

## **Learning a New Language Is Learning a New Culture**

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### **Abstract**

This article is intended to explore how language and culture are interwoven and their mutual impact on each other. Language can be viewed as a vehicle for exhibiting world culture. It is a well-known fact that for international peace, unity and harmony, appreciation and recognition of each other's culture is important. Culture may be prone to change, owing to new scientific discoveries, and technological inventions and conceptual innovations the world witnesses, almost every day. Different communities using different languages follow different cultural practices.

**Key Words:** Linguistic Competence, Communicative Competence, Cultural Value, Culture Shock, ESL (English as a Second Language)

### **Introduction**

Among the different means of communication, such as gestures, facial expressions and body language, language is the most effective. Language is used to fulfill the human needs, facilitate human activities and express human thoughts and imaginations. Mankind is also well informed of various cultures different communities embrace in the world. Culture which is an integral part of language learning sometimes fades into the background of in the language classes in Sri Lanka. Communication is an interrelationship between a language and its people and if cultural information is not taught as a part of communicative competence, complete communication cannot happen. Since English has emerged as the chief medium of international communication in Sri Lanka, there is an inevitable need for proficiency in English to communicate with people of other countries. Whenever two people from different cultures meet and use English to communicate with each other, they will use it in culturally distinct ways.

Hence it is clear that teaching intercultural interaction competence in English may well be among the most significant understandings of the future. It implies that culture should be integrated to the teaching of all language skills in the English language classroom so that learners can learn to speak, but also write, in culturally appropriate ways for specific purposes.

## **Language and Culture**

The notion that a strong relationship always exists between language and culture has been very popular and under study for long. That is, there should be some relationship between the phonetic structural elements and the sounds of the language and the ways in which speakers of the language realize the world and behave in it. The ways in which language and culture are related vary. In this context, some comments on what is meant by culture may be appropriate. Goodenough (1981, P.167 ) defined culture thus; ‘A society’s culture consists of whatever it is one has to know and or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members and to do so in any role that accept for any one of themselves.’ The knowledge pertaining to culture is socially acquired. The members of a particular society learn the necessary behaviours and they do not inherit them from others.

According to Edward Sapir (1929), language and culture are closely associated and one cannot be understood or appreciated without the knowledge of the other.

Goodenough (1981:62) summarises the contents of culture as follows.

- The ways in which people have organized their experience of their phenomenal world so as to give it structure as a system of cause and effective relationships, that is, the propositions and beliefs by which they explain events and accomplish their purposes.
- The ways in which people have organized their experience of the real world so as to give it structure as a phenomenal world of forms, their percepts, and concepts.
- The ways in which people have organized their experiences so as to structure their world in hierarchies of preferences, namely their value or sentimental systems.
- The ways in which people have organized their experience of their past efforts to accomplish recurring purposes into operational procedures for accomplishing these purposes in

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the future, that is, a set of grammatical principles of action and a series of recipes for accomplishing particular ends.

### **Structural and Functional Views of Language**

In this section, the communicative language is more emphasized with the illustration of appropriate examples.

**The structural view** of language is concerned with the grammatical system and it describes how linguistic items can be combined. For example, it may explain the operations of forming the passive ‘A parcel has been sent’ rather than the active, ‘somebody has sent a parcel’ or describe the word order rules to interpret the difference between the two sentences, ‘The man hit the woman’ and ‘The woman hit the man’.

The structural view of language and the functional view of language are separate aspects. However the mere consideration of structure alone cannot determine the communicative functions of language. For example, let’s consider the sentence ‘Why don’t you buy that book?’ From a structural viewpoint, it is unambiguously an interrogative. But from a functional viewpoint, it is ambiguous. It may be a question in certain circumstances. The speaker may genuinely want to know why his companion hasn’t bought that book. In other circumstances, it may function as a command. It may be the case of a teacher who addressed it to a student who hadn’t bought that book. In yet other situations, it could be a plea, a suggestion or a complaint. It can be said that while the structure of the sentence is stable and straight forward, its communicative function varies and depends on specific situational and social factors.

