptualisations of the world to the extent that it delimitates the frame of their conception and perception.

Definitely, culture is a multifarious term the reason why researchers could not agree on one single and consistent definition. A compromise definition could be that culture is a way of life and therefore a way of thinking. Its fundamentals are the particular perspectives, products, and practices (Cohen et al.,2003). These elements would inevitably be the label that distinguishes one group of people from another.

### **Types of Culture**

Literature in the field highlights two main types of culture. Individualism and collectivism are schemata that determine how adherents conceive the world differently (Hofstede, 1980). Indeed, the juxtaposition of those trends pinpoints paramount divergence at the level of self -conception, self-evaluation, self- growth, modes of thinking and relationships (Gorodnichenko and Roland, 2011).

On the one hand, individualist cultures emphasise more on individuality which promotes freedom and independence. That is to say that individualists are self- dependent and they focus on self-examination and self-enhancement. Moreover, they manifest deficiencies while being integrated into a group (Hofstede, 2001). Furthermore, they have the tendency to adopt analytical thinking as the major mode of reasoning (Gorodnichenko and Roland, 2011). Individualists are more autonomous, self-contained. Enhancement and growth are their essential objectives.

On the other hand, collectivists have the propensity to conform with the group. They are interdependent, and they highly estimate the evaluation of the other. They prefer working to achieve the goals of the group rather than their own objectives. Additionally, collectivists use the holistic mode of thinking and pay more attention to what is implied (Gorodnichenko and Roland, 2011). In few words, collectivists are conformist and interdependent.

Profoundly, the comparison between collectivist and individualist cultures and the analysis of the differences strongly sustain that culture does not only impact its adherents' perception of the world. It dictates to them the use of a specific mode of reasoning which

would lead them to generate particular behaviours and attitudes (Markus and Kitayam, 1991). To scrutinise the extent to which the learners’ culture affect the process learning of a foreign language, a questionnaire was administered to a sample of learners of English as a Foreign Language. The section below contains more details about the method used.

**Methodology Design**

100 first-year students of EFL at the Department of English at Batna -2 University were randomly selected to be the sample of our investigation. A questionnaire that contains a set of multi-choice questions (see Appendix A) were tailored to be administered to our sample. Results gained were statistically analysed through the software” Statistical Package for the Social Sciences” (SPSS), and thoroughly discussed in the following part.

**Results and Discussion**

Results highlight that the sample is formed out of 50 % male and 50% female whose age ranges from 17-30 years old. Also, the sample could be described as a multicultural sample since it encompasses a variety of cultures and cultural backgrounds like Chaoui, Kabyle, Constantinois, Tebessi, Mouzabit, Malian, Nigerian and Syrian. This would lead to the expectation of multidimensional and diversified perceptions and conceptualisations of the surrounding among the sample’s subjects.

**Item 1: What is culture?**

Table 1 demonstrates that only 60% were able to select the appropriate answer which is culture represents a style of life and way of thinking. The remaining 40% answers varied between a set of assumptions and beliefs and pieces of art and literature. The diversity of learners’ responses is emanated from previous knowledge that could be structured in different manners through different processes and mode of reasoning.

**Table 1**

*Item1*

	N	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid Way of life and thinking	60	60,0	60,0	60,0
set of assumptions and beliefs	7	7,0	7,0	67,0
pieces of art and literature	33	33,0	33,0	100,0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	

**Item 2: Is the Algerian culture collectivist or individualist?**

Unfortunately, Table2 highlights that only 50% of the sample are aware of the Algerian type of culture. Although 97% of the Sample were Algerians, almost its half are nonconscious that the Algerian culture is collectivist.

**Table2**

*Item2*

	N	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid collectivist	50	50,0	50,0	50,0
individualist	50	50,0	50,0	100,0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	

**Item 3: Is the British culture collectivist or individualist?**

74% percent of the answers were correct. This discloses that learners of EFL are more aware of the British culture type than that of the Algerian. Henceforth, they are concentrating on the foreign culture leaving aside their own. This permits us to assume that this sample does lack cultural awareness.

