

Is Culture Descriptive or Prescriptive: An Interview Study

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Abstract

The present study investigated Iranian educated individuals' beliefs about descriptive and prescriptive nature of culture. In doing so, 50 undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate students of Islamic Azad University of Karaj were selected through convenience sampling. They were interviewed using semi-structured questions to explore their beliefs about culture. Qualitative analysis of the participants' beliefs through grounded theory led to the categorization of individuals' beliefs regarding the role of family and society as two major sources of description and prescription in shaping their culture. In other words, half of the participants believed in highlighting their parents' and friends' roles in shaping their culture and further developing their understandings of culture through interaction with them, which resulted in descriptive nature of their beliefs. On the other, 50 % of the educated individuals held the belief that culture is prescriptive and

resistant to change when it is gained through family and society. Findings contributed to more understanding of culture and how it can be developed in order to help individual play an important role in the society by shaping their interactions with their peers as well as the society in psycholinguistic research.

Keywords: Beliefs, Culture, Descriptive, Prescriptive

Introduction

According to Kramsch (1993), culture means "membership in a discourse community that shares a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating and action" (p. 127), and thus, through culture learning one comes to understand and believe whatever one has to do for the purpose of operating in a manner which is acceptable to other members in that society. In fact, cultural knowledge is socially acquired and appropriate behaviors are learned (Abubaker, 2008). Culture can be defined as acceptable interaction within the social group and what makes the group, involving a way of life, a set of social practices, a system of beliefs and a shared history or set of experiences (Yassine, 2006). Culture is hardly definable in a simple way since it is so complex, subtle,

and layered. However, there are common themes and concepts in definitions of culture (Cui, 2014). Culture consists of shared characteristics of behavior and social interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding; patterns that are acquired through a process of socialization and transmitted to future generations; an ongoing meaning-making process within a context. Under this process, culture lies in human interaction (Gurney, 2005). The interaction generally involves communication between people and it is through verbal and non-verbal language that people can share their messages, knowledge, emotions and values (Hu, 2015). Moreover, culture learning takes place through symbolic integration, a kind of communication in which language or gestures are used.

Murdock (1941) asserted that there exist three basic factors to a comprehension of human social interaction including the individual, society, and culture. Further, he defined culture as a “corpus of habitual and traditional norms of behavior” (p.142) and divided its elements into techniques, relationships, and ideas. Techniques refer to the external world of nature which involve with exploitative activities (e.g. in the acquisition of food and other want-satisfying materials), technological process (in that materials are transformed into artifacts and consumption goods), and a variety of mystical and religious practices.

Relationships are the responses of the members who are acting within the society. They yield social structures in all forms of organizations (e.g. economic, domestic, and political, etc.) and culturally defined relationships can be maintained based upon a society’s system of interpersonal relationships. The third factor of a culture is ideas which “consist not of habits of overt behavior but of patterned verbal habits, often sub-vocal but capable of expression in speech” (p. 143). These include technological and scientific knowledge, beliefs, and a conceptual formation of normal behaviors involved in both techniques and relationships.

Cultural understanding aims to understand different value orientations between different cultural groups (Lazaraton, 2003). To identify key concepts to represent fundamental principles of culture, Hofstede (1991) examines the emotional and psychological characteristics of people from different cultural groups. He perceived culture as ‘software of the mind’ that guides us in our daily interactions.

In response to the increasing need for including culture learning evaluation in the testing program of the pedagogic inquiry, Lafayette and Schulz (1997) suggested three goals for culture that they consider ‘realistic and testable’ in a secondary foreign language program: “(1) knowledge: the ability to recognize cultural information or patterns; (2) understanding: the ability to

explain cultural information or pattern(s); and (3) behavior: the ability to use cultural information or pattern(s)”(pp. 581-582). They pointed out that all three objectives are basically cognitive, and the fact that they differ only in the type of knowledge they require. Lafayette and Schulz did not include attitudinal objectives because they were not convinced that it was “the function of the classroom teacher to manipulate attitudes directly and systematically toward a specific culture” (p. 582), even though many language teachers may now acknowledge the importance of affective factors in language learning, including learners’ attitudes in (dis)motivating them to learn a foreign language and culture in the first place and to (dis)continue their learning and have contact with the language and culture after the formal classroom education.

