Students' Perceptions Towards the American Culture as They Learn English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

Languages do not function isolated since these need their historical and cultural background. For this reason, the importance of this study relies on the analysis that the influence of a second culture has on the students' language learning process. The problem that this investigation attempts to solve is based on the importance of the teachers' experience in areas such as interculturality. The followed methodology consists on qualitative interviews applied to four young Mexican students from two different Universities of the state of Guanajuato, Mexico. An analysis of the results of these interviews shows that two main perspectives, positive and negative, were influenced by three main factors: (1) the preparation of the teachers; (2) the opportunity to travel to the USA; and (3) the social media algorithm. For future research implications this study will contribute to the investigation of adequate material that supports the language teaching practice that aims to consider the culture.

Keywords: culture, language teaching, language learning, educational settings, cultural awareness.

1. Introduction

Languages come from cultures that involve human beings that have distinct ideas, beliefs, traditions, political and social factors. For this reason, it is essential to consider that foreign language teaching permits students to have wide perspectives and learn about other cultures through the appreciation of the human and social aspects by leaving behind the limits of their first culture (C1) context (Mazari & Derraz, 2015). Bearing this in mind, contemplating the second culture (C2) in the teaching practice will bring opportunities to the students to learn how to use the second language (L2) and how to stablish communication with the individuals that belong to the target culture (Mazari & Derraz, 2015).

Considering this, teachers who dedicate their practice to teach a language should be informed about the distinct and possible procedures that will bring opportunities to assist the students to develop their personal experience with the cultural conditions of the target language (Wichadee, 2011). For this reason, teaching a language is a practice that requires the combination of the language itself and the culture since these two do not work isolated.

In this study, I intended to show the importance that a culture, specifically American, has on the teaching practice and the impact that it has on the students' language learning process

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by examining their perceptions towards this culture as they continue learning English. This study contributes to the language educational field by adding importance to the role of the teacher and the experience that it is necessary to have in other areas, such as dominating topics of interculturality or social problematics that are related to discrimination. As well as showing the importance of developing techniques that can be applied in the classrooms in order to transmit the knowledge related to cultures from a perspective of respect.

2. Literature review

2.1 *Culture*

Considering that the study is mainly focused on the importance and the impact that the culture 2 (C2) has on the language lessons it is essential to first understand the significance of this concept.

According to Matsumoto (1996, as cited in Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2012) culture is a group of attitudes, moral values, perspectives, and conducts shared by groups of people. Nevertheless, these will differ for each person and as well as being transmitted from one generation to other. In addition, Hofstede (1991 as cited in Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2012) states that culture will acquire the meaning that outsiders provide to this concept due to their interpretation since, particularly, the meaning of this word is invisible. Although it has specific factors that are considered to be physically visible, such as traditions.

2.2 *Culture in language learning and its importance*

As previously mentioned, culture can be defined as a practice that is given and shared by two or more people (Ferraro, 1998 as cited in Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2012). However, in language teaching and learning settings this concept receives a particular connotation. According to Mazari and Derraz (2015) culture in educational environments is a form of communication where the learners try to integrate the patterns of the target language and culture compared to their L1 and C1 (Mazari & Derraz, 2015).

In a lesson, teaching the target language is one of the most important tasks that are presented and considered to be a priority. Nevertheless, it is essential to provide an examination of the target language including an analysis of the culture behind this in order to stablish a reciprocal understanding with other societies (Mazari & Derraz, 2015). In addition, there is a connection between language and culture that is linked by three aspects. First is the fact of seeing language as an instrument for communication. The second aspect is the understanding and recognition of the essence of language. Third, there is the educational importance of learning about cultures (Mazari & Derraz, 2015).

Kovács (2017) mentions that normally the performance of language teaching involves the practice of the four skills and considers culture as a plus. In addition, the "culture" in a language lesson takes the role of the information transferred by the language and not as a proper feature of the this last. For this reason, it is important to start considering the cultural awareness as one of the educational aims (Kovács, 2017). According to Byram and Fleming (2002) the concept of cultural awareness is the comprehension of other speakers' culture and society as well as own, and the relationship between these two. Students and teachers should bear in mind that learning and teaching a language should guide to positive perceptions towards other speakers of different languages.