**Item Does**

**Table 3**  
*Item3*

**4:**

	N	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid collectivist	26	26,0	26,0	26,0
individualist	74	74,0	74,0	100,0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	

**culture influence its members?**

Table 4 confirms that learners do lack cultural awareness. Only half the sample answered that culture does influence its adherents. Those students whose response was negative assert that they do neither know what is culture nor its element and their impact on the individual conceptualisation of the world.

**Table 4**  
*Item4*

	N	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid Yes	52	52,0	52,0	52,0
No	48	48,0	48,0	100,0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	

**Item 5: On what basis do you rely when accepting/ avoiding people from other cultures?**

Responses to this question vary. Indeed, 34% of students base their judgment of the other on religion and religious interpretations. 14% accept the other according to his ethnic group. Only 44% posit that ethcis is the only parameter that helps to decide which person to accept and which one to avoid. 8 % of students depend on stereotypes in the evaluation of the other.

**Table5**  
*Item5*

	N	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid religion	34	34,0	34,0	34,0
ethnicity	14	14,0	14,0	48,0
Ethics	44	44,0	44,0	92,0
stereotypes	8	8,0	8,0	100,0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	

**Item 6: Does your native culture impede your learning of a foreign language?**

The persistent majority finds that their native culture has no relation with the hindrance and the impediment of the process of learning a foreign language. Table 6 clearly display students' responses.

**Table 6**  
*Item6*

	N	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid No	100	100,0	100,0	100,0

**Item 7: What exactly does hinder the process of learning a foreign language and its culture?**

40% of learners view that their religious convictions are the main impeder of the process of learning foreign languages, whereas 35% assume that ideological reasons are the major obstructions. On the other hand, 19% identify that primary conventional images the one possesses about the foreign culture are the barriers that block learning foreign languages.

6% of respondents postulate that religious conflicts, political issues, and personal preferences can be obstacles for the learners of foreign languages.

**Table 7**  
*Item7*

	N	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid Stereotypes	19	19,0	19,0	19,0
religious convictions	40	40,0	40,0	59,0
ideological reasons	35	35,0	35,0	94,0
Others	6	6,0	6,0	100,0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	

**Table 8**  
*Item8*

	N	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid Yes	66	66,0	66,0	66,0
No	34	34,0	34,0	100,0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	

**Table 8**  
*Why?*

	N	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid correct stereotypes	7	7,0	7,0	7,0
curiosity	13	13,0	13,0	20,0
eager to discover other cultures	8	8,0	8,0	28,0
enhance understanding	8	8,0	8,0	36,0
facilitate communication in English	6	6,0	6,0	42,0
needless	8	8,0	8,0	50,0
non-muslim language	5	5,0	5,0	55,0
we can not learning language without its culture	13	13,0	13,0	68,0
what for?	23	23,0	23,0	91,0
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9,0</b>	<b>9,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	

**Table 7**

*Other reasons that could hinder the process of learning a foreign language and its culture*

	Effectifs	Percentage	Valid Pourcentage	Cumulative Pourcentage
Valid	94	94,0	94,0	94,0
Personal reasons	1	1,0	1,0	95,0
Personal reasons	1	1,0	1,0	96,0
political matters	2	2,0	2,0	98,0
religious conflict	2	2,0	2,0	100,0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	

**Item 8: While learning English, do you try to know more about the English culture? Why?**

Only 66% answer ‘yes’ and put forward that they are curious to discover the English culture for different reasons like enhancing, understanding, and facilitating communication. Contrarily, students who responded” no” use wrongly founded grounds to justify their answers such as “the English culture is a Non - Muslim culture”.

**Item 9: Do you think that knowing about the other’s culture would help you to communicate effectively and live peacefully with others?**

73% percent of respondents’ answers maintain that knowing about the others’ culture can help individuals understand each other and live in harmony. Only 27% of learners hold that culture is not an essential element in the success of communication.

**Table9**  
**Item9**

	N	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid Yes	73	73,0	73,0	73,0
No	27	27,0	27,0	100,0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	

**Item 10: Does your native culture orient and guide you to accept/avoid the other or both?**

Table 10 affirms that around 52% percent of learners suggest that their native culture impacts their acceptance of the other while 18% claim that their native culture has the propensity to orient them to refuse and avoid the other. Whereas, 30% argue that the native culture can guide them to accept and avoid the others depending on specific criteria.