### **Communicative Function**

As a single linguistic form expresses more than one function, a single communicative function can be expressed by a number of linguistic forms. For example, a speaker who expects someone to buy him a lunch parcel has many linguistic options such as ‘Buy me a lunch parcel, please’, ‘Could you please buy me a lunch parcel?’ ‘Would you mind buying me a lunch parcel?’ or ‘Excuse me, could I trouble you to buy me a lunch parcel?’ Among these forms, some might perform this directive function in the context of certain social relationships. For example

‘You’ve failed to buy me a lunch parcel.’ could be a directive from boss to peon but not from boss to an officer in a superior position. Other forms may depend on shared situational knowledge for their correct interpretation (e.g. ‘It’s lunch time, isn’t it?’)

### **Skillful Processing**

The most efficient communication in a foreign language can’t always be achieved by manipulating its structures. But successful communication often depends on the skillful processing of the complete situation with the involvement of the speaker and the hearer, taking account of the knowledge already shared between them and selecting items that may communicate the message effectively. Foreign language learners should be provided with sufficient opportunities to develop these skills by being exposed to situations where the emphasis is on using their available resources to communicate meaning efficiently and economically.

Similarly for better comprehension, both a repertoire of linguistic items and a repertoire of strategies for using them in a concrete situation are necessary for the learner.

### **Concept of Intercultural Communication**

The term *intercultural communication* refers to communication between people from different cultures. More precisely it refers to “symbolic exchange processes whereby individuals from two (or more) different cultural communities negotiate shared meaning in an interactive situation” (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 16). In the symbolic exchange process people from cultural communities encode and decode the verbal and nonverbal messages into comprehensive meaning. This definition obviously emphasizes the influence of cultural variability and diversity on communication. It is obvious that two or more people of different cultural backgrounds engage in communication, cultural barriers to communication often arise due to the differences in their life patterns, social style, customs, world view, religion, philosophy and so on. This is often the case when the communicators share a foreign language.

Presently the role of intercultural communication has become very important partly because English assumes the role of an international language which is used by millions of people outside its original geographic boundaries to convey national and international

perceptions of reality which may be quite different from those of English speaking cultures. As the role of English as an international language gets expanded further and further, the number of L2 users of English will continue to grow, much surpassing the number of native speakers of English. English is the main link language across cultures today. Thus the goal of learning English shifts to enable learners to communicate their ideas and culture with not only the speakers of English but also those of other cultures.

The term *intercultural communicative competence* maintains a link with recent traditions in foreign language teaching, but extends the concept of communicative competence in significant ways. Generally it has been described as the ability to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language. More precisely, it is defined as the overall internal capacity of an individual to manage key challenging features of intercultural communicative competence to efficiently negotiate a mode of communication and interaction by ability to use and adapt language use appropriately in culturally different contexts. “The distinct features of intercultural communicative competence are cultural differences, unfamiliarity and incompatibility between interactants. Teachers and learners encounter many challenges because of this status of English as a means of international and intercultural communication. It justifies that successful communication is not merely about acquiring a linguistic code; it also concerns different cultural values reflected in language use. It lays out the philosophical base for a growing awareness that communicative competence should be conceived as intercultural communicative competence including not only the knowledge of basic values and norms; verbal and non-verbal interactional competence in using English in intercultural communication; competence in using language as social action; competence in creating and interpreting linguistic aspects of social reality, but also the cognitive, affective and behavioural adaptability of an individual’s internal system in all intercultural contexts” (Schinitzer, 1995, p. 38).

L2 learners intending to perform intercultural interactions effectively must possess these abilities to cope with the dynamics of cultural differences on account of the inseparable link between foreign language learning and intercultural communication.

### **Developing Cultural Awareness**

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It is apparent that if a teacher determines to maximize students' communicative effectiveness when interacting with members of other cultures, the students should be offered an opportunity to receive cultural awareness training as an integral part of their English courses. It is also to be borne in mind that teaching cross – cultural awareness in the English language classroom is not an easy task.

Teaching a L2 devoid of focus on its speakers' culture won't be fruitful. In a similar vein, promoting communicative competence without considering the different views and perspectives of people in different cultures which may enhance or even inhibit communication. After all communication requires understanding and understanding requires the acquaintance with the culture of the foreigner while always putting the target culture in relation with one's own.

Certain language difficulties Sri Lankan students encounter due to cultural variation between native speakers of English and Sri Lankans are quite apparent in many instances. For example, the expression, 'going to bed' referring to the act of sleeping, by native speakers of English may cause some extent of confusion or embarrassment particularly among students from rural areas in Jaffna, as they often lie down on mats or on bare floor, to sleep.

