

Improving English Language Acquisition by Imparting Cultural Awareness in The Classroom

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Abstract

Language teaching entails not only learning the fundamentals of the language but also various cultural refinements. As Malaysia is a multilingual and multicultural nation, every child that goes through the Malaysian Education System (MES) should be operationally proficient in Bahasa Malaysia and independently proficient in the English language. Having to learn English as a second language in a Malaysian setting, teachers must depend on the students' cultural and social background as this will contribute to their attainment in language proficiency. This diversity of cultures and backgrounds serves as a medium to be considered in acquiring a second language case, particularly for English language learners. Thus, this research intended to investigate how English language acquisition could be improved by instilling cultural awareness in a language classroom, as well as the issues, challenges, and strategies that the teachers used to instill cultural awareness in their language classroom. Qualitative research was conducted using purposive sampling and semi-structured interviews with ESL teachers from various types of schools in Malaysia.. The findings of this research signify that it is important to impart cultural awareness in a language classroom, despite the language and cultural diversity among the students. This implies that the diversity in the student's backgrounds needs to be addressed accordingly to promote unity among themselves in order to impart cultural awareness in a language classroom. Hence, by incorporating or instilling cultural awareness into a language classroom, it will undoubtedly improve students' English language acquisition

Keywords: English Language Acquisition, Imparting Cultural Awareness, Issues, Challenges and Strategies.

Introduction

English has been introduced as a core subject in primary schools across the world over the past decade. Besides empowering the use of English language acquisition among people, it is always mandated to develop cultural awareness among students across the world. Therefore, the development of teaching cultural awareness is relatively crucial to enhance English language acquisition, as is it relatable that language plays a huge part in building cultural awareness. Cultural insertion in language instruction has a significant impact on students' capacity to grasp cultural differences between their own culture and the target language, as supported by (Hidayati & Santiana, 2020).

Understanding how our own culture varies from that of others, particularly from that of our target language, is known as cultural awareness. In language learning, we will automatically teach culture as we teach the language because understanding a language requires not only knowledge of grammar, phonology, and lexis, but also certain features and characteristics of the culture itself. Beyond vocabulary and syntax, being culturally aware helps us to communicate with people more efficiently. In this research, we are trying to explore how English Language acquisition can be improved, by imparting cultural awareness in a language classroom. We will also be looking at the issues and challenges that the teacher faces while trying to instill cultural awareness in their students, as well as the strategies that they use in order to impart cultural values to the students. Greater consideration in the paper is afforded to discover the challenges and strategies taken by the teachers to implement cultural awareness to improve language teaching.

As Malaysia is a multilingual and multicultural nation, with the language breakdown of Malay (54.6%), Chinese (24.6%), Tamil (12.8%), and minorities and indigenous (7.3%) - according to (Albury, 2020), the development of multilingual education can be seen evidently from the policies that being introduced by the Ministry of Education (MOE) Malaysia over the years to date. As a first priority, every child that goes through the Malaysian Education System (MES) should be operationally fluent in Bahasa Malaysia and independently proficient in English. Nevertheless, the MOE still provides access to students who want to learn any additional language for their elective subjects and this language policy has already been implemented in the educational system in order to preserve the multicultural heritage while learning a language. In one language class, we can gather learners from different cultural backgrounds and language teachers should take this into consideration. Teachers must rely on the students' cultural and social backgrounds when teaching English as a second language in Malaysia, as this will make a significant contribution to their language proficiency.

In Malaysian schools' unique language settings, sociolinguistic competence makes an important contribution to Malaysian students' English language proficiency. Language teaching involves not only learning the fundamental concepts of the language but also diverse cultural refinements. (Mohan et. al., 2010). This is prevalent because Malaysia is a country with many cultural differences. Hence, acquiring English needs a different method than learning the students' native language. The structure of the target language (English) contrasts with that found in the mother tongue, for example, Chinese and Malay. Therefore, this diversity of cultures and backgrounds serves as a medium to be considered in acquiring a second language case, particularly for English language learners. Thus, in this research, we are trying to explore how English Language acquisition can be improved, by imparting cultural awareness in a language classroom. This research was carried out with the following objectives:

1. To identify issues and challenges that the teacher faces while trying to instill cultural awareness among their students in order to improve English language acquisition.
2. To explore the strategies that the teachers use to impart cultural awareness in their students in order to improve English language acquisition.