Schulz (2007) proposed five fundamental objectives for culture learning and cross-cultural awareness and understanding in the foreign language classroom:

1. Students develop and demonstrate an awareness that geographic, historical, economic, social/religious, and political factors can have an impact on cultural perspectives, products, and practices, including language use and style of communication.
2. Students develop and demonstrate an awareness that situational variables (e.g., context and role expectations, including

power differentials, and social variables such as age, gender, social class, religion, ethnicity, and place of residence) shape communication interaction (verbal, nonverbal, and paralinguistic) and behavior in important ways .

3. Students recognize stereotypes or generalizations about the home and target cultures and evaluate them in terms of the amount of substantiating evidence .

4. Students develop and demonstrate an awareness that each language and culture has culture-conditioned images and culture-specific connotations of some words, phrases, proverbs, idiomatic formulations, gestures, etc .

5. Students develop and demonstrate an awareness of some types of causes (linguistic and nonlinguistic) for cultural misunderstanding between members of different cultures (p. 17).

An overview of the literature on culture learning shows that just like the construct of culture, culture learning has been taken into account in various ways at different stages in the history of education. In the traditional view, culture has been classifiable, relatively static, and is understood mainly as pertinent cultural information and knowledge, such as literature, foods, idioms, and music. However, there is an increasing trend to view culture as dynamic and variable and to understand culture as an evolving process of creating meaning through interpersonal communication and interaction using the language (Crawford-

Lange & Lange, 1984; Lafayette, 1988; 1997; Moran, 2001). Thus, investigating both dimensions of culture can be of value when individuals' beliefs are considered. Hence, the present study investigates the learners' beliefs about culture by concentrating on its descriptive and prescriptive aspects.

Methodology

Participants

The present study was conducted with the participation of 50 people, who were undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate

individuals with different fields of study. They were selected through convenience sampling procedure due to their availability at the time of the research (Dornyei, 2007). In fact, the researcher selected the participants from Islamic Azad University of Karaj. The participants' field of study and their educational degree were taken into account by the researcher in order to select different groups of participants from different faculties. Their age range was from 21 to 30. The participants' characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1- Participants' characteristics

Characteristics				
Faculty	Engineering (n=10)	Sciences (n=12)	Psychology (15)	Law (13)
Gender	Female (n=36)	Male (n=24)		
Educational Degree	Undergraduate (n=11)	Graduate (n=27)	Post-Graduate (n= 12)	

Instrument: Semi-Structured Interview

In order to explore the participants' beliefs about descriptive or prescriptive nature of culture, they were individually interviewed by the researcher. Accordingly, the following research questions were asked:

1. How can one acquire culture?
2. What are the most important factors in understanding the culture?

3. Is culture something which is learnt? How?

4. Is culture something which is taught? How?

4. Are we supposed to accept any prescribed culture?

5. How can one develop her understanding of culture?

It is worth noting that the interview questions were adapted from Esfandiari (2016) and modified accordingly. In

addition, interviews were conducted in the participants' native language, i.e., Persian.

Procedure

The present study investigated the individuals' beliefs about culture and whether it has been gained descriptively or prescriptively. Thus, 50 undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate students of Islamic Azad University of Karaj were selected through convenience sampling. The researcher held the necessary meeting with the head of the target Faculties in order to provide the required permissions for data collection. Then, the participants were provided with through information regarding the objectives of the study. Informed consent was also obtained from the participants. Then, one to one interview was conducted in order to explore the participants' beliefs about culture, whether it is descriptive or prescriptive. It should also be mentioned that the participants' interviews were audio-recorded for further analysis.

