INCORPORATING CULTURAL FACTORS IN EFL CONTEXT

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Abstract: This study highlighted the issue of the incorporation of English cultures, cultural preference and diversity in relation to the students' English program. The need to analyze the students' perception is imperative since the students are considered as one of the most important factors in determining the success or failure of their own learning process. The respondents recruited for the present study were 80 part-time college students of different departments (i.e., Literature, Informatics, and Accounting). The use of mixed method aimed to elicit more elaborate data on the students' perceptions toward the above issues. The instruments used in the present study were questionnaires and semi-structured interview. During the data collection, the questionnaire, and interview were administered within the same day. The results indicated that the students' perception toward the incorporation of English culture was ambivalent. Of the 80 participants, there were only 48 students who voiced to agree and to strongly agree with the exposure; while the rest of the participants did not seem to agree. It was also found that most of the students preferred to learn Asian cultures instead of western ones. The most noticeable determinants affecting their preference were mainly the popularity of Asian cultures exposed on various media as well as their jobs which mostly involved Asian employers (Japanese, Korean, etc.). They were also found to appreciate the exposure conducted by the teacher as one of the relevant activity when learning foreign language. English grammar and vocabulary are skills to prioritize when speaking with Asians, and they did not find pronunciation important to support communication among them.
Keywords: *incorporating cultural factors; cultural preference; cultural diversity, Asian cultures; EFL.*

INTRODUCTION
The importance of incorporating culture has been widely acknowledged by numerous scholars. The need to incorporate English culture in EFL is basically driven by the perceived connection between language and culture (Brown, 2001; Brown, 2007; Dema, & Moeller, 2012; Nguyen, 2017). In the same notion, the other scholars such as Doob (1985) and Schaefer (2011) postulated that language belongs to one of the cultural elements, thus indicating the close connection between language and culture as well. However, with the growing awareness of the students-centered paradigm in pedagogy the attempt to incorporate English-only cultures in EFL learning process has become the subject of criticism (Slavin, 2009).

This is because the children, who enter their first learning process, will usually have absorbed their own cultural aspects as a result of their own parental upbringing (2009, p. 98). With this concept, exposing different culture to those who adhere to certain cultural beliefs may result in unfavorable responses or rejections.

In sum, scholars consider that the differences exposed to the students can possibly trigger cultural conflicts which leads to the students' rejection in learning English (see e.g., Palmer, 2013). The present study aimed to investigate the students' perceptions toward the incorporation of English cultures into their EFL program in order to allow the educators to have more complete pictures on how to incorporate cultural factors within the students' learning process. Specifically, the present study aimed to provide those involved in higher education with more sound arguments for incorporating cultural aspects as well as serving their students better.

The research questions were formulated as the followings:

a) What are the students' perceptions toward the incorporation of English cultures during the class?

b) What are the most noticeable determinants affecting the students' perceptions? c) Which cultures do the students prefer to learn during their English class? d) What are the most noticeable determinants affecting the students' preference? e) What are the students' perceptions toward the issue of cultural diversity with regard to their English learning?

There are numerous definitions of cultures leading to different concepts. The present study refers only to the definition of culture offered by Tylor (2008, p. 43) as "The complex whole including knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities, and habits acquired by man as a member of society"

Scholars believe that language and cultures are naturally inter-connected (see e.g., Brown, 2007). In the same vein, other scholars reinforced that language is basically part of cultural elements (Doob, 1985; Schaefer, 2011). More specifically, the argument for incorporating culture in language learning is mainly due to fact that the ability to communicate in a language requires knowledge of seeing, explaining and acting properly in line with the culture of the language (Omaggio & Hadley, 1986).

With the increasingly important role of bilingualism, cultural diversity, and the student-centered paradigm, the need to accommodate students' cultural background has also been highlighted by numerous scholars. Larsen-Freeman (as cited in Griffiths), for instance, postulated that learners are not merely passive recipients of a customized native-speaker input (2003). Therefore, it is certainly impossible for second language learners to simply get rid of their culture when learning the second language (Byrams & Morgan as cited in Hinkel, 2012). Atkinson as cited in Palmer 2013) reinforced that students' cultural background is an important component of ESL/EFL teaching. Therefore, he believes that the teachers will face it whenever they conduct the teaching process The teachers who ignore such differences will probably face "frustration, misapprehensions, intercultural conflict, and ultimately school failure" (Le Roux as cited in Palmer, 2013, p. 4).