Literature Review

Language Awareness and Language Learning

According to Association for Language Awareness (ALA), Language awareness can be defined as explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching, and language use. In 1985, The National Council for

Language in Education Working Party on Language Awareness declared that a person's sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life is also referred to as language awareness. James and Garrett (1991) then define language awareness as incorporating five domains: affective, social, power, cognitive, and performance. Thus, it shows that language awareness covers a cognitive to sociocultural spectrum and includes seemingly disparate fields of study and practice such as cognitive linguistics (attention and awareness in language learning), language teaching, language use, and intercultural communication (cross-cultural awareness) (as cited by Svalberg, 2007). As a result, language learning can be more effective as knowledge is exchanged, new beliefs and viewpoints are taken into consideration, and learners take responsibility for their own learning in such a learning environment as cited in (Moeller & Nugent, 2014).

Moreover, according to Chomsky, all languages comprise similar structures and rules (a Universal Grammar), and as a matter of fact, children everywhere acquire language in the same way, and without much effort, (Slabakova, 2021). Loewen (2021) also mentioned that children's natural language acquisition is part of the process of language learning. Aside from that, brain research has shown that the "prime time" for emotional and social development in children is between the ages of one and twelve. Therefore, the earlier we nurture and shape the intended outcomes in children, the more effective and sustainable it becomes. As for communication, it is in occurrence with the help of language, therefore, with language awareness, children can easily learn about other people, their upbringing, and their culture. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) also views language learners as "social actors" who are engaged in both language acquisition and giving back to their community to increase language awareness (Council of Europe, 2001). In other words, to communicate in another language, the speaker must have a language awareness, and a strong grasp of cultural norms and gestures to convey a message to someone fully. Hence, this awareness will allow for more efficient, natural communication between individuals.

Language and Cultural Awareness

Language and culture are generally portrayed as inseparable, and their relationship is immensely complicated. Language plays an important role in human behavior. It is a primary mode of human interaction. Cultural awareness, on the other hand, is the recognition that our own culture differs from one individual and group to the next, especially in terms of language. Cultural awareness, as defined by Moeller and Nugent (2014), is the ability to communicate responsibly and productively with people of different cultural origins. The realization of cultural behavior then will lead to the development of tolerance and a better understanding of diversity, as well as to a deeper understanding of one's own culture and behavior. Similarly, we can't appreciate a culture if we do not understand the language; as supported by (Downes & Downes, 1998). Thus, in modern society, with the globalization of the world, it is vital to impart cultural awareness in order to improve language learning.

As language makes people stay connected with each other though they came from different regions, races, and also cultures, thus, it is possible to avoid misunderstandings and prevent children from becoming judgmental of other cultures by instilling language and cultural awareness in children at a young age. By being culturally aware, we are striving to avoid assumptions, seeking meaningful interaction with people of different cultures, and deepening our understanding of culture's dynamic. It is also crucial to raise learners' cultural awareness in order to develop and advance their linguistic proficiency as cited in (Wang, 2018). Language learners can learn several types of language, culture, and environment when

cultural awareness is instilled in language learning. As a result, they can improve their social skills among multicultural people. This can be witnessed when people commonly in Malaysia, although they are Chinese or Indian, other people can still communicate with them by using the second language which is English or Bahasa Melayu. This was highlighted by De Swaan (2013) that people who speak more than one language are able to bridge the gap between groups by communicating in multiple languages.

Cultural Awareness and English Language Acquisition

Language evolution is frequently shaped by the culture of the specific group who speaks it, because language is more than just words, grammatical principles, and sentence construction; it also includes unique cultural norms, social systems, and cognitive processes. Understanding these cultural-based contexts, as well as linguistic principles specific to a culture, is crucial for successful language acquisition. Therefore, it should be considered that cultural diversity may indirectly influence the learning or acquisition of a second language among learners. Only then, the learning or acquiring of a second language can take place effectively. When learners enter the target language world, knowing the culture of the language will help them feel at ease in real-world settings as highlighted by (Yurtsever & Dilara, 2021). Therefore, it can improve language learning and they acquired the language better because they have a sense of belonging to the cultural values of the target language.

