

Reflecting Culture in EFL Classrooms: Students' Perspectives

Hee-Jung Jung
(Chosun University)

Jung, Hee-Jung. 2012. Reflecting Culture in EFL Classrooms: Students' Perspectives. *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*. 20(1). 63-83. Implementing culture in EFL classrooms has been increasingly considered to be a critical aspect of involving students in the wider vision of learning a language. This study thus investigated the importance of cultural understanding in EFL classrooms. Three research questions were addressed after analyzing data from 310 respondents. Findings showed that students did not receive enough cultural experience in English language classrooms. Students also had a lack of confidence in their knowledge about the culture of English speaking countries. In addition, students tended to have a preference for learning about the culture of economically rich countries, such as America and England. The results also showed that among many possible activities and sources, students were mostly influenced to learn about culture through activities such as role-play, quizzes and reading, and through sources such as teachers and mass media. Findings suggest that understanding culture should be considered as a crucial part of language learning.

Key Words: Culture, Cultural Understanding, EFL Classroom, Language Learning

1. Introduction

Intercultural learning and teaching in ESL/EFL classrooms has been widely emphasized in the last ten years (Corbett, 2003). Given the growing need for English language learning, Halliday (1975) remarks that students should also be involved and actually act in various sociolinguistic situations. In other words, language learning involves empathy among speakers within the sociolinguistic

and socio-cultural standards of the countries in which the language is spoken. Communication is not an intangible system of linguistic features, but a socially constructed process. Because culture is embedded within every aspect of society, language learning should not be isolated from the society that employs it (Seelye, 1984).

With the development of the notion of Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram 1997; Corbett 2003; Risager 2007), one of the main objectives for language teaching has become to foster the ability to use language in order to communicate with people from other linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Corbett, 2010). Canale and Swain (1980) divide communicative competence into the four aspects of grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competences. Sociolinguistic competence can be extended to include intercultural competence. That is, intercultural competence is proven through social effectiveness, i.e., getting that which one wishes to get through an interaction and appropriateness, i.e., understanding situations and their requirements (Martin, 1993). Phillips (1983) writes that intercultural competence is the “ability to accomplish specific goals” (p.33), and that this ability requires behavioral skills in order to meet communication requirements.

Pesola (1991) emphasizes that with insufficient cultural insight and skills, even fluent speakers can fatally misinterpret the messages they hear or read, and the messages they intend to communicate can be misunderstood. In this sense, when individuals learn about a language, they learn about culture simultaneously (Byram, 1989). Thus, research on language learning has acknowledged the interconnectedness of language and culture (Ando, 1997; Brown, 2000).

“Language competence may be attempted directly without prior immersion in the culture. But in the absence of culture experience, a dearth of motivation, achievement, and enjoyment is probable in the arduous task of language learning” (Carpenter & Torney, 1973 p. 11).

To reflect this issue, the Seventh Revised National Curriculum stipulates, as one of its goals for English education, the ability to understand foreign culture and national culture, along with the acquisition of basic communicative ability.

It is therefore necessary to understand students' intercultural experiences in EFL classrooms in order to facilitate their learning. This study aims to examine students' perceptions of culture and the culturally educative activities in which they take part in EFL classrooms.

2. Literature Review

The definition of culture has generally included cultural products (e.g., literary works or works of art) and background information (e.g., facts about the history or geography of countries in which the target language is used) (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999). The term continues to include such aspects, but now also includes behaviors and attitudes, and social knowledge. In short, culture can be seen as the framework of assumptions, ideas, and beliefs that are used to interpret other people's actions, words, and patterns of thinking. It is crucial that EFL learners should understand different cultural frameworks, otherwise, they will use their own cultural system to interpret target-language contexts (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999).