Likewise, Alpetkin (2002) has long argued that the concept of native speaker itself is "shaky". Therefore, the concept of teaching English based on native speakeristic paradigm is not always necessary. Specifically, Alptekin (2002) elaborated that the instances of speaking practice in the future will probably occur more in non-native English context instead of in English speaking context.

Empirically, the perceived incompatibilities or differences between the students' cultural background and the newly exposed English cultures have also been reported. In Pakistan context for instance, some Pakistani students who learned English were found to bear negative attitudes toward learning English due to the perceived differences (Jabeen & Shah, 2011). The teaching of English in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have also been marred with some criticisms due to the perceived improper cultural presentation in their teaching materials (Osman, 2015).

The relatively current research on the teaching English in Saudi Arabian cultural context has also indicated slightly disheartening challenge, in that most of the learners of English language at Jazan University admitted to having some socio-cultural limitations, such as the fear of practicing English language, the paradigm that speaking English is not the part of the culture at Jazan, westernization, and so forth (Ullah, 2017).

Hopkyn's (2017) current research, alike, has also found some relatively discouraging responses. For instance, while the influence of English toward the respondent's identity was deemed as positive changes, the impact of English toward Arab cultures was still considered harmful since it could probably incur negative changes to cultural identity such as Arabic loss, the emergence of domestic rifts between generations adopting traditional and modern point of views, more modern clothing changes and the desires to behave like English native-speakers (Hopkyns, 2017).

Unlike the above disheartening reports, the study conducted in Indonesian EFL context revealed different results. Murtisari and Ma's finding (2017), for instance, found that Indonesian students tended to view the existence of English positively in terms of enriching their language and culture. More specifically, Murtisari and Ma (2017) indicated that there were more than half of the respondents who disbelieved that the existence of English could erode their cultures.

In sum, scholars believe that the intercultural conflict arising between the students and the newly cultural exposure is generally caused by

the perceived or real incompatibility of goals, values, expectations, processes, or outcomes between two or more interdependent individuals or groups (see e.g., Martin, & Nakayama, 2008, p. 211). Triandis (2009, p. 18), alike, corroborates that the intensity of conflict will usually depend on "how far the distance occurs".

METHOD
Basically mixed method is generally considered as a study which employs both written and verbal means (Frankel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012; Schoonenboom, & Johnson, 2017). The use of written means as the data collection is due to the potentially simple and efficient way of collecting the data (Bohner & Wanke as cited in Chung 2006). The data collected through questionnaire is therefore perceived very suitable to measure someone's perception/attitudes (Bohner & Wanke as cited in Chung 2006). In terms of eliciting someone's perception, the use of Likert scale-like option, for instance, enables the participants to categorize their thought on certain aspect easily (Sinno, 2008; Yu, 2010).

In order to support the validity of the data collection, the use of interview can be administered in order to help validate the participants' perception (Yu, 2010; Frankel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012; Schoonenboom, & Johnson, 2017). This is because the use of questionnaire, which is solely administered without other means, can possibly prevent the participant to describe their thoughts further and the reasons behind their choices. Some of the scholars even perceive that the use of sole questionnaire will allow the participants to conceal the truth about their perceptions (Sinno, 2008). Therefore, the use of interview which is conducted almost at the same time (concurrently) will possibly provide the participants with more chances to figure out the reasons behind their perception, thus making the data become more valid (Schoonenboom, & Johnson, 2017).

The study was conducted in a privately funded university located in a suburban area. The university has been accredited and operating some majors at the moment. The recruitments of the students was not solely based on their majors but mainly based on their availability to support the study. In addition, the management of the university also required the researcher to obtain the participants' consents prior to the commencement of the study. Scholars such as Frankel, Wallen, and Hyun (2012) perceived that it is possible for the researcher to select the subjects of research based on their availability due to several constraints such as the limited number of participants who are able to participate in the projects, etc.