To add empirical strength to the current research, a qualitative as well as quantitative method has been adopted.

## **The Method**

Fifty undergraduates in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Jaffna were selected for this study. They were divided into two target groups of students. Group A is considered as the Control group and Group B, the Experimental group.

## **Syllabuses**

Different syllabuses were utilized for teaching English language teaching skills to the groups. For Group A, a syllabus with the inclusion of English culture was administered while Group B was taught with a syllabus incorporated with cultural elements attached to Tamil, the mother tongue of students.

## **Procedure**

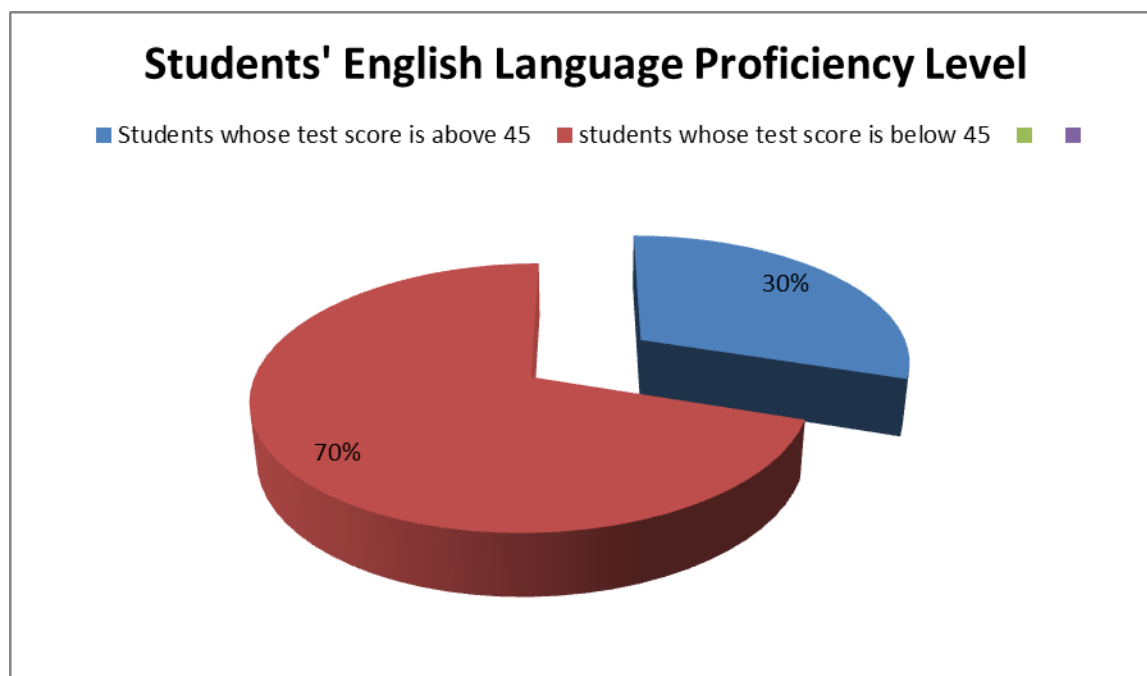
A pre-test was conducted among the two groups to assess the language skills that were to be taught to them. These groups were imparted instruction for a complete semester. The Control group was given instructions in language skills, adopting English culture oriented syllabus. The Experimental group was taught to develop language skills through Tamil culture oriented syllabus. At the end of the semester, when the instructions were complete, the two groups were administered post-tests based on their respective syllabuses