Language educators and cultural linguists have unanimously agreed upon the fact that target language learning would lose substance without proper understanding of the target culture (Nazari, 2007). This implies the belief that cultural competence plays a critical role in successful language learning (Ellis, 1994; Terry, 2000). In terms of English language teaching and learning, the culture of English-speaking countries has become a core aspect of EFL/ESL programs. Similarly, Kramsch (1993) emphasizes that meaning can be developed in encounters with other cultures through the learner's exploration of cultural borders, and in the act of discovering and making sense of new cultural aspects and spaces that have to be accommodated cognitively and emotionally. Relating with the home culture (C1) for learners is also a fundamental point in the process of becoming an intercultural speaker, which can be of particular relevance in the increasingly multilingual and multicultural educational contexts of classrooms (Corbett, 2010).

Kramsch (1998) understands language as a factor which defines and controls the culture of a given community, such as the thoughts and behavior of the

community's members. Brown (2000) simply defines culture as a way of life, and also understands culture as the context within which we exist, think, feel and relate to others. Given that language is used in the context called culture, what Kramsch and Brown mean here is that culture and language are inseparable, and are closely interrelated with, not independent of, each other. Thus learning a language is the process of learning a culture. Ignorance, lack of understanding, or prejudices about the target culture can be obstacles to effective communication between language users from different cultures. Therefore, both of language and culture should be incorporated as one, rather than separated into two (Soh & Park, 2003).

The cultural issue in ESL/EFL has, in turn, become a delicate matter given how fast-evolving social changes are, as many new symbols are created and old ones are redefined. Sociopolitical and geopolitical power has shown increasing presence in determining the relationship between learners and the language they are learning (Byram, 2003). In addition, the strong trend towards multiculturalism and the increasing respect toward minority culture, has challenged the deep-rooted superiority of some cultures and peoples; increasingly, sub-culture has emerged into co-culture (Samovar, 2004).

In other words, language teaching should reflect upon those changes and attempt to reflect the new needs of learners (Zhang & Li, 2008). In response to this issue, Alptekin and Alptekin (1984) suggested that the idea of English as an international language should be independent of the cultural norms and values of native English speakers. Teaching culture in language classrooms should consider the circumstances of the learners and the learners' own culture rather than insisting on loyalty to the target language culture (Han & Bae, 2005).

Furthermore, Byram and Zarate (1994) advised that learners of a foreign language should be taught how to become "intercultural speakers" rather than trying to approximate native speakers (Byram & Fleming, 1998, p.16). Similarly, McKay (2002) advocated interculturalism rather than biculturalism. In interculturalism, learners are encouraged to understand other cultures rather than accept them. That is, L2 learners can keep their own identities, which are founded on their own culture, and at the same time communicate in the target language with others from different cultural backgrounds (Soh & Park, 2003).

L2 learners should try to fully understand different social or cultural norms

such as the behaviors and thoughts upon which their cultures and socio-political systems are founded, and they should be ready to admit that there are similarities or considerable differences between their own cultures and their target cultures. In this sense, textbooks or materials for L2 learners need be designed to help learners attain both linguistic knowledge and cultural awareness which can assist in their interactions with users of the target language (Soh & Park, 2003).

However, the content of language, not to mention its style, does change, and 'mastery' does not depend on understanding a static vision of a culture. It rather lies in the constant and repeated exercise of discourse in the language. Even native speakers will lose their grasp of their mother tongue if they do not use it for an extended period of time (Eoyang, 2003).

Besides this, while the significance of culture has often been discussed, the specific contents and techniques of cultural teaching within the foreign language (FL) curriculum still remain unclear to FL educators. Many FL classrooms still view cultural learning as a supplement to language study and deal mostly with food, festivals, buildings and other cultural institutions. Without knowing how and what to teach about culture in the FL classroom, most FL teachers are uncomfortable in providing culture teaching (Bragaw 1991; Hadley 1993; Arries 1994). As a result, FL teachers either do not talk about the target culture in their classrooms or only mention the parts of the target culture that have been included in the textbook. Culture still makes up only a small proportion of foreign language-teaching curricula (Tsou, 2005).