Data Analysis

To analyze the participants' perceptions about culture, the interview transcripts were taken into account using grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in which the partial transcripts of the collected data were coded to find the main categories regarding the main purpose of the study and answer the research questions .

As to the data transcription, Dornyei (2007) argues that researchers can benefit

from partial transcription, i.e., the transcription of the parts that fit the purpose of the study. In this regard, those selected extracts of the interview data that were along with the main categories gained from grounded theory methodology were provided to highlight the sort of beliefs participants had about descriptive and prescriptive nature of culture.

As to the importance of the grounded theory, Dornyei (2007) adds that it is used in qualitative research method including the detailed procedural guidelines for data analysis providing an in-depth analysis of a phenomenon. In fact, grounded theory is concerned with coding data. For this purpose, three stages were defined according to Dornyei (2007) including:

1. Open coding of interviews to find general segments regarding culture;
2. Axial coding of the data to find connections between the categories of interviews segments found in the first step to create a meaningful set of categories; and
3. Selective coding by which the researcher aims to elaborate on an idea that has already been specified in the second stage.

Results

The present study investigated the educated individuals' beliefs about culture and whether it has been descriptively or prescriptively shaped. Qualitative analysis of the participants' interviews resulted in the selective categorization of their beliefs

as 1) Descriptive Culture: Family and Society Matter and 2) Prescriptive Culture: Family and Society Matter. In the following, each category is taken into consideration by providing the related extracts of the participants' interviews. It should be noted that the participants' interviews were translated into English.

Descriptive Culture: Family and Society Matter

The descriptive part of the culture denotes that people have been born with a sort of culture gained through interaction with their families and then grown in the society. However, such culture undergoes development when an individual try to develop his/her characteristics by playing an active role in the society through education or being employed in an organization. Thus, family and society have paved the way for the person to be concerned with his/her formation of culture, leading to attempting for its growth further.

As to the participants of the study, half of the educated individuals believed in the descriptive nature of culture by recognizing the role of family and society in shaping their culture. In fact, these groups of participants pointed out that although culture and its understanding and development might be fixed in the early ages of some ones' life. However, when they are in interaction with their families as well as the society, they are involved in the

meaningful social process in which new and developed aspects of culture are formed, which might provide an ideal atmosphere for the individuals to take active part in the society in order to promote their socio-cognitive growth. The participants of the study demonstrated that culture is not a stable entity, which requires to be taught in the beginning - by parents and apparently the society - and further developed by the person's self-attempt in shaping his/her cultural identity by interaction with the people in the society. The following extracts exemplify the participants' beliefs in descriptive nature of culture.

Extract 1.

I believe that we learn our culture from our families. I mean father and mother. Then, when we grow up, we enter the society and then another form of culture can be experienced. After that, gradually we can develop our understanding of the surrounding phenomena, which help us to gain more information regarding our society to improve our awareness of the culture.

Extract 2.

In my opinion, family and society shape our culture from our childhood up to adulthood. However, I should say that it does not mean that culture is a fixed construct. We, as humans, are interacting with each other and such communications can shape our culture and develop it when

we are taking active part in the society as an individual who tries to raise his/her awareness of cultural identity.

Extract 3.

I am a person who is always thinking about her past and trying to develop herself. This is very important for me when I gain an understanding of culture as a daughter of my family, and then try my best to shape or reshape it in order to reach perfect contributions in my future life. This is the fact that culture has to be developed and development lies in the person's interaction with the society, which helps him/her to be aware of her socio-cognitive situation.

Prescriptive Culture: Family and Society Matter

When culture is prescriptive, it might direct the individuals to take it as an 'idol', that should be frequently considered probably without any question. In such cases, there must be fewer opportunities for the person's understanding of interactive culture because the person has been prescribed to believe in that shape of culture taught by his/her family or the society. In fact, there is no space for individuals to question the formation of the adopted culture or what they can do in order to develop their understanding of culture. It is also worth mentioning that such individual should not blame no one but themselves in holding such beliefs that when family and society teach us some values as culture,

they are prescribed and had to be recognized.