## **Results and Data Analysis**

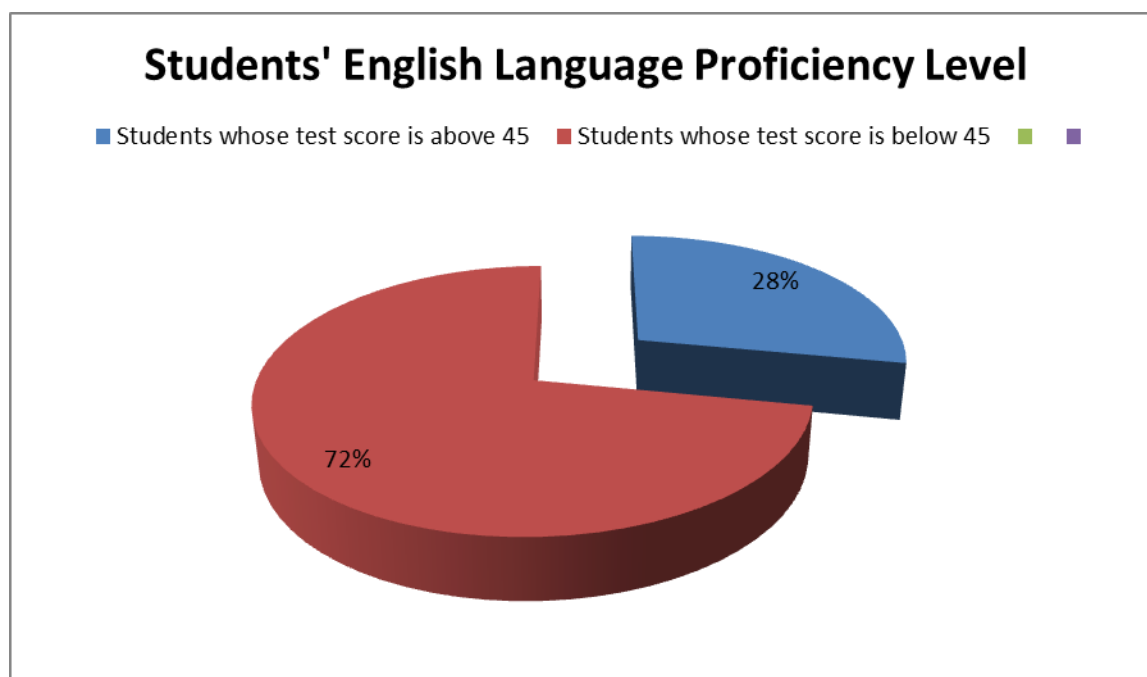
The students' performance in the tests administered to the two groups represents the outcome of the current research.

The pre-test result of the Control group is represented by Chart – A, and that of the Experimental group is shown in Chart – B.

### **Chart – A**



**Chart –B**

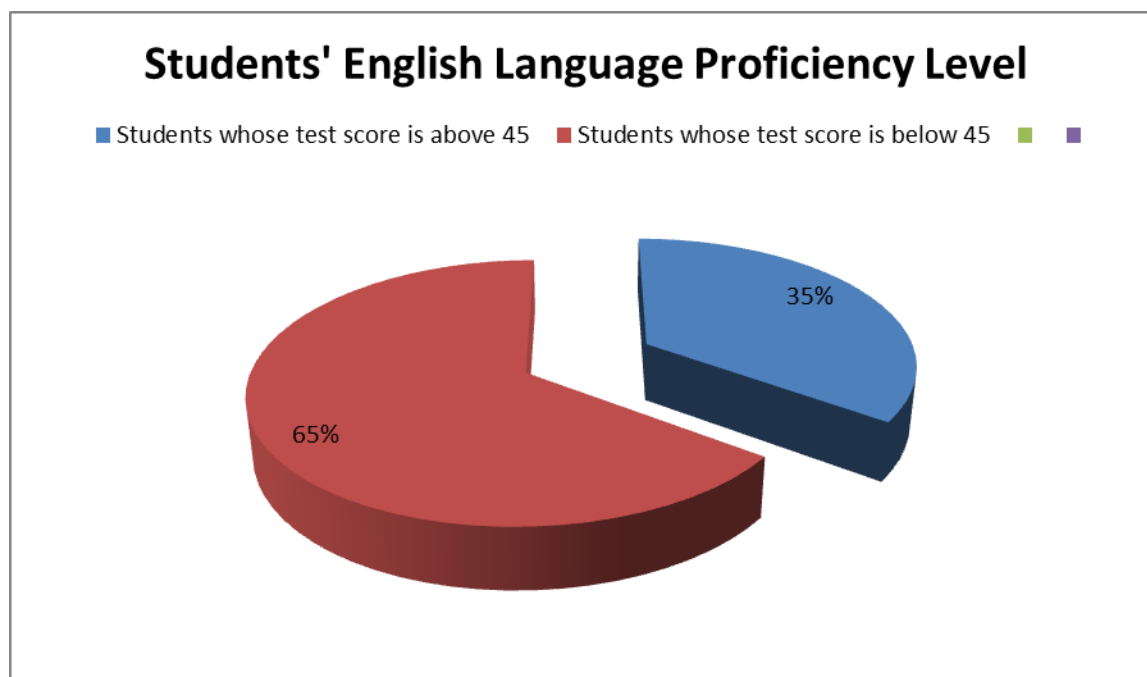


The results of the pre-tests reveal that the levels of the basic language skills of the groups remain almost the same, with very little variation that can be ignored.

