PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS' PERCEPTION ABOUT LANGUAGE, CULTURE, IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
	In foreign language learning, and teaching, the concepts of language, culture, identity and difference, and their relationship are contentious topics. What is culture? What is identity? What is difference? What connection do they have to language? What part should the culture of the learners have in learning about the culture of the target? Questionnaires and Focus group discussion were used to collect the data. This study explores pre-service English teachers' in a private university in East Nusa Tenggara perceptions about language and culture in language learning. The results show how pre-service English teachers' perceptions of language and culture fit into a humanistic and functional framework in relation to language learning. Participants also mentioned the value of language acquisition in understanding cultural diversity and cultural identity.

INTRODUCTION

It is well known that numerous academics have struggled to define the concepts of language, culture, identity, difference and connections among them. Many scholars argue that language, culture, identity, and difference are interconnected, flexible and unfixed. Ramírez-Lizcano and Cabrera-Tovar (2020) argues that in the field of language education, there is considerable discussion concerning how culture, cultural development and transformation may affect language learning. Alvarez & Bonilla (2009) states that the recognition of students' perception about the connection between language acquisition, culture identity and difference has helped people understand other cultures, recognize local ideologies, recognize cultural identity and increase cross cultural awareness. However, scholars such as Turizo and Gómez (2006), however, assert that in certain countries, particularly in EFL contexts where English is not widely spoken, the connection between language acquisition and culture is ignored.

In order to comprehend the relationships between language, culture, identity, and difference, this study will first define the term language and culture. Hall (1997, p. 1) believes that language is a tool that can be used by us to "stand for stand for or symbolize our ideas, beliefs, concepts and feelings to others". People analyse and make logic of everything around them, convey their ideas about the world, build experiences within a community, and identify both themselves and other people through language (Hall, 1997; Kramsch, 1998). In similar vein, Kramsch (2004, p. 255) believes that it is through language, a method of communication utilized by people, they are able to share their knowledge and experiences.

Other than language, understanding culture is another important notion since it offers a framework for looking at the ideas of identity and difference. Being a part of a discourse community that has a common social space, history, and set of rules for behaving, thinking, seeing, and judging is known as culture (Kramsch, 1998). Culture is the means by which individuals interpret their experiences (Nunan and Choi, 2010). Further emphasis is made by Hall (2013) who claims that this process involves understanding the representation of meaning and language towards culture. It is through that language people are able to create meaning within a culture and share the understanding to the members of culture in an insightful manner.

The discussion of language and culture leads to the discussion of identity and difference. In relation to language and culture, identity and difference are reciprocal of each other. Woodward (1997) constructs the concept of identity and difference by stating that identities are represented through language and cultural symbol. Identity refers to how people perceive themselves and other people in relation to the greater society and the cultural group they are a part of (Kim, 2003). The process of constructing an identity is not easy. It requires individuals to examine categorical systems that divide and organize social relations into two opposed communities, such as "them and us" or "other and self" (Woodward, 1997). This shows that difference between us and them establishes the parameters under which something can exist and distinguishing it from what it is not. Thus, identity can be compared and found to be either similar or distinct from others. Both Kramsch (1998) and Woodward (1997) emphasize that apart from similarity, difference can also serve as a signal of identity. Individuals can utilize difference to define themselves, forge connections amongst members of the same cultural group, and to set themselves apart from others (Woodward 1997). In terms of language, Norton (2010) states every time we speak using any languages, we negotiate and renegotiate our identity as well as our relationship with others in a community of cultural group.

Scholars have connected the idea of language learning a with various topics of debate. Theories like the universal grammar (Chomsky, 1959) and behaviorism (Skinner, 1957) have influenced how languages are taught, evaluated, and promoted. Initially, learning a language was viewed as mastering particular linguistic skills like vocabulary, phonology, or grammar. Although these linguistic perspectives on language is still prominent among language theories, other elements that have had an impact on language learning have recently addressed diverse perspectives on the nature of language. For instance, Tudor (2001) explores the notion of language's range in terms of its foundation in cultural, humanistic and functional aspects in addition to its representation as a linguistic system. Tudor asserts that students' varied viewpoints, philosophies, and life experiences are crucial for helping them comprehend the language and how its acquisition is seen.