Being aware of the culture in the language lessons is an essential task that teachers and schools must consider due to the following reason. According to Krasner (1999) the fact of do

not considering the cultural awareness in class can lead to learners to not make a connection in their cultural schemata which includes the target language rhyme, and historical background.

2.3 *Stereotypes and ethnic stereotypes*

The concept of stereotypes forms an essential part of the socialization of crucial organizational groups (Perkins, 2018). These stereotypes can be considered as reasonable, and people stablish the definition of themselves based on the terms that stereotypes have assigned. Brigham (1971) defines this concept as generalizations that are contemplated as unreasonable by the person that assigns the label. In addition, it is stated that no all of the stereotypes are considered to be precise (Jussim, 2005 as cited in Buchtel, 2014).

As previously mentioned, due to the nature of the responses of the participants this concept will be defined as the result and predictor of the behavior (Cauthen, Robinson, & Krauss, 1971). According to Cauthen et al. (1971) the stereotypes are considered to be mainly linguistic behaviors that change with the social class as well as the nationality. Through the results of this study some topics are contemplated, and the ethnic stereotypes form part of these. As Brigham (1971) states, the ethnic stereotypes are linked with negative points of view as well as discriminatory actions.

The stereotypes towards other cultures can lead to the probability of judging and having prejudices about other cultural practices and people. However, Buchtel (2014) mentions that if people become less cognitively critical about these practices as well as adopting a non-judgmental perspective can lead to the thought of being careless about the emotional care towards other cultures.

Considering this information, it is important that a balance exists between the implementation of culture and the perspective that the learners have towards the C2 and L2 in order to avoid negative prejudices that guide them to negative actions, such as discrimination. In a language lesson, this aim can be achieved through the consideration of the learners C1 and L1 analysis in order to avoid developing stereotypes towards the cultural differences as well as promoting the learners' cultural sensitivity through material that helps to establish the relationship between language and culture (Mazari & Derraz, 2015).

3. Methodology

3.1 *Research design*

The present study intends to show the impact the impact that approaching the C2 has on the lessons and the possible effects that this action has on the students' language learning process. The study intends to show the impact of the approachability of the target culture in the lessons and its effects on the language learning process of the students. Therefore, the research questions that conducted this study are the following: What are the Ss perceptions on the target culture of the second language that they are learning? and What are the factors that influence their perceptions?

For the purpose of this study and the research questions that guided this investigation a qualitative paradigm was necessary to be applied. According to Creswell (2014, as cited in Kamal, 2019) the qualitative paradigm is defined as the approach that allows to be conscious and permits to explore the definition of human and social problems based on people's opinion. As previously mentioned, this paradigm was relevant to be applied because it permitted the researcher to understand the students' perceptions and interpretation on a specific issue through their experiences and opinions based on real settings in order to show the data and its analysis

realistically (Woods, 2006). In addition, this gave an opportunity for the researcher to generate the description of the collected data through main concepts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016 as cited in Kamal, 2019).

On the other hand, the case study method was used. Merriam (1938, as cited in Heigham & Croker, 2009) defines the case study method as a specific entity or role that the researcher intends to explore, such as an institution, T and Ss. This method was convenient to be applied because the results obtained from this method might assist other similar studies that have close cases (Heigham & Croker, 2009). In addition, as Ellet (2007) mentions it is used to show a specific reality and to bring a situation that may have not much information.

3.2 *Inquiry tools*

According to Heigham and Croker (2009) semi-structured interviews can take as an advantage the knowledge that is being produced in the dialogues by allowing the liberty to express by following the aspects that are considered important for the researcher (Brinkmann, 2014) while going to distinct directions that were not initially planned (Heigham & Croker, 2009). This was convenient to be applied because the researcher prepares the interview based on topics in which is not naïve (Ziebland, 2013) while also promoting the interviewees' engagement (Galletta, 2013). Additionally, it provides an understanding of the mental words that students and teachers hold, and the essence of the language teaching and language learning as a social and educational occupation (Barkhuizen et al., 2013). This consisted on the application of twelve to fifteen questions depending on the possible topics that emerged from these. The questions can be seen in the Appendix section named as interviews.