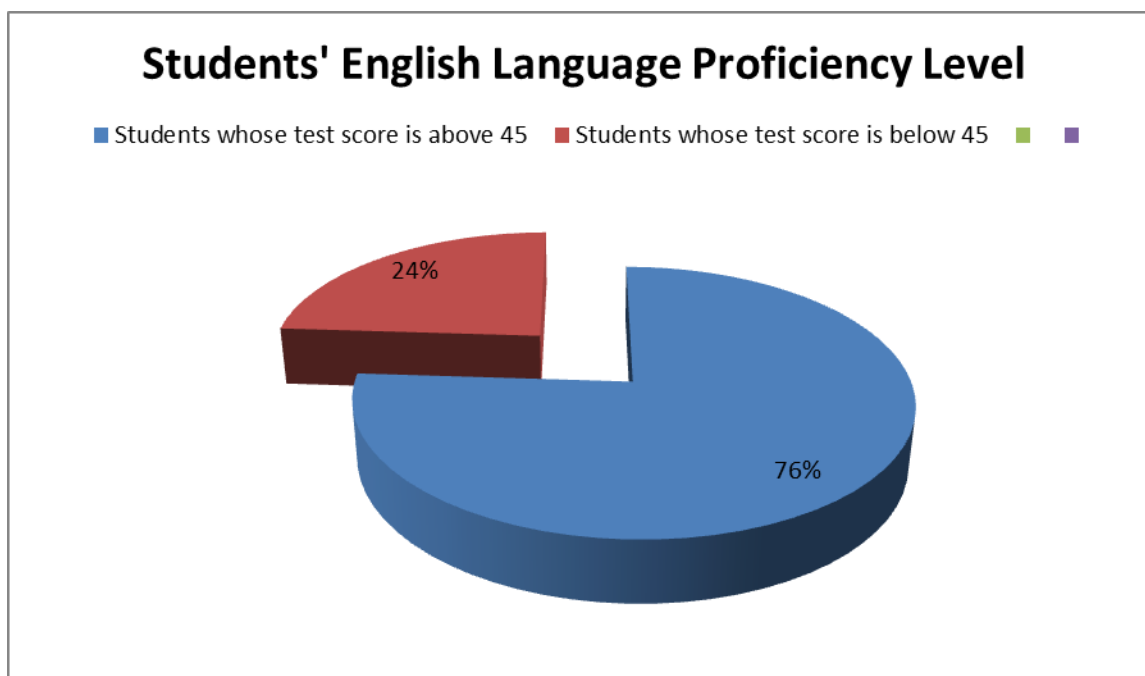


Chart-C and Chart-D reflect the findings of the post-tests administered to the Control group and the Experimental group. The Experimental group has remarkably greater gain in language skills than the Control group. These findings obviously indicate that the inclusion of the students' native cultural elements has helped the students of the Experimental group to rise dramatically in language proficiency.

**Chart – C**



**Chart – D**



During the teaching sessions, the following observations were made in the Experimental group.

- Students' native culture seems as a tool of motivation to learn the language.
- Familiar concepts facilitate the learning process.
- The culture shock is eliminated.
- Learning is made tension-free.
- Students are free from the additional task of understanding hidden meaning and philosophy attached to the alien cultural practices.
- Ample opportunity for easy and effective communication.

### Conclusion

Different communities using different languages adopt different cultures. Nevertheless there may be similarities to some extent, between two cultures. Similarities between a student's mother tongue and the second language facilitates learning the second language and dissimilarities between languages impede learning. Hence it is suggested that in order to promote

ESL learning, native cultural aspects should be incorporated into the ESL syllabus. Since alien cultural elements confuse and puzzle students they should be eliminated in a possible manner.

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