According to Scarino (2014) in recent years, the idea of language learning has evolved from a focus on grammar to how students interact in many cultural settings and how the globalization phenomenon affects communication. In modern day, language learning considers the diversity of students, the range of languages they use, and the variety of situations in which learning objectives are to be met. In similar vein, McChonacy (2018) views language learning as a process that focuses on interpretation rather than just producing the target language's words or sentences. He emphasizes how crucial it is to broaden our understanding that language, language learning, and culture are not separated but interconnected concepts in language learning. Language is the comprehension of linguistic systems and codes; learning is the acquisition and interpretation of actual knowledge. But the idea of culture is the cornerstone upon which meaning is formed and communicated during language acquisition.

According to Kramsch (1998), culture is significant in language learning and instruction because the social layers and historical of culture have united to overcome the sociocultural environment of language study. According to Gulbinskien and Lasauskien (2014), students who are learning a foreign language are internalizing the cultural and linguistic systems. The use of language is correlated to a variety of products, activities, attitudes, communities, and individuals depending on certain contexts.

Culture is important to language instruction because it has been integrated into our knowledge of how people interact with one another (Moran, 2001). Through an examination of the participants' experiences as language learners and the subsequent construction of cultural reflections, we hope to better understand and explore the participants' perspectives of language and culture in language learning.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study used a qualitative research approach. The elicitation data collection procedure was beneficial for discovering and defining the participants' opinions. According to Creswell (2007), the purpose of qualitative research is to enable participants to express themselves and have their voices heard. Another purpose is to comprehend the context in which people encounter the topic being studied. This approach is relevant to this study's investigation since it allowed the writer to get comprehension of the participants' perceptions of language, cultural, identity and difference concepts. This study requested the participants to select a moniker that would be used to identify the instruments during the data analysis process because participant anonymity is essential to qualitative research. The participants in this study were pre-service English teachers in a private University in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. In the university, they were required to take language and culture courses. This study was done to explore their perceptions of language and culture in language learning before they take the language and culture courses. The participants were 3 boys and 3 girls. Their ages ranged from 19 to 22 years old. Questionnaires and focus groups were done to get the data.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

To explain about the findings and discussion, this study used the following subcategories to help the readers follow the researcher's idea. The findings and discussion consider the participants' perceptions of language and culture in language learning in light of their experiences as both English language learners and future English teachers.

Participants' perceptions of Language

To discuss participants' perception of the relationship between language and culture in language learning, this research began by identifying participants' understanding of language. Scholars have proposed different definitions of language. One definition is language as communication tools. In order for communication to take place, two or more people must be in the conversation. In this instance, the emphasis is on the interaction process to enable feedback to be exchanged between the speaker and his interlocutor. It is through language that the conversation could happen. In general, all participants agree to the definition of language as a communication device, which enables them interact with others. This can be seen from participant statements, for example: *"… language serves as a tool for interaction and a tool for communication with other people around me such as my friends. It allows me to express my ideas, concepts, feelings, and thoughts to them. Without language, I cannot convey what I think about them"*. Owing to the work of linguist such as (Chaer and Agustina, 2004) in relation to the previous statement, as a means of communication, language functions can be examined from various angels like listener and speaker. Speakers or the participants of this study expressed their ideas, concepts, feelings, and thoughts when interacting with others. Meanwhile, for the listener, language not only compels the listener to understand but also to and to ensure that the action is in line with the speakers' intentions.

