PERCEPTIONS OF ENGLISH L2. LANGUAGE OF SHAKESPEARE OR JUST A TOOL FOR INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION?

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Abstract

According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, the learning of a new language is considered, in its ultimate form, as to be the appropriation of a new culture. The attraction of the latter, or at least in part, is often a motivational trigger for learning its language.

Does the language-culture association take precedence over the instrumental utility of English whereby the motivation to learn is related to the benefits that knowledge of English offers for work or studies? Which is more important: the utility of English for intercultural communication or the attraction of the culture?

The present study examines the perception of the language-culture association vs the instrumental utility of English L2 in bilingual and multilingual adults residing outside of English-speaking areas. The quantitative data was collected through an online questionnaire.

The results show that what motivate English L2 learners to consume cultural products in English is their variety and availability, rather than a particular interest in the Anglo-Saxon cultures.

The English language is considered by the majority of respondents to be mostly a tool for intercultural communication, studies, and work.

Many respondents are neutral regarding the aesthetical aspects of the English language.

Keywords: *English L2 learning, motivation, interest in the cultures of the English language, tool for intercultural communication, perceptions of English*

1. INTRODUCTION

This study deals with the perception of the language-culture association *vs* the instrumental utility of English as a second language in bilingual and multilingual adults residing outside of English-speaking areas. In this article I do not discuss the expansion of English nor the linguistic imperialism that some see in this process (see Phillipson, 1992 and Modiano, 2001a). Honna, (2005, p. 77) notes

> In much of Asia, English is no longer a colonial import. Throughout the region, English is the language of education, culture, business and, above all, regional cooperation. English-speaking Asians claim English as their own language. Filipino poet Gemino Abad once said, "The English language is now ours. We have colonized it, too." This is not a political statement. This is simply a descriptive remark concerning the current state of the English language in this part of the world.

Nowadays, no one doubts that English is the most studied and used language in intercultural exchanges. Learning English is a thing to do and something difficult to avoid. The reasons are so obvious, that the question *why* does not arise. Still, I decided to ask.

According to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, the learning of a new language is considered, in its ultimate form, as to be the appropriation of a new culture. The attraction of the latter, or at least in part, is often a motivational trigger for learning its language. Is this statement valid for English? Do learners of English perceive the language to be related to specific countries and cultures or does English play mostly the role of an international language?

Languages are usually associated with specific countries and nations, and English is not an exception in this sense. However, it should not be forgotten that, for example, in India, the Philippines, Pakistan or Hong Kong millions of speakers use English as a first or second language, but ESL teaching materials do not reflect cultural diversity, and learners of English are less exposed to English varieties' cultures than to mainstream cultures (Baxter, 1991, Guntzmann, 1999, Nault, 2006, Modiano, 2001a, McKay, 2003, Raigón-Rodríguez, 2018). Sifakis (2004, p. 245) emphasizes that "learners' attitudes regarding the issue of ownership of English and its status in international/intercultural communication are paramount and the first to be investigated." English is considered to be an international, global language that does not only belong only to native speakers or specific cultures. Modiano (2001b pp. 161-162) states:

> Thus, with English, because it has lingua franca status, because there are a number of nation-states which have large populations speaking the tongue, and because the cross-cultural dimension of English among foreign-language speakers can effectively exclude the native speaker as well as the cultural distinctiveness which the native speaker represents, it is illogical, surely, to talk of the learning of English as a foreign language as an activity which is enriched through interjecting a cultural studies dimension defined as the history, society, culture, and institutions of the British. The cultural framework for English is global and as such is no longer situated in the legacy of one distinct culture.

Culture can be defined as a set of arts, philosophy, knowledge and achievements of a nation or other social group. Culture includes language, beliefs, religion, way of life, social habits, cuisine, and technologies. Language and culture association in second language teaching and learning received wide disciplinary coverage (Kramsch, 1998, Hinkel, 1999, Pennycook, 2007)

Globalization leaves little room for monolingual and homogenous communities, "it would be rather difficult to find human groups today in which variation in languages and cultures is not incorporated into quasi-daily empirical experience, for reasons both of external openness and exposure, and of internal differentiation." (Coste, Moore & Zarate, 1997, p. 14).