Richards (2001) points out that cultural sensitivity is one of the fundamental aspects that should be considered in making and selecting textbooks. Regarding this, some studies have been performed at different levels to investigate what kinds of cultural elements are presented in the English textbooks in Korea. For instances, several studies (e.g., Cho, 2003; Han, 2001; Yoo, 2002) analyzed how these works addressed social relations, age, or gender distribution and emphasized the contextual and cultural authenticity of the dialogue presented in the textbooks as a way of providing more effective education.

Soh and Park (2003) examined the ways in which cultural contents are presented in middle school English textbooks based on the guidelines of the Seventh National Curriculum. Based on their findings, they recommended that

cultural materials should be presented in a more systematic way to help enhance students' cultural understanding and that textbooks writers should make greater efforts to reflect the preferences of both students and teachers.

In addition, Han and Bae's study (2005) analyzed selected textbooks in order to identify whether there is any difference between the cultural content written by native speaker writers and Korean ELT writers. Their results showed that there was not much difference in these two forms. Jung and Min (2005) examined how cultural aspects are being taught in Korean middle school English classrooms. They suggested that not only learners' second culture but also their first culture should be presented in culture teaching and English teachers should organize a cultural plan for the year.

Shin (2009) explored whether cultural understanding could generally help students' English language competence. The result of this study emphasized that understanding English is not only about acquiring language form, but also about understanding its given contexts. Most of studies mentioned above agreed that developing intercultural competence is needed to help English learners to understand communicative contexts. However, compared to work addressing cultural integration, research studies on this topic have been few. It is also hard to find studies which discuss this issue from a student perspective.

3. Research Design

3.1. Objectives

This study aims to understand students' intercultural experiences in EFL classrooms. The study aims are clarified by the following three research questions:

- How do students experience cultural content in their EFL classrooms?
- What kinds of activities do students experience that can teach them about culture in EFL classrooms?
- What suggestions can we apply for more effective cultural integration in EFL classrooms?

In order to find answers to these research questions, this study used a quantitative research approach to gather the necessary data for analysis.

3.2. Data Collection and Measures

A survey was conducted in order to collect data. Multidimensional survey methods, including fax, mail, and email, were utilized to request participants for this study, targeting 10 local middle schools. The participants were ranged from grade7 to grade9 in the Jeonnam province. After finalizing the list of participants, questionnaires were mailed to the students who had agreed to participate. All participants were given one month to complete and submit their responses. A total of 322 questionnaires were collected using both online and paper-pencil methods of data collection. Among these, a total of 12 responses were excluded because of missing or unrelated responses to the questions. As a result, a total of 310 responses were used for data analysis. 55.8% of the participants were male and 44.2% were female.

The survey questions were designed to answer the research questions mentioned above. Participants recorded their level of agreement with items using a 5-point Likert-type scale with questions that investigated students' experiences in the classroom. Some questions had multiple responses so that participants could select as many items as they felt to be applicable. These questions were designed to ask about the cultural information sources that students thought were most helpful in enhancing their cultural understanding. In addition, one question required students' worded statements in order to get rich and deep responses to what they felt could be a method of integrating culture into their language classrooms. Finally, items using a 5-point Likert-type scale were summed and averaged to give an overall score.

3.3. Data Analysis

To analyze data, the questionnaires were arranged into three categories (Students' Cultural Experiences, Students' Cultural Sources and Activities, and Suggestions) based on the research questions. Descriptive analysis was used to illustrate the distribution and range of responses for each question. In addition, students' worded statements were examined in order to assess their thoughts

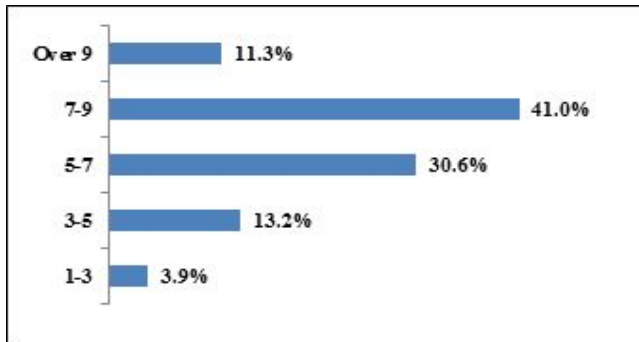
about implementing culture into their classrooms.