The participants were conveniently recruited based on their available time and their willingness to participate voluntarily (Frankel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). There was no reward given to those attending the project. The research was conducted merely based on voluntary basis and only conducted for a day in order not to disturb the students' learning process. The participants recruited were mostly the first semester students, while the rest were in their second semesters.

The first data collection was taken from the questionnaire administered to the students in their own classes. The second data collection was taken from the random interview conducted to the students one by one in order to provide more elaborate data and much more relaxing atmosphere. Since the present study was scheduled for only one day, the researcher did not interview the whole students. On the other hand, the researcher offered the students who were willing to be interviewed right after the process of eliciting written data. There were only 8 students who were interviewed after the administration of questionnaire. The followings are the data of the students participated in the study.

Table 1. *The participants of the study*

Department	Number	Occupation	Written data	Oral data
English Literature	20	Yes	Yes	Yes
Informatics	20	Yes	Yes	Yes
Accounting	40	Yes	Yes	

Note: Not all of the students of the two departments were interviewed

Since the present study aimed to analyze students' perceptions, some instruments were employed to elicit the data. In sum, the analysis of the research data was based on both written and oral data. The use of written instrument (i.e. questionnaire) was administered for the first time

in order to allow the researcher to get the preliminary data indicating the participants' perceptions toward the incorporation of English culture in their EFL context. Further, the oral/verbal data were used so that the researcher could get more complete reasons supporting the participants' perceptions. The use of verbal data supporting the written data is also in line with Patton's concept suggesting the use of interview as the means for identifying the participants' thought, idea, or perception.

Patton (as cited in Frankel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012), for instance, defended the use of interview in order to elicit someone's mind instead of the other instruments e.g. observation. "We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe. The issue is not whether observational data is more desirable, valid, or meaningful than self-report data. The fact of the matter is that we cannot observe everything. We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things" (p. 451).

The followings are the brief steps of collecting the data:

1. The students were informed about the planned research which would be conducted in their classroom.
2. The students were given some brief information regarding the research, the procedures, and the confidentiality regarding the research.
3. The students were asked to fill in the questionnaire based on the students' classrooms (i.e., Literature, Informatics, and Accounting).
4. After handing in their questionnaires, the students were requested to attend the interview session for approximately 10 to 15 minutes.
5. The interview was offered to the whole participants and conducted in semi-structured manner.
6. The participants were selected to attend an interview session.
7. The interview aimed to identify more elaborate data on the students' perceptions.
8. The interview was conducted in Bahasa/students' native language in order to

allow the students to express their perceptions freely.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The section presents the findings from written data (i.e. questionnaire) taken from the first phase. For the sake of simplicity, the oral/verbal data elicited during the interview are presented partially in the discussion section. Only certain relevant statements will be presented in the discussion. The verbal data are translated into English (Muamaroh, 2013, p. 64).
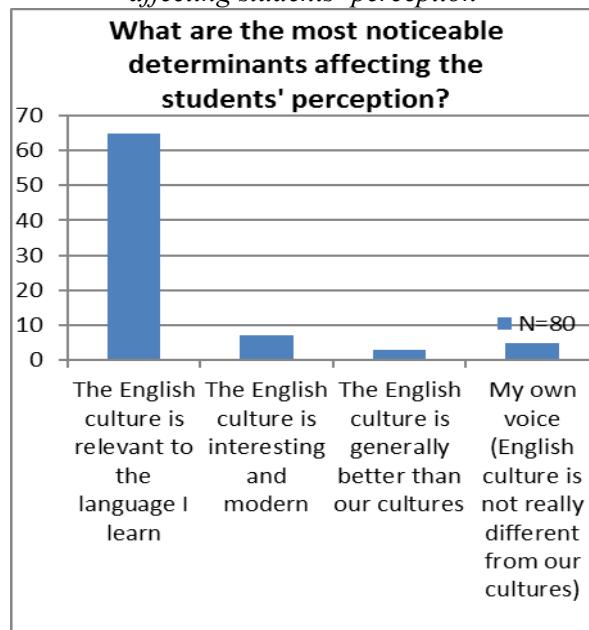
The students' perception toward the incorporation of the English culture in EFL