Concerning the participants of the study, 50 % of the undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate students believed in the prescriptive nature of culture. In fact, they did not lay any value regarding the developmental aspect of culture teaching or learning, pointing out that culture should be respected in the way individuals have gained it from their ancestors and what society has gifted them. Thus, the participants perceived culture as a fixed construct that individuals have to take it not for granted but into account in their social life and adhere to its functions when communicating with their peers regardless of the development of individuals' understanding of culture. The following extracts reveal the participants' beliefs in prescriptive aspect of culture.

Extract 4.

I have to say that culture is not always developing. We learn it from our family or the people around us. That's it. There is no way to change it. Because, I think that our culture has no way to be further developed when it is perfect. Why should we develop it? I am satisfied with that.

Extract 5.

When you are born, you are provided with such culture that you can not change it. Or, let me say that you must not develop it. Because, culture is a fixed concept that we might acquire from our family and society.

After that, it has been always with us and we adopt it or implement in behaving with others.

Extract 6.

I believe that the understanding of culture donated by father and mother as well as the society can be enough for individuals' character development in the society. In fact, I think that people are not allowed to change their learnt culture when they grow up as there is no justification for that.

To sum up, the participants of the study held conflicting belief regarding culture by demonstrating the descriptive and prescriptive dimensions of their awareness about culture. In fact, the educated individuals in the present study recognized the fact that culture had to be gradually developed through interaction in the society although the counterpart participants disagreed with the developmental aspect of culture by adhering to the previously-learnt constructs of culture.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to qualitatively explore the individuals' beliefs about culture regarding its descriptive or prescriptive dimension. The participants of the study were interviewed. Grounded theory was used in order to categorize the participants' beliefs. Results revealed that both descriptive and prescriptive aspects of culture were equally treated by the educated participants. In other words, half of the participants agreed that culture is not fixed

entity, requiring individuals to develop it through interaction in the society, while the remaining 50 % of the individuals did believe in the prescriptive side of the culture, denoting the stable dimension of culture learn through family and society.

As to the descriptive aspect of culture, it can be argued that the participants might not be satisfied with their previously taught culture. Or, at the very least, they apparently thought that they could develop their gained culture. This can be in alignment with Abubaker (2008) and Yassine (2006) that pointed out the developmental phase of culture learning. Cui (2014) assumes that individuals are encouraged to develop their understanding of culture, and such awareness can be raised when interaction takes places among the different groups of people who share their thoughts and communicate with each other in the society. Findings of the study revealed that culture must not have been taken for granted in psycholinguistic research as Hu (2015) argued that individuals attempt to recognize the role culture plays in the society and the fact that individuals try to adhere to cultural values created through one-to-one interaction, resulting in the development of culture.

As far as prescriptive dimension of culture is concerned, previously taught and learned concepts of culture are valued as no opportunity for culture development is made in this stage. According to Moran

(2001), such beliefs must not be censured because they originate from the person's internal characteristics, which might undergo changes one day in his/her life. Findings of the study are in agreement with Lafayette (1997) and Schulz (2007) who stated that culture hardly accepts the development when individuals try to manipulate its previous components. Lazaraton (2003) also demonstrated that individuals' fixed perceptions of culture does not mean that they are illiterate or less-educated people because there is no scientific or logical justifications behind it. Thus, such beliefs have to be taken into account on their own.

Finally, it should be mentioned that present study explored the small number of participants' beliefs about culture, which does not meet the generalizeability of findings. Scholars can take into consideration larger groups of participants through quantitative research by administering a questionnaire, which has to be further developed. Research on culture is worth consideration because it has been a taken-for-granted issue in psycholinguistic research.

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