4. Findings

4.1. Students' Cultural Experiences

The duration of the students' English learning had a wide range. Among 310 students, the majority (41.0%) had studied English for more than 7 years, implying that they had started studying English just before entering elementary school. 30.6% of the students had studied English for more than 5 years. However, very few students (3.9%) had recently started to learn English after entering middle school. Furthermore, 35 students (11.3%) had studied English for more than 9 years. This implies that those students had started learning English at around 3-5 years old (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Experience of English Study (in years)

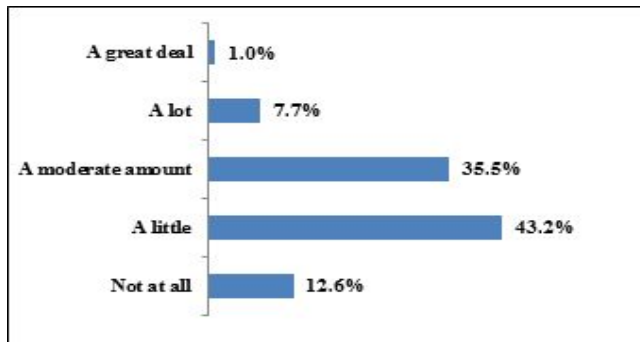


Furthermore, as shown in Figure 2, most students thought that they had learned little about the culture of English speaking countries in their English classrooms or that they even didn't remember any cultural education having taken place. 12.6% of students responded that they had no cultural experience in classrooms. 43.2% and 35.5% of respondents (43.2%) had experienced a little or a moderate amount of the culture of English speaking countries in classrooms, respectively. Only 1.0% said that they had a great deal of experience of the culture in English speaking countries. These results imply that EFL teachers

need to use different kinds of materials and information to present students with a comprehensive picture of the target culture.

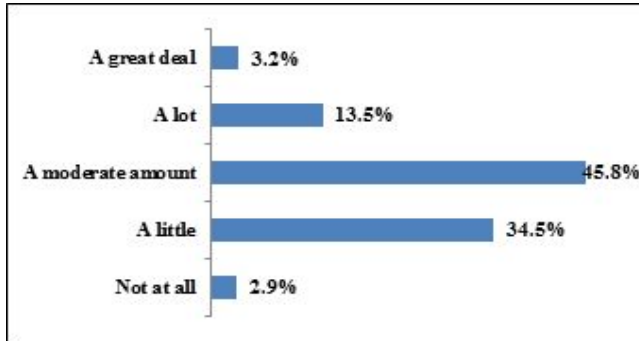
Teachers in English classrooms thus need to develop various teaching methods or materials that can educate students about the diverse cultural contexts of English speaking countries in classrooms. This is particularly important given that not many students thought that the time allocated to teach English culture was enough.

Figure 2. Cultural Experience in English Classrooms



In addition, the results showed that few students had confidence about their cultural knowledge of English speaking countries. This implies that the students did not have enough cultural knowledge about English speaking countries. In other words, students poorly estimated their own understanding of English culture. Teachers need to therefore provide opportunities that allow students to experience the diverse cultures of English speaking countries in order for students to develop self-confidence about their cultural knowledge. Figure 3 shows how students assessed their self-confidence about their cultural knowledge of English speaking countries.

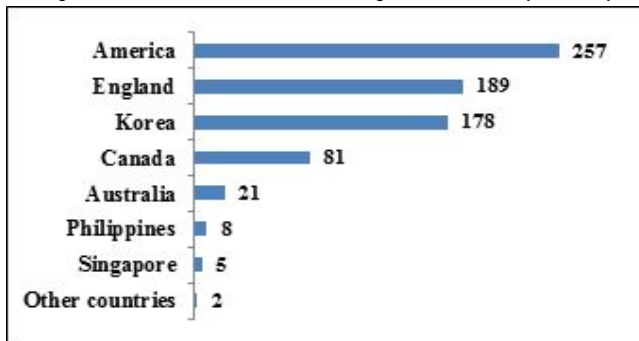
Figure 3. Students' Confidence about their Cultural Knowledge of English Speaking Countries



To examine students' preferences about how they would want to learn about the culture of English speaking countries, one question asked students to select two countries that they believed they should learn about in their EFL classrooms. As shown in Figure 4, students had a high preference for learning about American culture (257 responses). England and Korea culture had 189 and 178 responses, respectively.