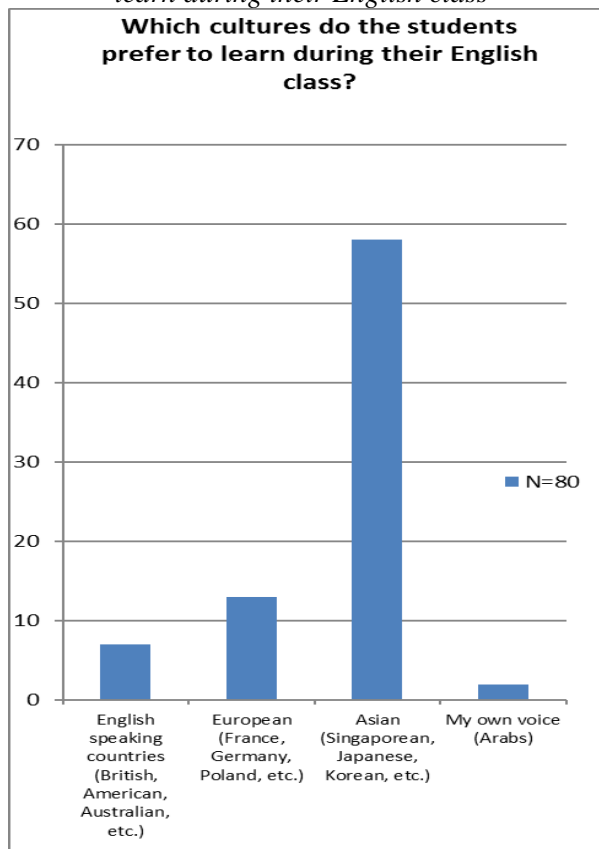Table 2. *Students' perceptions toward the incorporation of English culture*
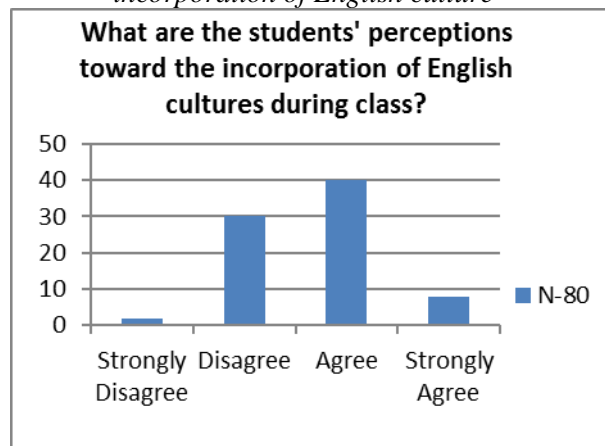
The most noticeable determinant affecting students' perception

Table 3. *The most noticeable determinant affecting students' perception*

The cultures that the students prefer to learn during their class

Table 4. *The culture that the students prefer to learn during their English class*

The most noticeable determinants affecting the students' preference

Table 5. The most noticeable determinants affecting the students' preference
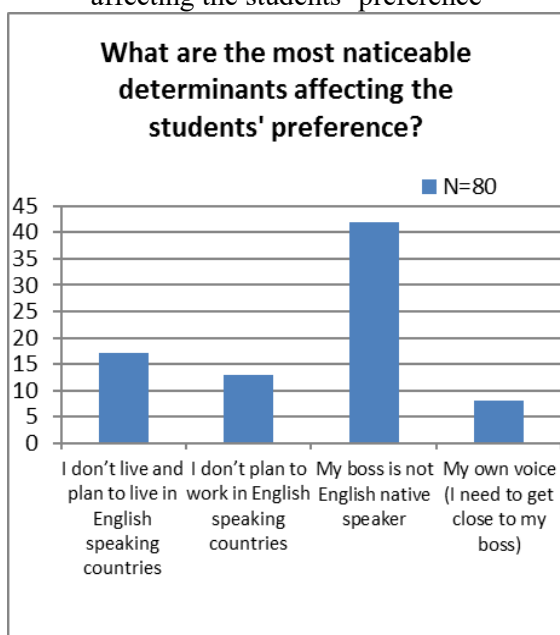
The students' perception toward the issue of cultural diversity