In addition to communication instrument, participants situated the concept of language as a crucial tool for personal, professional and economic development. This presumption can refer to the idea that participants were English learners and that English is the language of the most industrialized and strong countries, and that knowledge of it is necessary to comprehend why they are successful. This can be seen from the participants' efforts to make researchers know and understand their background in

learning English, for example through statement *"Language skill is one of the job requirements today. We can earn more can and we can even show our education level through language"*. Another participant tried to convey his statement through an economic perspective *"English is one of the languages that helps us with better career possibilities and economic development"*. I*t helps us build networks, collaborate and compete economically with developed countries.* Indirectly, these presumptions suggest the benefit that individuals could get from learning the foreign language.

Furthermore, since the idea of language's nature has been broadly explored, participants also investigate a more humanistic understanding of language. They include their emotions, social reactions and feeling to perceive language. They define language as a tool for self-expression. It is through language that they could identify himself, find out similarities and differences between them and their friends and make others understand their identification of themselves. *"Language is a mirror for us both as a self and as a community. If we speak the same language to express our language means we belong to the same community but if not, we belong to different community.* Referring to this statement, participants perceive language by connecting it with culture, identity and differences indirectly. Kramsch (1998) states that the main tool we use to conduct our social lives is language. Language and culture are intertwined when it comes to communication. People could learn, transmit and express culture through language (Kim, 2003). Furthermore, owing to the work of some scholars such as Trueba & Zou then Sapir & Whorf, the relationship between language and culture can be explored further. Language is a component of culture, it cannot exist without culture (Trueba & Zou, 1994, quoted in Kim, 2003). Moreover, some of them even relate the of language to an image, a symbol and color. The following statement is the example from participant: *"I think language is limited to phrases, words and sentences. It could be divided by symbols, accents, color, image, etc"*. In this case, language symbols can offer comprehensive feedback. The sender, who is speaking, is able to understand the symbols in his own language. For example, finger movements as a form of language contain special meaning for a group of people in a community.

Participants' perceptions of Culture

The participants of this study perceive the concept of culture from two different aspects; visible and invisible aspects. The former refers to what is visible in a cultural group such as history, festivities, dances, locations, and cuisine. The later refers to what is invisible in a cultural group such as behaviour, customs, beliefs, and values. In relation to the visible aspect of culture, people see culture as a concrete or visible product because these components have remained constant in people's lives over time. Accordingly, culture is only understood in terms of its most obvious elements, and it may serve as a framework for a cultural group or community to broaden its cultural heritage and market it as a commodity that other cultural groups or communities may buy (Ramírez-Lizcano and Cabrera-Tovar, 2020). One of the participants had the following perception: *"Culture is unique. Every region has its own diversity of cultural products in terms of food, clothes, accessories, dances and celebration from ancestors until now"*. In a similar vein with respect to the visible aspect of culture, other participant thought that: *"Culture characterizes a region or group in terms of food, costumes, musical instruments, dances and artifacts"*.

Individuals' impressions of culture are influenced not just by cultural products but also by intangible and symbolic components including ideas, values, conventions, and behaviors. People see culture as an intangible or invisible product because the truth of what is actually happening and the reasons behind it can remain hidden if one does not have a thorough understanding of a culture. One of the participants highlighted that *"culture is custom, beliefs, behavior, norms and religion owned by people within communities or countries that come from the old generation to the new generation"*. Surprisingly, one of the participants claim that recognizing what is invisible within a culture and appreciating it are also parts of culture. *"With cultural beliefs, we can respect other people"*.

Participants' perceptions of Identity and difference

To perceive the concept of identity and difference, participants tend to connect them with language and culture. They identify their identity by comparing themselves with their friends. They highlighted their interactions when they spoke different traditional languages, having different accent and wearing different traditional clothes. When it comes to language, culture, and representation, identity and difference are mutually dependent. Identity is given meaning through language which it is represented (Woodward, 1997). Owning to the work of Woodward, one participant claimed that *"identity relates to myself such as my skin colour, culture, ethnic, language and family name"*. Other participants state that *"Identity refers to who you are. It is the symbol of who the person is such as ethnic, race, culture…"*.