**Table10**  
**Item10**

	N	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Valide accept the other	52	52,0	52,0	52,0
avoid the other	18	18,0	18,0	70,0
Both	30	30,0	30,0	100,0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	

Thoroughly, an analysis of the above descriptive data unveils binary realities and major controversies in learners’ perceptions and attitudes towards themselves and the other. Indeed, learners do not know the exact meaning of culture, its elements, and the characteristics that would shape and delimitate the scope of their perceptions and conceptualisations. Moreover, learners are unaware that culture comprises different components like religion, assumptions, beliefs, language, body language, imagination, values, and attitudes of a given group. These constituents are transmitted from one generation to another through communication and socialisation (Matsumoto, 1996). Henceforth, culture could be described as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes members of one group or category of people from another.” (Hofstede, 1994, p.5 ). Consequently, the native culture would inevitably influence its adherents’ view and attitudes towards the whole world.

Additionally, learners are unconscious of the fact that language and culture are intimately interrelated and it is very unlikely to learn one without the other (Kramsh, 1998). Therefore, learning English, for instance, necessitates and highly requires learning its culture to develop flexibility in understanding, and facilitate the effective communication. In few words, respondents do lack cultural and intercultural awareness the reason that blocks the development of their intercultural communicative competence.

Besides, learners do unconsciously use wrongly founded religious and ideological interpretations, preconceptions, and stereotypes to judge and evaluate the other. The same

aspects are used as a solid foundation to decide whether to accept or refuse the other. Regrettably, learners are unaware and heedless of the paramount importance of not judging the other and accepting him/her whatever were the differences in the sustenance of the universal harmony. Lamentably, they do not even know that their religion “Islam” did never prohibit them from learning others’ languages and their cultures. Instead, Islam ordered its adherents to respect and appreciate the others whatever were the differences.

### **Conclusion**

Culture is the fundamental foundation that demarcates boundaries to its members. It highly influences their behaviours and attitudes to the extent that it could orient them to refuse or accept the other. Therefore, it might propel them to avoid learning a specific language and its culture. This what could be deduced from learners' responses. False interpretations and misunderstood dogmas ingrained in one’s assumptions could unconsciously determine his/her responses and reactions. Accordingly, this paper recommends developing cultural and intercultural awareness among learners of foreign languages to permit them to inquire into their own culture, speculate the foreign culture, identify differences, and respect them. In other words, learners of foreign languages should enlarge their cultural and intercultural knowledge and enrich their insights to boost their acceptance of culture differences. This would assuredly lead them to generate positive attitudes vis-à-vis their cultures and the foreign ones. Hence, cultural and intercultural awareness facilitates for them the process of learning foreign languages, enhances their understanding, and guarantees the success and the efficacy of the intercultural communication.

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### **Appendix A**

Dear students,

Would you, please, fill in this questionnaire to help us complete our research on the impact of native culture on the process of learning a Foreign language. Information provided will be used only for the sake of our research and will remain anonymous.

Thank you.

Age: .....

Gender:  Female  Male

Mother culture:

- Chaoui
- Arab
- Kabile
- Other .....

Tick appropriately

1.What is culture?

- A way of life and thinking
- A set of assumptions and beliefs
- Music, art and literature

2. The Algerian culture is

- Collectivist
- Individualist

3.The British culture

- Collectivist
- Individualist

4.Does culture influence its members?

- Yes
- No

5.On what basis do you rely when accepting or avoiding people from other cultures?

- Religion
- Ethnicity
- Ethic
- Stereotypes

6.Does your culture impede your learning?

- Yes
- No

7. According to you, what exactly does hinder the process of learning a foreign language?

- Stereotypes
- Religious convictions
- Ideological reasons

Other .....

8.While learning English, do you try to know more about the English culture?

- Yes
- No

Why?

.....

9.Don't you think that knowing about the other's culture would help you to communicate effectively and live peacefully with others?

- Yes
- No

10.Does your culture orient and guide you to?

- Accept the other
- Avoid the other
- Both