Table 6. *The students' perception toward the issue of cultural diversity*
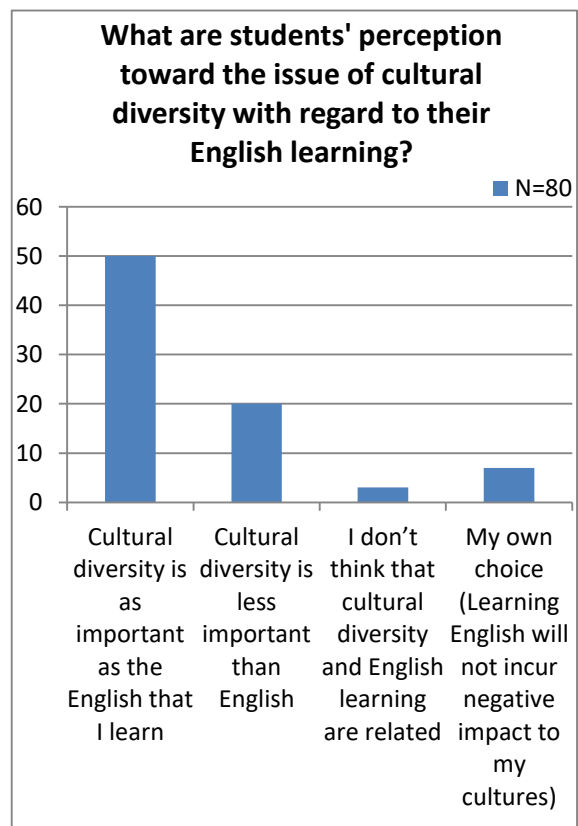
The students' need for learning English

Based on the finding of the first research question (Please refer to Table 2), it can be inferred that the English cultural exposure during the class was not fully supported by the whole participants. In fact, there were only 48 students (40 agrees and 8 strongly agrees) who voiced their agreement. In fact, the rest 32 students (approximately 40 % of the whole participants) were found to disagree with such exposures.

One of the participants (A) who voiced his unfavorable written responses, openly stated:

Well, I think English is still important but I think presenting English cultures too much is not important anymore for us, as you see that I am not living abroad and I think there is not much benefit to my work at all (Interview).

Similarly, another participant (B) who admitted to have voiced his favorable written response in the questionnaire indicated relatively the same perception

I think my focus is now ...how to find a better employment, so whether the teaching of English culture is important, may be, if one day I go to America or Australia ...but the most important thing that I have to do now is I have to be more

prepared to apply my English in Asian communities since my boss is Japanese (Interview)

When being asked about the English skill was very important for him, he simply stated.

What I need is, off course, the ability to communicate well, may be grammar, you know that Asian doesn't really care about pronunciation but they simply have accurate grammar to communicate, but again it doesn't mean that they hate English pronunciation, but they just simply focus more on jobs (Interview)

The most noticeable determinants affecting students' perception

The ambivalent responses on the incorporation of English cultures was found relevant to the verbal utterances elicited by the researcher, in that the participants basically learned English for a mere practical reason; thus they did not focus much on cultural aspects as the followings.