Recent social and political changes have focused attention on the debate about the relationship between language, culture, and cross-cultural and intercultural awareness (Wierzbicka, 2003, Byram, 1997, Hull, Stornaiuolo, & Sahni, 2010, Saville-Troike, 2003, Barletta Manjarrés, 2009, Dankova, 2012). Ennis (2015) analyzes different cases for the interdependence of language, culture and communication, and suggests an integrated model to language and language pedagogy. While the relationship between language, culture and communication in second language teaching is commonly accepted and culture is an inseparable part of curricula, language can be taught as a tool of intercultural communication without connection to any particular culture. When English is used in a multicultural context and in the absence of native speakers, intercultural competence is more important than knowledge of second language cultures. For example, in the case where two people from two different countries in Asia communicate in English, knowledge of British or American culture does not matter because the proximity of their cultures leads these people to adopt another communicative style more appropriated in an Asian context (see also Honna, 2005). Barletta Manjarrés (2009) emphasizes that "intercultural competence should be evaluated separately from linguistic competence in a second language (p. 147). Learning to communicate in a second language must include dealing with the unexpected, coping with uncertainties, acting in flexible manners, and de-centralizing one's own perspective" (p. 155).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Materials

The quantitative data was collected through an online survey. The survey is available in French and in English. The survey aims adults residing outside of English-speaking areas: these people do not need to learn English in order to be integrated to a new society. The multiple choice questionnaire contains 25 questions about age, mother tongue, practice of other languages, proficiency in English, use of

English, motivation to learn English, purposes of the learning, interest in Anglo-Saxon cultures (English, American, Australian, etc), and perception of the English language. The respondents did not know the real goal of the study. The survey looks like a very general survey on the learning of English as a second language.

In addition to the personal network, announcements were posted in different closed groups on Facebook related to languages learning.

2.2. Profile of the respondents

The number of the participants is 246. The majority of the participants are 18-30 year old or over 46, 58% are female and 42% are male. The majority have been learning English for 5 years or longer. Beside English, 81% can sustain a conversation in two or more languages. During their life, 76% developed significant relationships with people for whom English is the mother tongue.

The first language of the respondents is French (34%), Russian (19%), Hebrew (9%), Spanish, Italian, German, Russian, Polish, Portuguese, Georgian, Czech, Arabic, Icelandic, or Japanese.

Regarding the self-reported proficiency in oral English, 51% are fluent, 22% can enter unprepared into a conversation on various topics, 20% can participate in a conversation on familiar topics, 7% have a basic level.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This paper presents some results of the ongoing study. The number of the respondents is 246. The participants were asked why they were learning English. Multiple answers were allowed for this question.

The first reason of learning English is its lingua franca status: 65% of the respondents do it in order to find a common ground with people whose mother tongue is other than English. This is the most frequent reason reported. Fifty-six per cent are learning English for work, 56% - in preparation for traveling abroad, 53% for the pleasure of learning a new language, and 53% of the respondents are motivated by a better comprehension of media content in English (Internet, TV, radio, social media). Thirty-five per cent are learning English for their studies.

Only 28 % are interested in Anglo-Saxon culture, a rate that in my opinion is not too high. I suppose that much more than 28 % of learners of Japanese, Icelandic or Irish are interested in the culture of the language or at least in one aspect of it. Due to the absence of comparable data, this remains an assumption. Only 30% of the respondents are learning English in preparation for traveling in English-speaking countries. Once again the rate is not high. The term “Anglo-Saxon culture” used in the questionnaire refers to the cultures of Inner Circle, countries directly associated with English: USA, Great Britain, Australia or Canada. I decided not to introduce a topic related to Global English in the questionnaire.

Where do you have to use English? (Please choose all that apply)

Eighty-three per cent of the respondents have to use English when traveling. This answer confirms once again the interest in English as lingua franca. Thirty-seven per cert use English for their hobbies, 34% at work, 29% with friends, 19.5% for their studies, 17% in daily public life (restaurants, public facilities, etc.), and 15% at home.

What proportion of movies and programs in English do you watch, and English books do you read?

The proportions of movies and programs in English the participants watch and English books they read show a significant level of their exposure to English cultural products. Cultural products, a term used in the questionnaire, include all expressive forms of the culture, such as written audiovisual productions (literature, movies, TV shows, music) and social media content.

English cultural products represent more than 50% for 39% of the participants, from 20% to 50% for 27%, from 5% to 20% for 19%, and less than 5% for 15%. Audiovisual production in English is responsible for the relatively high proportions that participants declare.

Regarding English cultural products (movies, TV series, music, literature, etc.), please scale your opinion on the following statements (see Table 1 below for answer options)

Almost 49% of the respondents agree or strongly agree that they are interested in English culture products because of their content, but the neutral rate (41.5%) is high. Does it mean that 41.5% of the respondents are not really interested by the content of English cultural products even if they are heavy consumers of them?