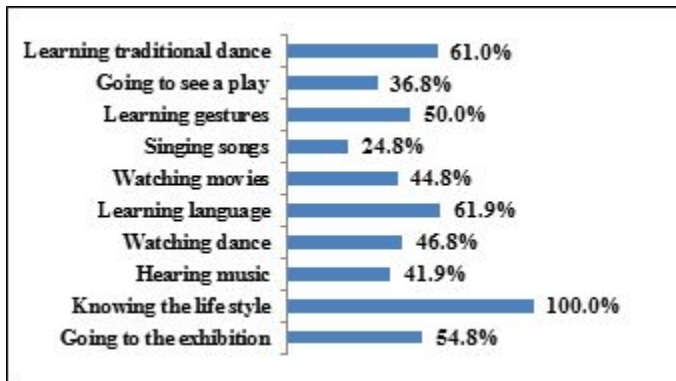
These results implied that students' preferences about cultural learning were somewhat influenced by both social-and-national status and global socioeconomic power. That is, students preferred to learn about the culture of richer, more socio-culturally dominant countries than poorer ones. It implies that the students needs to be aware of the importance of understanding various cultures including C1-C3. Moreover, students believed that learning about Korean culture was very important in learning English.

Figure 4. Students' Cultural Learning Preferences by Country



Brown (2000) defined culture as being the ideas, customs, skills, arts and tools that characterized a given group of people in a given period of time. Therefore, all categories in Figure 5 belong to a part of culture. If the students who participated in this study fully understood the concept of culture, the response rate for all categories in Figure 5 would be 100%. However, only "lifestyle knowledge" had a 100% response rate, indicating that students did not have a clear knowledge or definition of culture. The integration of culture into English classrooms should therefore be based on providing a clearer awareness of what culture is.

Figure 5. Understanding Culture



The last question (multiple responses) about students' cultural experience was designed to assess the reasons for which learning culture could be seen as useful in English classrooms. Table 1 summarizes the results. First, a majority of students (96.1%) learned about the culture of English speaking countries in order to develop their communication skills. 41.3% and 41.0% of the participants utilized their cultural learning experiences in order to understand verbal and nonverbal patterns, and to extend their intercultural knowledge, respectively. In addition, students thought that learning about culture would help to reduce any kind of cultural bias, to understand reading text and materials, and to understand the native culture itself.

Table 1. Reasons of Learning Culture in English Classrooms

Reasons	Frequency (Multiple Responses)	Percentage
To develop communicative skills	298	96.1%
To understand verbal and nonverbal patterns by comparing the target with the native culture at a more conscious level	128	41.3%
To extend intercultural knowledge	127	41.0%
To reduce cultural bias	93	30.0%
To help to understand the reading text, movies, and materials	74	23.9%
To understand the native culture and the self	66	21.3%

4.2. Students' Cultural Sources and Activities

The second part of this study is an attempt to find which culture-related activities students had experienced in their EFL classrooms. Culture is not only contents, but also a series of dynamic processes, including those involved in learning processes (Hinkel, 1999). The results of this study indicated that the students acquired cultural information through various media.

Among various sources of cultural learning, the majority of participants (82.9%) developed cultural knowledge through teachers, parents, and guest speakers. In addition, many students acquired cultural knowledge from various media sources, including videos, books, newspapers, magazines, the Internet, and so on, as is shown in Table 2. This result implied that the role of multimedia is a crucial part of learning about the culture in English speaking countries. The usage of multimedia in EFL classrooms should be emphasized in order to deliver effective cultural learning tools for students.