Moreover, the participants perceive identity and difference as being flexible and non-fixed. This is in line with the theory of Woodward (1997) which states that discourse modifications and representations in language and culture can cause identity and difference to be inherent, fluid, fixed, or unchangeable. Interactions with people who speak different languages and belong to different cultures help to develop identities and forge new ones. "It is pretty hard to define my identity and the notion of difference. As you know, identity is something that relate to yourself while difference refers to something that is not same with yourself. I think when I communicate with my friend from other regions, my identity change as I may find similarities and differences between us" said one of the participants in the questionnaire.

Participants' perceptions about the relationship between language, culture, identity and difference in language learning

To explore participants' perception about the relationship between language and culture in language learning, this study began by recognizing the English language's position as one of the languages that people speak the most in the world that has shaped participants' opinions about language learning opportunities. It also helped to sustain the notion that English is a valuable and significant language for the participants as English language learners and future English teachers.

There are various views regarding how language and culture interact in language learning. There are those who argue that in language learning, language and culture are distinct entities, while others maintain that they are inextricably linked and cannot be separated. Some claim that because language is so shaped by culture, everything that happens in the culture will reflect in it. On the other hand, it's also said that language and culture have an impact on how people think and learn language. Participants made the following comments in relation to the previous statement:

1. *"Language and culture must be interrelated. As a student who studies English, I think I need to learn both the language and culture. It helps me master the language and understand why people behave differently in other cultures"*.
2. *"I think language and culture are connected to each other. Language has the power to identify a culture. The way a term is used has a certain meaning that is unique to a language and its relationship to culture. We can use it to convey cultural values and ideas"*.
3. *"By learning English, I can know about the culture. I also have chance to share about my own culture. As a result, I can explore the world"*.

The insights provided by participants above demonstrated the degree to which culture and language might interact during language learning. Thus, students may be able to comprehend how language learning conveys cultural awareness through the portrayal of culture in the langauge classroom. In addition, participants' perception of the connection between language and culture in language learning give insights that foreign language learning help to improve participants' awareness of the world around them and to fortify their own culture.

Regarding the cultural component of learning foreign languages, pre-service English instructors themselves hold varying opinions. Some learners may feel threatened by their identity in their first language if culture is given too much importance. As an illustration, some participants remarked, *"We are studying English in this class. I want to focus on learning language and grammar without being distracted by culture"*. Others assert that values, history, and culture are not effectively taught in language classrooms. There were participants who said that language and culture are two different things. "*Why should I learn the culture? I just need to learn the language".* This highlight the opinion of some scholars that language and culture are separated as noted by McChonacy (2018), one of the most common issues in teaching English as foreign languages is that learners' interest in learning English appears to be disconnected from the development of culture in general and their cultural identity and the recognition of otherness in specific. In similar vein, Kramsch (2013) argues that people who come from different social backgrounds might feel inferior or uncertain about their own culture which may lead them to reject culture from language classes. He further explains that those who come from a middle-class background may want to learn about foreign cultures but acknowledge their cultural identity because they believe their own culture to be universal and study languages and cultures mainly in order to gain a deeper understanding of it.

CONCLUSION

This study's objective was to know participants' perceptions of language and culture in language learning. This study agreed that it is crucial to investigate participants' viewpoints on the function of culture in language learning. It is also essential to examine the relationship between language and culture given that culture can impact the language learning process. It is found that participants perceived language as communication instrument, and a mean for self-expression which enabled them to communicate themselves, their opinions, and their emotions. Additionally, participants believe that language may be used as a tool to promote accessibility to the economy and jobs. This study also offered opportunities for understanding participants' perception of culture, identity and difference. Cultural factors can affect a learner's performance in the language as well as their ability to acquire a foreign language, so it is important to help students develop an understanding of culture as a valuable process in which they also shape their identity through understanding and maintaining cultural awareness.

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