3.3 *Context and participants*

The four students, two women and two men, belong to the B2 to C1 level according to the European guidelines. These learners' range is from 20 to 25 years old. They are currently studying in distinct academic programs of the University of Guanajuato and the University of Leon in Mexico, such as Hispanic literature, international business, law and accounting. The participants speak Spanish as L1, and their first culture (C1) is Mexican. In addition, it is essential to mention that they were sent a consent letter that stated the confidentiality of their identities and their participation was voluntary since they provided their signature. The template can be found in the appendix section named as Consent letter.

3.4 *Data processing and analysis*

In order to analyze the data, four of the stages adopted by Richard (2003, as cited in Heigham & Croker, 2009) were applied. First, there was the application of few questions depending on the possible topics that emerged. Second, the transcription of the interviews was obtained with the application of technological devices. Third, the information was registered in tables that allowed to categorize through the use of codes. Fourth, the data was organized to find patterns within the abstracts and these were linked with themes.

The categories were labelled as instruments, fragments that were extracted and identificators that differentiated the participants. Firs, the abstracts were given a code named as perceptions towards the American culture and these were separated into two main groups: positive and negative perceptions. The second code has the name of factors that influenced the perceptions. The third code was named as actions that impacted on the development of the skills since these supported the principal aim of the study.

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The process that carried out the data analysis focused on the thematic analysis. This kind of analysis follow the processes of coding the information based on themes as well as looking for the patterns and the connections that these share (Barkhuizen, 2013 as cited in Mora, Rivas, Lengeling & Crawford, 2015). As Heigham and Croker (2009) mentions, the macro level analysis of data consists on the codification of interviews.

4. Results and discussion

In this section, the following results will respond to the research questions that conducted this study. These will be explained and numbered regarding their importance to the questions and this study.

4.1 *Perceptions on the American culture*

Based on the participants answers' two main perceptions emerged. These were divided on two main categories: positive and negative. According to Meagher and Castaños (1996) a positive perception is based on admiration, approval and tolerance towards the target culture. On the other hand, they consider that a negative perception includes a defensive attitude towards the culture. These definitions are relevant for the study because they were somehow reflected in the students' positive and negative perceptions on the American culture.

The students were asked about their perceptions regarding the American culture. In their answers it could be noticed some positive aspects regarding the comparison of the socioeconomical contexts between both cultures, the C1 and the C2. The main difference was well received by the students and their responses to this question included admiration as follows:

> "Americans take very serious the economy aspect in order to work and improve so they can live better. It can be observed in their attitudes since in Mexico people are very conformist and our economy sustains this since it is not good as in the USA. This country belongs to the 1st world so they are better than us in that aspect as well as being English an easy language to learn not as others such as Spanish." (Participant 1)[1]

> "I would say that in the aspect of culture Americans and Mexico differ, because Mexicans are warmer people. However, on socioeconomical aspects USA is a country that is better than us since they are a worldwide power." (Participant 3)

In this abstract, the Participant 1 not just compares the socioeconomical factors, but also the L1 and L2 by suggesting that the grammatical structure of the target language and its usages do not require a demanding amount of effort such as their native language. As Lantolf (1999) mentions the adults in particular are able to acquire new cultural models and adjusting their conceptual organization. Bearing this in mind, students recognize these models and try to adapt and incorporate their own perceptions to the previous ideas that come from their C1. As well as including new concepts and structures in a metalevel since these are linked or relative to their native culture (Lantolf, 1999)

However, other responses regarding their opinions on the American culture were dedicated to the recognition of discrimination and segregation from Americans towards immigrants. Considering this past information in mind, when learners were asked about the perception, they had towards the C2 all the informants expressed significantly the same negative opinion:

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[1] The interviews were originally done in Spanish. However, these were translated by the author of this study.

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"I think that there is a lot of discrimination towards Mexican people, and it is complicated to integrate to the society when you are an immigrant. I could observe that Americans do not let others to integrate to the society unless people were originally from there." (Participant 2)

As can be observed in Extract 2, Participant 2 shows a defensive attitude towards the American culture by saying that "there is a lot of discrimination given by the Americans" and she suggests that this treatment is received particularly by her compatriots which makes her perception stronger by providing empathy since this student belong to the same minority group due to the same sociocultural context. In addition, all of the participants stated the next negative comments, which were dedicated to the American cultural practices:

"I do not think that American people and their culture have much to share, culturally speaking. They do not contribute in this aspect as other countries do, such as Mexico. We are rich in traditions, food and even values since we are kinder, warm as well as having and showing hospitality." (Participant 3)