Availability of books, movies, TV series, music, and social media in English plays an important role: 56% of the respondents agree or strongly agree that they are interested in English cultural products because they are easily accessible.

About 29% of the respondents are more attracted by productions in English than by productions from other cultures, 41.5% are neutral. Quantity of cultural products in English and their availability could explain the attraction to them in 29% of respondents.

About 68% of the respondents agree or strongly agree that they use the English cultural products to improve their English – this is a common strategy in second language learning.

The chi-square test is very conclusive: $\chi 2 = 140.928$, df = 12, p =0.001 (cf. Table1).

In %	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I am interested in English cultural products because of their content.	26.8	22	41.5	4.8	4.8
I am interested in English cultural products because they are easily accessible.	26.8	29.3	36.6	0	7.3
I am more attracted by the English cultural products than by works of art from other cultures.	9.76	19.5	41.5	17.1	12.2
I use the English cultural products to improve my English.	26.8	41.5	19.5	9.76	2.44

Table 1. English cultural products (In %, 246 respondents)

Do you intend to become more knowledgeable with respect to English artistic and cultural creations?

Only 24 % of the respondents say that the are doing this on an on-going basis, 66% say maybe one day and 10% not at all. The answers suggest that either the majority of the respondents are not so motivated to do so or consider they are knowledgeable enough.

Relationship to the English language and English language cultures

The respondents rated their relationship to the English language and English language culture (cf. Table 2). Among the respondents, 90% have a positive or very positive relationship to the language; almost 66% have a positive or very positive relationship to the English language cultures and 32 % are neutral. Thirty-two per cent of neutral answers are a very high rate for people with a good level of proficiency in oral English. Results show that language passes before the English language culture. At that point, I would like to be able to compare my results to similar data for other languages. Is it possible that a third of the learners of Japanese or Icelandic declare that they are neutral regarding Japanese or Icelandic culture? Probably not.

The chi-square test is very conclusive: $\chi 2 = 53.338$, df = 4, p =0.001 (cf. Table 2).

In %	Very positive	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Very negative
My relationship to the English language is:	51.22	39.02	9.76	0	0
My relationship to the English language cultures is:	26.83	39.02	31.71	2.44	0

Table 2. Relationship to the English language and culture (In %, 246 respondents)

What best defines the Anglo-Saxon culture, according to you?

The respondents were invited to choose the statement that best defines the Anglo-Saxon culture, according to them (cf. Table 3). Twenty-seven per cent define English in term of economical leadership and 24% emphasize its rich cultural heritage. Only 7% of the respondents think that English cultural production is above all others. Forty-three per cent consider that English is not more special than any other language – such little enthusiasm shows the fairly neutral attitude of these respondents who do not give any special status to the English language.

English drives the world economy.	27
English cultural production is above all others.	7
English has a rich cultural heritage.	24
English is not any more special than any other language.	43
Total (246 respondents)	100

Table 3. What best defines the Anglo-Saxon culture, according to you? (In %, 246 respondents)

The questionnaire also contained some very subjective questions regarding the perception of the language.

Do you find English to be a beautiful language?

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, as the saying goes, but 58.4% of the respondents say that English a beautiful or very beautiful language. For the other 31.7%, the beauty of English does not matter and 9.8% consider that English is not beautiful or not beautiful at all.

Do you find the English language sexy?

To this very subjective question, only 29% say yes : English is a sexy or very sexy language, 49% are neutral, 17% say no and 5% do not know if English is a sexy language.

The answers to these two subjective questions show that for many respondents the English language is not attractive as an object.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Results show that the language as a tool for intercultural communication passes before the Anglo-Saxon cultures and that there is a gap between what respondents say about their interest in Anglo-Saxon cultures and their use of English L2. Only 28 % of the respondents are interested in Anglo-Saxon cultures, 41 % are not really interested by the content of English language cultural products but they are heavy consumers of them: English cultural products represent more than 50 % for 39 % of the participants. The availability of cultural products in English (and not a particular interest) explains why ESL users choose them. A great diversity of information in English reinforces this choice.

In the context of education, a second language and its culture are always presented as a whole. I wonder if the discourse on the link between language and culture influences the responses of those who claim to be interested in the Anglo-Saxon cultures and if all of them are really interested.

In the cosmopolitan context, English is seen primarily as a communication tool and not as a part of any specific culture. From a pragmatic point of view, the aesthetic qualities or the cultural background seem to be of less importance.

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