

Understanding English Language Learners' Interpretations of Cultures: The Case of Digital Photographs

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate what cultural meanings English language learners (ELLs) attributed to the selected digital photographs and how they interpreted these photographs at the intersection of 'my culture' and 'other culture' dichotomy. This qualitative study was carried out during the fall term of 2020-2021 at a state university in Antalya, Turkey. Forty-one first-grade students (26 males and 15 females) of English language and literature participated in the study. Data were gathered in two parts. In the first part, participants' free-associative responses to the selected photographs were collected, and in the second part, participants were asked to categorize the same photographs as 'my culture' or 'other culture' and explain how and why they did such a categorization. Findings showed that ELLs attributed different meanings to the selected photographs, employed either the judgmental/deductive or the experiential/inductive strategies to differentiate their own culture from other cultures, and paid attention to different visual descriptors inherent in the selected photographs.

Keywords: English language learners; interpretation; digital photographs; culture; deductive; inductive.

Introduction

Today's world is characterized by information and communication technologies. These milestones have been profoundly influencing vocational, educational and personal domains of our lives while turning our world into a digital one. In this digitalized world, knowledge is mostly produced and accessed by audio/visual texts that rapidly transmit messages within a complex web of cultural ramifications (Magnan, 2008). Such an instant way of conveying culture-laden messages paved the way for removing geographical distance and porous national borders (Halavais, 2000). With all these in mind, today's classrooms' demographic make-up is rapidly diversifying, and current pedagogical approaches prioritize that learners should be regarded as multicultural beings (Kiss & Weninger, 2017). Digitalization has been changing the way people learn (Donaghue, 2015) and transform them into visual learners (McCue, 2013). Considering most of these learners are and will be digital natives who are active participants of the digital world, educational goals and methods should be accommodated to the skills that these learners need to engage in the 21st-century world (Guerin et al., 2010). Therefore, in education, new types of literacies and ways of learning devoted to technology, digital media, information and visuals are now listed among the 21st-century skills on which education (NCREL, 2003). In the landscape of English language teaching (hereafter ELT), intercultural communicative competence (hereafter ICC) has been embraced in recent decades, and it is currently seen as the ultimate goal. ICC aims to enable learners to use the target language effectively and appropriately in culturally diverse settings. One of the culturally diverse settings in the 21st-century world is the digital space. Despite diversifying linguistic make-up of the digital world (Graddol, 2006), English is still the predominant medium of communication in various digital spaces in which linguistically and culturally diverse people interact with one another (Clare, 2017). Hence, using digital tools to develop ICC has been gaining currency not only in education as a general field but also in ELT pedagogy (Pantaleo, 2015).

When it comes to digital photographs as cultural resources, using such media as instructional or supplementary materials, is not a new trend in English language teaching. Despite still being used for decorative and attention-grabbing purposes, in a multitude of global and local English coursebooks, photographs are also functionally used to concretize abstract phenomena, support the meaning in written or audial texts, yet their potential offers much more. Visuals, particularly photographs, have the capacity to inherently “represent the world in a cloak of apparent authenticity” (Alvaray, 2014, p. 109). As Radley (2010) argues, they are “more than representations because they are also resources, mediators that, along with words, give shape to ideas” (p. 268). In cultural terms, they vividly portray cultural practices, persons, products and perspectives belonging to a given culture (Peesapati et al., 2010; Van House et al., 2005). Due to the rich semiotic and cultural meanings they incorporate, digital photographs are often seen as culture-laden artifacts portraying miniatures of sociocultural realities (Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018). Accordingly, they are valuable cultural resources to learn about and understand other cultures while evaluating critically and reflecting on one’s own culture (Alvaray, 2014; Kiss & Weninger, 2017) as activities and tasks designed in this way entail learners’ interpretations of photographs depending on their own social and cultural frameworks of knowledge and past experiences (Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018; Peesapati et al., 2010). In a similar vein, exploring cultural aspects such as artifacts and practices in one’s own culture and other cultures, interpreting cultural documents or events from another culture and relating them to the ones existing in one’s own culture are considered objectives and indicators of ICC (see also Byram, 1997, pp. 57-64). Therefore, learners’ cultural assumptions, beliefs and attitudes play a crucial role in interpreting photographs and developing ICC.

There is a need for research focusing on how learners interpret digital photographs due to learners’ exposure to these media in today’s digital world. Kiss and Weninger (2017) focused on the meanings attributed to a single photograph by two culturally different groups, and findings of their study revealed that English language learners’ (hereafter ELLs) perceptions and interpretations differed although both groups created universal, cultural and individual meanings. Likewise, Kusumaningputri and Widodo (2018) used digital photographs to investigate ELLs’ perceptions of their own cultures and other cultures. Findings of their study showed that digital photographs were effective tools to understand ELLs’ cultural assumptions, prejudices and stereotypes, and, if directed through carefully designed tasks, cultural realities portrayed in those photographs helped ELLs enhance their critical cultural awareness (p. 59). Despite these studies, the pertinent literature lacks studies related to how ELLs engage with digital visuals/photographs. Hence, this study aims to investigate the way ELLs interpret digital photographs and seeks answers to the research questions given below:

- What free-associative responses do ELLs make to the digital photographs shown to them?
- What interpretive strategies do they use to differentiate their own culture from other cultures while viewing the photographs?
- To what visual descriptors do they pay attention while differentiating their own culture from other cultures?