Table 2. Sources of Cultural Learning

Sources	Frequency (Multiple Responses)	Percentage
Teachers/Parents/Guest speakers	257	82.9%
Video/DVDs/TV	231	74.5%
Books/Newspapers/Magazines	192	61.9%
The Internet	186	60.0%
Music	73	23.5%
Photographs/Illustration	58	18.7%
Fieldwork	35	11.3%
Souvenirs	19	6.1%

Furthermore, activities that were used to teach about culture were examined. The most common activities that students had participated in classrooms were role-playing, quizzes, observation, reading activities, and information searching (see Table 3). The students agreed that the use of role-play helped their comprehension in an enjoyable way when learning about culture. Some students mentioned that role-play facilitated their overcoming boredom and provided opportunities for oral communication as well as for learning about cultural stories.

Another important activity was the use of quizzes. Quizzes were used to test knowledge of the materials that teachers had taught or would teach to their students. EFL teachers asked their students to answer "True or False" type questions in either pairs or groups. Students shared their knowledge and common sense about the culture in English speaking countries to find possible answers. During this process, students became more engaged in their aim to find the right answers to the question. Teachers could check answers through other activities such as reading, listening, or using video clips. At this point, extra information and explanation were added by the teachers.

Table 3. Students' Activities for Cultural Learning in English Classrooms

Activities	Frequency (Multiple Responses)	Percentage
Role-play	248	80.0%
Quizzes	192	61.9%
Reading	179	57.7%
Observation	155	50.0%
Information searching	114	36.8%
Games	90	29.0%
Discussion	72	23.2%
Using songs	43	13.9%
Field trips	19	6.1%

In the observational activities, the students watched a video or were engaged with some other materials, and the teacher asked them to observe particular features. For example, students watched a video of a target-culture festival and noted what differences existed in their native culture. Asking students to 'observe' in this way made them focus more closely on the materials by making it into an active task, rather than a passive act.

Additionally, information searching was one of activities that 36.8% of students reported as being part of their cultural training. In this activity type, students were asked to search the Internet or the library database to find cultural facts related to the contents of their course. Students then explained to their classmates what they had found from these searches in the following class. Other types of activities found in this study included games, discussion, using songs and field trips, all of which were designed to stimulate cultural learning. As shown Table 3, most of these activities could be easily adapted in classrooms to facilitate students' linguistic and cultural learning, which would ensure that students were actively engaged with the target culture and language.

4.3. Suggestions

The last survey question asked participants' opinions about how EFL classrooms could improve in order to facilitate better cultural understanding

during language learning. The responses were rewritten and reorganized to develop categories and relationships. This process involved sorting the data into the broader issues. Eventually, the results were categorized into four different suggestion issues: (1) Active Participation, (2) Personalizing, (3) Using Various Sources, and (4) Concreteness and Use of Examples.

4.3.1 Active Participation

Most students mentioned that they wanted to participate in culture-related activities. This study found that activities with simple directions and comprehensible goals, such as quizzes or surveys, were very successful even with young students. Some students claimed that such activities were often extended to open-ended discussions based on their experience, which helped their understanding of the culture of English speaking countries to develop in many different ways.

Engaging students in discussions with other students whose political, social, religious, racial, or ethnic identities or opinions differ from their own, provides them with the chance to learn how to understand different perspectives and to negotiate with others. To reflect this, some textbooks include various issues for discussion in the beginning or the last part of each chapter. Furthermore, one student suggested that teachers needed to provide extra information and incentives (e.g., extra points) to students in order to encourage them to participate in lectures, festivals, or any other culture related events. Active participation in cultural activities was seen as an important part of the cultural learning process. To encouraging the participation, teachers can assign the semester project or workshop during the semester break. These activities can deal with the question how minorities or migrants express themselves through the arts and what obstacles exist to involve them in mainstream culture.