"I do not feel that American people have anything that they can give us. I mean, nothing culturally valuable, like right now at the Cervantino festival. I mean, if you went to the United States section, you could not find much. They do not contribute much, not even in terms of food, and it was not a very fruitful; it was all about business." (Participant 4)

As can be noticed in Extract 3, Participant 3 and 4 shares their perceptions based on the comparison between their native culture and the C2. This evidence leads to the concept of otherness which allows people to understand to how extent we are similar and different from others (Mazari & Derraz, 2015). These participants are aware that both cultures and countries differ from each other in some aspects. Nevertheless, they do not demonstrate a positive attitude towards this fact since they also commented that they would have preferred that another country would have assisted to a famous event given in their city in which countries are welcome each year.

4.2 *Factors that influenced the perceptions*

Three broad factors influenced on the informants' previous perceptions. The first factor is dedicated to teachers. The majority of participants agreed that having teachers that are native, that lived in the USA, and has knowledge about the C2 plays an important role:

"The teacher that I have right now is native and she has taught us more about where she used to live. Actually, we had a whole class dedicated to patriotism and she explained aspects of her culture." (Participant 2)

This first factor shows that since the teacher who belong to these characteristics had direct contact with the C2 and know more about the cultural and social practices as well as the language itself can influence on how the students perceive the culture of the language that they are learning. This is because they provide exact, natural and closer information about the L2 and C2.

The second factor consists of the opportunity that these students had to constantly travel to the USA and having direct contact with the native speakers and citizens as well as their context and English in natural settings. A few interviewees emphasized that visiting the country made them realized that a certain problematic exists but is not a particular issue of one specific country. This can be seen on the following lines:

"When I traveled to the USA, I did not experience any bad experience or treatment, but I do recognize that racism exists as well as in other countries." (Participant 1)

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This factor demonstrates that students are aware of social problematics that different countries have and many minorities face. However, these few students do not categorize this to one particular culture. The last and third factor is the usage of social media, internet and apps since these promoted the increasement of cultural stereotypes and prejudices. The majority of informants stated that their perceptions were influenced due to the social media algorithm.

> "The general perception that I have about the American culture is based on the news that I read and the social media, such as TikTok." (Participant 3)

> "The YouTube and TikTok algorithm continue blinding us, so if you consume a certain type of video, it will keep feeding your page with this kind of videos. All of this affected me when I saw what happened to George Floyd." (Participant 4)

As can be observed in the Extract 8, Participant 3 and 4 shares that social media influence on their negative perception towards the country and the C2 since these participants started to notice specific social problematics that affected their personal opinion regarding the country and the culture. The companies that are in charge of social media are motivated to elevate the user engagement by adding content related to the user preferences as well as promoting dispersion and filter bubbles (Springsteen, Yeoh & Christenson, 2024). In addition, they mention that people are very likely to be exhibited to the opinions of other individuals in social media. Bearing this in mind, the interviewees based their perception on other social network opinions that might affect the development of their own and real critical opinions and thinking.

4.3 *Actions that impacted on the development of the skills*

The following actions showed the importance that introducing the culture behind the target language has since this is a practice that is not normally followed in English lessons that are given in Mexican educational settings. According to Stainer (1971, as cited in Genc and Bada, 2005) the fact of studying a culture can provide to the students a motivation to learn the target language. Considering this information in mind, it is essential to mention that an important theme emerged from the answers and was considered to be added as a third code. This was related to the actions that students applied in order to introduce themselves to the American culture since in their daily lessons there was a lack of information. These actions can be observed as follows:

> "I enjoy to watch YouTube videos about the people who lives there as well as the tv shows and American movies and this helped me with my listening skills as well as being able to read American news in English." (Participant 1)

In this answer it can be noticed that the personal interest of the students for knowing about the C2 guided them to develop and increase their level in the L2 through their hobbies and interests. This improvement was mainly achieved in the listening and reading skills. These actions permitted them to have contact with English and cultural daily situations that occur in the country. The fact that there was not enough information provided about the C2 in the classroom time shows the importance of teachers, and other educational roles to implement this on the curriculum since it will permit learners to be aware of other external realities that differ from their own (Kramsch, 2003).