As what CEFR for Languages offers to most of the countries that have been using the framework including Malaysia, they need to assimilate implicitly about the cultural values beneath it in order to learn the English language. As highlighted by Little (2012) one of the objectives of the CEFR for Languages is to increase intercultural and pluricultural awareness while assisting language learners in keeping track of their own abilities. Apart from that, students can improve their performance by learning using the target culture itself as it plays a communicative role in language learning. As mentioned by Wang (2018), students' learning competence in English teaching can be hampered by a lack of cultural awareness and cultural background knowledge. Therefore, language acquisition can be more effective when cultural awareness can be instilled in language teaching as they can relate the material to their own cultural knowledge. Thus, the inclusion of cultural material in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) curriculum can benefit and be effective for the students by helping learners to become more used to the target culture, which improves their performance as mentioned by in (Yurtsever & Dilara, 2021). In that regard, teachers must be prepared to spend some time helping students reflect on their preconceived notions and impressions before beginning any language teaching. As a result, in multicultural and multiethnic EFL or ESL contexts, students can gain knowledge by learning about the target culture, as English teachers play an important role in fostering mutual understanding among learners.

Methodology

Research Design

This research has been chosen to be conducted qualitatively. A personal interview was conducted with one respondent at a time because it provides an excellent opportunity to collect precise data about what people believe and what motivates them. Qualitative research was conducted to get a comprehensive understanding of human behavior, through observation and interpretation of behavior, experience, attitudes, intentions, and motivations to learn about people's thoughts and feelings (Ahmad et al., 2019). The

interviews for this research have been done in 3 parts; firstly, the demography of the participants, secondly, the issues and challenges that the participants faced, and the last section is for the strategies used to impart cultural awareness in the classroom. The researchers have selected 7 participants majoring in TESL and have at least three years of experience teaching English in urban primary schools in Selangor. The interview sessions were conducted through either video calls (online) or face-to-face meetings and all sessions have been recorded (with the consent of the participants). The interview transcriptions then were checked by participants for verification purposes.

Participants

This research was conducted on 7 English teachers in Malaysia. The participants in this research were chosen using purposive sampling, which requires that the participants fulfill the requirements for this research, such as; participants must be English teachers who are majoring in TESL and teaching in national schools (*primary & secondary*) or national type of school (*SJKC/SJKT*). They were chosen because they will represent their multicultural students' backgrounds in order to meet this research's objectives.

Research Instrument

Based on the research's objectives, a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions was designed. Participants were asked to answer predetermined interview questions to further explore their responses to the issue. The interviews were conducted via video calls and in-person meetings, after which, thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview transcripts. In order to increase the validity and reliability of this research, the interview questions developed by the researchers are reviewed and validated by an expert from the faculty before being used for the interview sessions. Informed consent forms were also given to the participants and the researchers explained to them that their participation is voluntary and their confidentiality is protected.

Data analysis

Data gained from the interviews were analyzed using the thematic analysis method. The themes were developed after going through the three stages; data transcription, data coding, and data analysis. The data collected from the interview sessions were transcribed from audio form to textual form. Next, the data were categorized into themes and sub-themes based on recurring keywords retrieved from the transcriptions. Finally, the data interpretation was presented according to the thematic analysis.

Findings & Discussion

Participants' responses to the research were collected using semi-structured interviews. This research employed a thematic analysis method in order to analyze the data obtained from all seven participants. Firstly, the interview transcripts were read thoroughly in order to identify patterns among the data, which then led to the first and second rounds of coding. Through the coding process, three main themes were identified, which are *challenges or issues* that occur, their *importance*, and the *strategies* being used in order to impart cultural awareness to improve language acquisition. The significance of this study is of great importance, as summarized in the following table:

FINDINGS	IMPORTANCE	SIGNIFICANCE
ISSUES and CHALLENGES to Impart Cultural Awareness	Difficulty to make students understand and respect each other norms and culture due to <i>different levels of knowledge and understanding towards other culture</i>	<i>Understand and respect</i> each other <i>norms and culture</i>
	Difficulty <i>to understand and mastering the skills and the content of the target language</i> due to <i>language diversity and cultural diversity</i>	<i>Understand and master the skills and the content</i> of the <i>English language</i>
	Difficulty in <i>understanding the similarities and differences of each culture</i> can lead to <i>confusion</i> among the students	<i>Understand the similarities and differences between each culture to avoid confusion</i>
IMPORTANCE of Cultural Awareness	To <i>create awareness</i> and <i>mutual understanding</i> to respect each other	Encourage students to <i>communicate better in the English language</i>
	<i>Enriches lessons, vocabulary, and understanding</i> of other cultures	Encourage students to participate in the lesson and <i>enhance English language learning</i>
	<i>Preserving tradition</i> while learning a language	To <i>preserve tradition</i>
STRATEGIES to Impart Cultural Awareness	To <i>introduce cultural awareness</i> as <i>early</i> as they started schooling	<i>Increasing students' cultural awareness</i> from a young age
	-To <i>teach cultural diversity through activities</i> like oral presentation, role-play, pictures & technology-enhanced activities: e.g: youtube/internet	<i>Introducing cultural background knowledge</i> associated with the lesson materials
	To <i>instill cultural awareness during the lesson</i>	To make students be <i>more engaged, and interested</i> in the lesson and <i>acquire the English language</i> easily