4.3.2 Personalizing

Many students in this study suggested that cultural activities should be better related to their own experiences. In other words, teachers should allow students to make connections between the teaching material and their own lives. Language teachers are aware that students generally enjoy talking about themselves. Teachers should encourage students to recognize ethical, historical,

political, and social connections and to discover the connections between classroom learning and life events. This process would clarify students' textual knowledge and lead to action. To do that, teachers need to understand students' interest and background to prepare the materials and develop the contents. For example, the popular singers, actors, brands, or issues can be the starting point to deal with the cultural contents.

4.3.3 Using Various Sources

Another suggestion made by participants in this study was that they could be encouraged to integrate ideas or information from various sources into their cultural learning processes. Participants believed that teachers should offer them the chance to construct clear views, synthesize and organize ideas, and connect class readings with out-of-class experiences. In this context, teachers would need to invest their time in selecting various media that can present cultural issues in interesting ways. Some students felt that illustrations, examples, movie clips, or guest speakers would be helpful ways of expanding their cultural knowledge. By using a variety of approaches and materials to create cultural texture, teachers could provide their students with a better understanding of culture.

4.3.4 Being Concrete and Using Examples

Some students felt that the explanations their teachers gave when discussing cultural learning were too abstract and simple. They even believed that their teachers did not always fully understand the issue themselves. This result implies that some students had difficulty understanding the teaching provided to them. This would be likely to cause a loss of interest for these students. Students sometimes added that they would prefer seeing and experiencing to listening as regards in cultural learning. However, it can be challenging to provide students with authentic information in classrooms due to time and money constraints. To ameliorate this situation, teachers should try to use technological tools (e.g., video clips, chatting, emailing, or websites) to offer semi-authentic experiences.

5. Conclusion

The acquisition of cultural knowledge is an underlying factor in the successful learning of English. Intercultural competence identifies the ability of a person to act both adequately and flexibly when confronted with the actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures (Meyer, 1991). Intercultural competence includes the capacity to establish one's own identity in the process of cross-cultural mediation, and to assist other people to stabilize their own identities. Developing knowledge of the complicated relationships between culture and its linguistic expressions is a tremendous challenge for EFL learners.

EFL teachers therefore need to explore ways of creating learning environments that encourage sustained engagement with various tools and materials so that students can develop an awareness of the differences between their own culture and the foreign culture. To develop cultural awareness alongside language awareness, materials and activities need to offer more than a shallow acknowledgement of cultural identity and to deal more thoroughly with the cultural adjustments that underlie the experience of learning a foreign language.

In this study, students already knew the importance of cultural knowledge and were eager to participate in the cultural tasks offered in their language classrooms. Although students engaged in cultural activities, they believed that such activities were not adequate. Students felt that a classroom atmosphere should be created that would facilitate an open-minded approach to other cultures. In addition, the results suggest that teachers could better apply personalizing activities with the aim of appealing to identification with the students' own world. In the case that students started stereotyping about other culture, teachers could suggest students discuss their own lives, as most students enjoy talking about themselves.

In addition to personalizing activities, students suggested they would like to see more active participation in classrooms. For lower level students, activities such as simple surveys and question and answer tasks may prove to be more beneficial than other methods. For intermediate and advanced students, most teachers would prefer to discuss activities associated with elements of the target culture.

Additionally, in engaging with all of the culturally integrated activities elaborated in this study, teachers should not attempt to cover all aspects of the target culture, but should cautiously choose the topics in which students are most interested. To help the students understand, language teachers should use various sources to make learning contexts richer. Finally, teachers themselves should be adequately familiar with both students' culture and the target language culture, and should select their materials and lessons in a way that creates opportunities for their students to develop their intercultural skills.

In developing cultural awareness in EFL classrooms, it is important that EFL teachers should help their students to acquire knowledge about the cultural norms, beliefs, and habits of other cultures. In sum, merely presenting cultural information is not enough to teach students how to use a target language appropriately. The ways in which culture can be taught has become an important issue, and further research should be conducted in the context of language learning.

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Hee-Jung Jung

Dept. of English Education

College of Education, Chosun University

375 Seosuk-dong Dong-gu

Gwangju Korea 501-759

Phone: +82-62-230-6217

Email: jung@chosun.ac.kr

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