5. Conclusion

The main objective of this study was assessing the importance of approaching the C2 in the classroom when teaching the L2. Bearing in mind the research questions, the results of this investigation show that two main perceptions came from the students' answers: positive and negative. These perceptions were focused on three main aspects; the cultural practices that American people have, their discrimination towards immigrants and the economic situation that

USA faces. On the other hand, the main factors that influenced these perceptions were the teachers, the opportunity to travel to the country, the use of social media and personal interests.

These findings will be of interest to language teaching field because adds more importance to the teachers' role regarding their teaching performance at the moment of approaching topics related to the C2. The insights gained from this study may be of assistance to be aware of the significance that the role of the C2 has on the lessons. The factors that I have identified therefore assists in our understanding of the role of the teacher to search and update on topics such as accents, cultures and materials. In addition, an aspect that can be learnt from these results is the recognition that the influence of the culture has on the L2 learning process outside of the class. The results of this study indicate that this has on the language teaching practice is the improvement of the language curriculums, the extra preparation of the teacher in other areas that complement their profession as well as the improvement of material and activities.

A limitation of this study is the lack of English teachers that taught the 700 English level in one campus. Although the current study is based on a small sample of teachers, the findings suggest that this issue can be approached in future studies by applying the investigation on campus that count with more language professionals that are prepared in higher levels as well. The present study lays the groundwork for future research into strategies that teachers can use and apply in order to address the C2 in the classroom as well as investigating materials that can be adapted or designed for approaching topics that helps learners to recognize the C2 from their contexts.

As final thoughts for this study, it is essential to bear in mind that some of the answers provided by the participants are related to the cultural stereotypes that are influenced by different elements, such as social media. In addition, there is a possibility that students already formed a former stereotype about the C2. Nevertheless, if there are techniques that T and curriculums apply there is a probability that cultural stereotypes change and leave space to create new and positive ideas of a culture.

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Appendix

Consent Letter

Universidad de Guanajuato

Carta de consentimiento sobre el proyecto de investigación

Yo, Citlalli Aguilera, alumna de séptimo grado de la licenciatura en la enseñanza del inglés por parte de la Universidad de Guanajuato, estoy realizando un proyecto de investigación con el tema que se describirá en las siguientes líneas.

El principal objetivo de este estudio es explorar las perspectivas que tienen los estudiantes, que están aprendiendo inglés como lengua extranjera, hacia la cultura americana. Por otro lado, otro de los objetivos es analizar los factores que hay detrás y que además afectan dichas percepciones hacia esta misma.

Si usted decide participar en este proyecto, es importante que conozca la dinámica. Se le hará una entrevista en español la cual será grabada a través de una sesión que se dará en la plataforma de zoom. Así mismo, su identidad no será mostrada y tampoco se hará referencia a su nombre real, ya que este se usará bajo un pseudónimo. Las grabaciones y notas que se hagan durante esta entrevista serán usadas y aplicadas exclusivamente para fines de este proyecto. Además de mencionarle que yo seré la única persona que va a acceder a esta información, la cuál se usará en el estudio para mostrar los objetivos anteriormente ya mencionados. Su participación es totalmente voluntaria. Se hará una posible publicación de este estudio, y en caso de ser así se le hará llegar una copia si así lo desea.

Consentimiento del participante

Yo acepto participar en este proyecto de investigación

Nombre y firma:

Fecha:

Nombre de la investigadora: Citlalli Aguilera

Fecha: 26/10/23

Interview

1. What motivated you to learn English? Were there cultural or personal influences that guided you to make this decision?

2. In general, how would you describe your experience learning this language?

3. What opinions do you have towards the American culture?

4. How do you perceive the American culture?

5. Within your English classes, how do you think that the American culture is handled?

6. How would you describe that your English teacher handles American culture?

7. Do you think it is important to incorporate the American culture into your English lessons, and why?

8. Outside of your English classes, how do you stay in touch with American culture?

9. Can you share a story/critical moment, positive or negative, that has influenced your perception towards this culture?

10. Do you think that your perception of the American culture influences or influenced in your process of English learning process? Why or why not?

11. Have you experienced any cultural differences that surprised you during your English learning process? In what ways have they affected your perception towards this culture and the target language?

12. How do you think that the American culture has influenced your motivation to learn English?

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