Methodology

This study was conducted in a qualitative research design, enabling the researcher to delve deeply into the phenomenon in question (Gay et al., 2012). Data were gathered through learners’ responses to the digital photographs selected from social networking sites. The study was carried out during the fall term of 2020-2021 at Akdeniz University, Turkey. The convenience sampling method was employed to choose participants as this method allows researchers to choose the nearest and accessible individuals to

willingly serve as respondents (Cohen *et al.*, 2007; Teddlie & Yu, 2007). A total number of 41 first grade students of English language and literature department participated in the study. Data were gathered in two parts. In the first part, the participants were shown three photographs selected from the digital space (e.g., Facebook, Flickr, Instagram, Pinterest and Twitter etc.), and they were asked to write down whatever came to their minds about the photographs. In the second part, the same photographs were shown to participants once again, respectively, and they were asked to categorize them as 'my culture' or 'other culture', and explain how and why they did such a categorization in a detailed way. For data analysis, the content analysis method was employed, and this process was reviewed for a double check by another expert to increase reliability of the findings and the interpretations.

Findings

While gathering participants' responses to the given photographs, they were first asked to write down whatever came to their minds about them. These free-associative responses to the photographs were categorized as universal, cultural/sub-cultural and individual meanings, as suggested by Kiss and Weninger (2017). Findings revealed that all three types of meanings emerged from the responses. However, findings also showed that a particular type of meaning came to the fore for each visual. For example, the great majority of responses for Visual 1 fell into the category of universal meanings, whereas meanings attributed to Visual 2 were mostly cultural and subcultural, and the ones attributed to Visual 3 were mostly individual. This might stem from the homogeneous demographic make-up of the participants because ELLs from different cultural backgrounds tend to interpret visuals differently (Hewings, 1991, Kiss & Weninger, 2017). Another factor might be the details that each visual had because details in the selected visuals decreased.

The second part of the data collection aimed to understand how and why participants culturally interpret the given digital photographs. To do so, they were asked to determine if their own culture or another culture was represented in those photographs, along with explaining the reasons behind their decisions. Findings revealed that for most participants, another culture was represented in Visual 1, whereas Visuals 2 and 3 were mostly associated with their own culture. The analysis of their responses showed that participants determined if the photographs reflected their own culture or another culture using either the judgmental/deductive strategy or the experiential/inductive strategy. The judgmental/deductive category involves critical comparisons based on cultural stereotypes and the definite dichotomy between 'we' and 'they'. For example, the image of a person riding a bicycle was not culturally familiar for some participants, and such responses as "*riding a bicycle is not part of our [Turkish] culture*" or "*it is not common in our country*" emerged. The second type of strategy identified in the responses was the experiential/inductive category, which incorporates the responses based on participants' past experiences and their focus on segmental elements while viewing the photographs. For example, several participants related the image of a group of people looking at a map to their experiences in school years, uttering such sayings: "*this map reminds me of my geography classes in high school*" or "*I spent my high school years in such a classroom whose wall a similar map was hung.*"

Lastly, both types of responses categorized as judgmental/deductive or experiential/inductive were also analyzed in terms of the visual descriptors to which participants paid attention. Those visual descriptors were categorized into three groups: setting, objects, and persons. Findings showed that participants whose responses were grouped in the judgmental/deductive category tended to pay attention to objects in Visuals 1 and 2 and persons in Visual 3, all of which are the aspects foregrounded in the photographs. The analysis of the experiential/inductive responses showed that participants whose responses were grouped in this category also focused on finer details such as the overall ambiance, outfits, and hairstyles of the people in the photographs.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study focused on cultural meanings that ELLs attributed to the selected digital photographs and how they interpreted these photographs at the intersection of 'my own culture' and 'other culture' dichotomy. The fact that all three types (universal, cultural and individual) of meanings emerged from the responses indicate that digital photographs function as a starting point for the meaning-making process, and there are countless possible meanings. Besides, this study also showed that ELLs employed either the judgmental/deductive or the experiential/inductive strategies during a process of identifying the visual descriptors that set them apart from those that belonged to other cultures. Based on these findings, this small-scale study makes two contributions. First, it provides an empirical account of how ELLs make sense of digital photographs and what visual indicators they pay attention to while making a distinction between their own culture and other cultures. Second, this study also shows that learners' responses to digital photographs can also be used as a tool to understand learners' cultural attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, stereotypes, and experiences related to their own cultures and other cultures. Besides, such interpretive activities can also be used to develop ELLs' ICC levels simply because while interpreting such visuals in cultural terms, learners relate cultural aspects inherent in them to the ones existing in their own culture.

In addition, although learners' past experiences and their previous knowledge also play an essential role in attributing meanings to the given visuals (Kiss & Weninger, 2017, p. 194), there is a need for studies focusing on how and why learners' cultural backgrounds influence interpreting visuals in cultural terms. It can also be inferred from the findings of this study that learners need guidance in interpreting visual materials following the instructional objectives because, as Hewings (1991) states, "once an illustration has been interpreted in a particular way it is difficult to see it in another way unless it is pointed out to us that another interpretation is possible" (p. 243). Therefore, visuals in instructional materials should be presented in tandem with written explanations so that learners can interpret them appropriately. Although this study is limited to a small group of ELLs' self-reported accounts, these findings give us a profile of their interpretive habits and skills. Thus, there is a need for further studies employing new methods such as semiotic units of analysis, psychometric tests and on-site observations should be used to understand better how English language learners interpret cultures inherent in visuals.

Digital Photos Used in the Data Collection Process

Visual 1 <https://www.flickr.com/photos/faceme/42660865255/in/photolist-27ZN5Xz>

Visual 2 <https://www.flickr.com/photos/eltpics/9732521392/in/album-72157625532363215/>

Visual 3 <https://www.flickr.com/photos/eltpics/8617437298/in/album-72157625532363215/>

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