Challenges and Issues

Through the description of the interview transcript, there are three main challenges that can be highlighted from the research. Firstly, we found out the theme for the challenges is *the difficulty to make their students understand and respect each other's norms and culture due to different levels of knowledge and understanding towards other cultures*. All of us are all shaped by many factors such as our ethnic background, our family, our education, and our

personalities. The participants said, students bring to school not only different racial and ethnic backgrounds but also a variety of learning approaches. As a result of different levels of knowledge and understanding, differences such as ethnicity, racism/inequality, different ways of knowing, and learning styles can all contribute to the difficulty in understanding and respecting each other's norms and culture, as cited by (Chouari, 2016). Therefore, it is critical for teachers to understand the impact that cultural differences might have on their student's education, particularly in a language classroom.

Next, it is the *difficulty to understand and master the skills* and the content of the target language *due to language diversity and cultural diversity*. The teachers discovered that the students were having difficulty understanding different cultures because they were not well exposed to other cultures as they were living in their own culture. Furthermore, the culture depicted in textbooks is not always representative of the culture of the students, making teaching and learning the target language more difficult. For some students, English is their third or fourth language. Oftentimes, as they find themselves in a learning context that is completely foreign to how they have been socialized within their families and communities, these students experience a sense of inferiority and carelessness. This will then lead to difficulty in understanding and mastering the skills and the content of the target language due to the diversity of languages and cultures.

The last challenge is the *difficulty in understanding the similarities and differences* of each culture which can lead to confusion among the students. The participant claims that the fundamental values and beliefs are shared and pervasive, implying the presence of a dominant set of cultural beliefs. Understanding this diversity is a good thing as it will make a language lesson to be even more fascinating. As these shared beliefs or similarities of certain cultures may cause confusion among students; therefore, while teaching the language, these cultural similarities and differences must be addressed and explained accordingly to avoid any misunderstandings. By becoming more aware of our cultural differences, as well as exploring their similarities, it can help the students to communicate with each other more effectively. Respecting both similarities and differences in each other's cultures will then lead to many opportunities in learning a language. As a result, students will acquire language easily.

Importance of Cultural Awareness in improving Language Learning

From the interview transcripts, there are three importance of cultural awareness to improve language acquisition that can be highlighted from the research. Firstly, by imparting cultural awareness in a language lesson, it will *create awareness and respect* among the students in order *to communicate better*. The participants said that students will be more comfortable with each other and able to communicate and interact in a more appropriate manner if they are aware of and understand each other's cultures. As supported by (Svalberg, 2007), a person's sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life is an important factor to learn a language. This is also supported by what was mentioned earlier that language awareness and cultural awareness are both crucially important in language teaching and learning as cited in (Wang, 2018). Therefore, acknowledging cultural differences in a lesson is the first step toward mutual understanding and respecting each other. Consequently, students will feel more confident and motivated to take part in the language lesson.

Secondly, the participants said that by having cultural awareness in a language lesson, it

could *enrich lessons, vocabulary, and understanding of other cultures* which will *enhance language learning*. The participants claimed that understanding different cultures through various contexts will undoubtedly spark students' creativity by introducing them to new vocabulary, making a language lesson more interesting and engaging for the students. By being culturally aware, it will enable students to communicate with each other more effectively, not only by words and grammar but by understanding their cultural-based contexts differences. As a result, the students will be more self-assured and motivated to participate in the language lesson as supported by (Yurtsever & Dilara, 2021). This will encourage students to participate in the lesson and learn the language.

The third importance of cultural awareness to improve language acquisition is the ability to *preserve tradition* while learning a language. The participants said that some students have prejudices against teachers and students of different races and cultures. These cultural differences cause students to become prejudiced or stereotyped towards a certain culture. Therefore, by understanding the uniqueness of one's culture, students will be able to tolerate their friends as they recognize how their own culture differs from their friends, particularly in terms of language. Thus, when cultural awareness is instilled in language teaching, language acquisition can be achieved because students can relate the lesson to their own cultural knowledge and traditions. Language learning then can be more effective because students feel that they are safe and not different from other students since the teacher accepts the differences that occur and gives respect to the student's culture. As mentioned by (Bakir & Aziz, 2022) elements of the local culture are important and necessary, yet, the inclusion of foreign cultures is also needed for the students to be able to familiarize themselves with other global cultures and cultural diversity.