Respondent C, for instance, simply stated:

I think English is important, as we know that English is an international language, however, in this difficult time, we need to know what to do first in our study, so I think communication is the first (Interview)

Based on the analysis, it could also be inferred that the students still indicated their appreciation toward the incorporation of the English cultures, despite the fact that they did not plan to travel or migrate to English speaking countries, as simply stated by respondent E:

[I think it is logical if we are supposed to learn English cultures since we are English literature students; thus it is quite reasonable if we learn English culture so that we can appreciate things about English] (Interview)

The newly emerging cultural preference: The Asian cultures and their business power

Based on the findings, it could also be inferred that students' contacts with many non-native English speakers (Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, etc.) have significantly increased the participants' interest toward learning the cultures as firmly stated by respondent F:

As you know that we, mostly college students, even teenagers, are now frequently exposed to Asian cultures, such as TV's drama, K-Pop, or the other Asian cultures or songs, in fact, one of my superiors is also a Chinese, so I think we have no reason for not learning these cultures (Interview)

When being asked about the English of Asian who sometimes produces many grammatical errors or improper pronunciation, she simply stated (F):

Certainly, it is very common for us to make some mistakes, even though we try to speak English, we admit that we sometimes make mistakes, but I

don't think that our communication is disturbed, in fact, we manage to get along well, for instance, my boss keeps using English when he talks to me and the other workers, this is mainly because I cannot speak Chinese, and secondly because it is the language that we understand [Interview]

With reference to Kachru's circles, it could be interpreted that the participants were getting more interested in learning cultures from the expanding circles such as Korean, Japan, and China rather the ones coming from the inner or the outer-circles (Pung, 2009). Despite the potential mistakes which emerge during their English daily practices, they keep using their English to support their communication.

This finding also confirms Alptekin's (2002) hypothesis in which the number of non-native English speakers will far exceed native speakers, thus resulting in the varieties of English usage.

Another participant (G), likewise, expressed the same idea when being questioned on the Asian English which tends to indicate some deficiencies, such as less proper grammar or pronunciation:

Yes, I understand that speaking with Asian or like my boss, they just use English for communication practice in my workplace, so I don't think that pronunciation is important for us, since we communicate among Asian, but so far we have no problem with our communication (Interview)

When being questioned further on the skill that the participant chiefly depends on when communicating his Asian boss, respondent G firmly stated [I think we focus on accuracy, so I focus on grammar and vocabulary, we don't really care with English pronunciation, but it doesn't mean that we don't appreciate it] (Interview)

Based on the written and verbal data, it could be inferred that the participants tended to focus more on communication practices, thus focusing more on some aspects of accuracies such as grammar and vocabulary. The action which tends to ignore English-like pronunciation is somewhat relevant to Yu's (2010 finding that the Chinese college students analyzed by her indicated strong wishes to be identified as Chinese while learning English, thus partially indicating that English-native like pronunciation is not really important for them.

The students' awareness toward cultural diversity

Based on the finding (see the last figure), it can be interpreted that basically the students are still aware of the importance of preserving their own culture, thus indicating the importance of

preserving their own cultures as well as the other cultures.

Another important finding from the questionnaire is the participants' perception on the absence of potentially harmful impact due to the English learning process. In short, the present study confirms the previously conducted study in Indonesian EFL context indicating relatively positive responses toward learning English (Murtisari & Ma, 2017). This finding also confirms the studies conducted in some Asian countries such as China (Yu, 2010) in which the students that she analyzed indicated favorable responses/attitudes toward learning English and considered that English did not pose any harm to their cultures. The present study, whatsoever, disconfirms the other study conducted in the middle-eastern countries and Pakistan in which some of the students of certain geographic regions tended to indicate strong disagreement toward learning English (Jabeen, & Shah, 2011; Ullah, 2017; Hopkyns, 2017).

CONCLUSION
Due to the increasing interest toward Asian cultures indicated by the students, it is certainly important for the teachers/lecturers to incorporate Asian cultures during the class. The need to accommodate the students' interest is reasonable since the students recruited for the present study are the ones working for Asian owned companies (Japanese, Koreans, Chinese, etc.).

Based on the findings, it could also be found that basically the students' interest to learn more Asian culture is due to the fact that they will not permanently live in English speaking countries, or simply stated that the students tend to learn English for instrumental motives and not for integrative motives (Dornyei, 1996; Al-Shamy, 2012). This finding also confirms the increasingly important role of the expanding circles since there will be more English communication practices which occur in this region (Alptekin, 2002).

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