Strategies in Imparting Cultural Awareness

In order to increase students' cultural awareness, teachers should take advantage of every opportunity to educate and explain cultural knowledge in the language teaching practice. While imparting linguistic knowledge to their students, teachers have a responsibility to promote the culture of the language they are teaching. Therefore, from the interview transcripts, the teachers agreed to *introduce cultural awareness* as early as they *started schooling* (primary level). This can be seen from the excerpt of the interview which is; *"We must teach cultural awareness to improve language learning among the students as early as primary years because their memory is like a sponge and better at this age."* As highlighted by Chomsky; children everywhere acquire language in the same way, Slabakova (2021), and a children's natural language acquisition is part of that process of language learning (as cited by Loewen, 2021). Hence, the sooner a teacher encourages and shapes these desired outcomes in students, the more efficient and long-lasting it becomes.

Other than that, based on the semi-structured interview, there are several strategies that can be inculcated to teach cultural diversity during the language lesson which the teachers *implement through activities like oral presentation, role-play, pictures & technology-enhanced activities: YouTube/internet*. Teachers can use this technique to introduce cultural background knowledge associated with the lesson materials, particularly the fundamental and significant cultural knowledge that embodies and reflects the key characteristics of the target culture. From understanding the cultural differences, students will be able to avoid assumptions, seek meaningful interactions with their friends from many cultures, and broaden their comprehension of the changing nature of culture. Teachers must utilize

classroom instruction to its fullest potential in order to introduce the desired culture. Likewise, they feel that it is crucial to use different types of strategies in implying cultural awareness in language classrooms as they can uplift the cultural diversities among the students.

By instilling cultural awareness during the lesson, students will be more engaged, interested & eventually acquire language easily. When the teachers encourage activities like oral presentations, students begin to share their stories and relate their cultural experiences to the learnings as the students eventually will feel a sense of belonging in acquiring the language because they can relate it to their cultural beliefs. As supported by Moeller & Nugent (2014) that when language proficiency and intercultural competence are interconnected in a language classroom, students are best prepared for participation in a global environment. This is parallel to the CEFR for language's objective, which is to assimilate implicitly the cultural values beneath it in order to learn the English language.

Conclusion

The main aim of this research is to investigate how English language acquisition can be improved by instilling cultural awareness in a language classroom, as well as exploring the issues, challenges, and strategies that the teachers used to instill cultural awareness in the language classroom. The study is rooted in the sociocultural theory and the interactionist approach, which serve as fundamental frameworks for understanding second language acquisition and its influencing factors. This investigation also indicates that it is critical for teachers to understand the impact that cultural differences might have on their student's education, particularly in a language classroom, as language awareness and cultural awareness are both crucially important in language teaching and learning as cited in (Wang, 2018). Thus, it will help to avoid any difficulties in understanding and mastering the skills and the content of the target language due to the diversity of languages and cultures. The findings also suggest that with awareness in mind and by respecting both similarities and differences in each other's cultures, it will then lead to many opportunities in learning a language. As a result, students will acquire language easily.

In general, therefore, it should be acknowledged that cultural differences may indirectly influence students' learning or acquisition of a second language, as only then can the effective learning or acquisition of a second language occurs, particularly in the English language. Regardless of ethnicity, students require strategies for mastering the English language. By understanding their cultural-based contexts differences, this will encourage students to be more self-assured and motivated to participate in the lesson and eventually to learn the language. Taken together, when cultural awareness is instilled in language teaching, language acquisition can be achieved because students can relate the lesson to their own cultural knowledge and traditions. Hence, the sooner a teacher encourages and shapes these desired outcomes in students, the more efficient and long-lasting it becomes. The findings of the research also provide insights into different types of strategies in implying cultural awareness in language classrooms as they can uplift cultural diversities among the students.

Even though the limitation of this research is the small sample size, yet, the participants do represent their multicultural students' backgrounds and it met the research's objectives. Further research with a larger sample size is suggested to establish the notion of the importance of cultural as well as language awareness in English language acquisition. Despite

the relatively limited sample, the contribution of this research has been to confirm that when language proficiency and intercultural competence are interconnected in a language classroom, students will be best prepared for participation in the global environment. Hence, this research concludes that incorporating or instilling cultural awareness into a language classroom will undoubtedly improve students' English language acquisition.

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