

Inclusion of Target Language Culture in EFL Classrooms in Pakistan: Learners' Perspective

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Abstract

This research explores the advanced English language learners' attitude towards the inclusion of different aspects of target language culture in Pakistan. This study also aims to find out if there are any differences in the attitude of the learners from urban areas and those from rural communities. The data was collected from two Pakistani universities. A questionnaire was used pertaining to different aspects of culture and if the respondents were annoyed when exposed to those aspects of culture. The data was analysed with SPSS and the extent of learners' agreement and disagreement with the anchor statements was measured. The results indicate that the learners from both the target communities have positive attitude towards the teaching of all aspects of target language culture. However, the ratio of positive attitude is higher in learners from urban industrial community. Moreover, the learners from both the communities were not open to the teaching of some concepts such as homosexuality and funeral customs in the target language community. This indicates that all the aspects of target culture may not be included in ELT syllabus and the sentiments and customs of the local community must be taken into account while designing the content of ELT material.

Key words: Attitudes; learners' perceptions; Target culture; Muslim reaction; culturally sensitive ELT material

1. Introduction

The inclusion of target language culture in ELT content has generated a long standing debate. The inclusion of target, local culture or international culture or the complete abandonment of culture in English language teaching syllabus are some of the solutions offered by the researchers and the stake holders. However none of these solutions is viable in every context. Research shows that in some English language learning communities actually welcome the addition of target language culture in the ELT classroom. Ho's (1998) and Ilter and Guzeller's (2005) studies may be cited in this regard. On the other hand, some other communities view target culture with suspicion and as an attempt to change the local culture. This is especially the case in many Muslim countries where English language is seen as synonymous with Christianity and the target culture is seen as immoral and contrary to their religion (Argungu, 2002; Mahboob, 2009). Hence the inclusion of target language culture in ELT classrooms in Muslim countries is protested against and there have been calls for Islamic English (Ilter&Guzeller, 2005) which incorporates Islamic concepts of *pardah*, modesty, and halal food etc.

Culture, however, is not a static whole as it affects many aspects of life in a community. Thus it is pertinent to know if those who oppose the inclusion of target language culture in ELT classrooms are against this culture per se or if there are some particular aspects of target language culture that are annoying to them. In order to investigate this issue, the present research aims to explore the attitude of English language learners in Pakistan towards the teaching of various aspects of target language culture in their classrooms. Moreover, the researchers hypothesise that the attitude of learners from urban industrial areas will be different from that of the students of rural agrarian community. Thus data has been collected from The Islamia University of Bahawalpur which is situated in a rural agrarian area and from Government College University, Faisalabad located in urban industrial premises.

2. Literature Review

McGuire (as cited in Smit, 2000) defines attitude as observable responses towards a phenomenon.

Dyers and Abongdia (2009) claim that the attitudes are manifested and promoted by individuals hence learners and teachers are the major focus of attitudinal studies. Bayyurt (2006) stresses the importance of the teachers' involvement and attitude towards target language culture as they may facilitate or hinder the language learning process. Smit also elaborates that the learners' attitude may be affected by their "heterogeneity and complexity" (p. 137) as well as their individual differences and evolving personalities. The role of community context is also very significant (Walker, Shafer, & Iiams, 2004) as it determines the attitudes of a society.

Since Gardner, the relationship between attitude and motivation to learn has been explored. The research shows that integrative motivation positively influences the learners' desire to learn a language. Dornyei (2003) related integrative motivation with openness among the learners towards the target culture and an ability to recognise and embrace the cultural differences in their local and the target culture. However, this may become tricky if the target culture is seen as a threat to the local culture and religion.

The learners' attitude is also important because it is claimed that success in language learning is connected with the positive attitude of the learners towards that language and its culture (Prodromou, 1992). And the importance of the knowledge of target language culture has been emphasised by various researches and attitudinal studies. The learners, however, continue to offer a variety of responses towards target language culture ranging from positive to lukewarm to outright negative. The learners may entirely reject the teaching of culture as well, may it be target or local. Prodromou's study of the Greek English language learners reveals their preference for neutral topics such as science and technology as compared to Greek or American culture.

Meilin & Xiaoqiong (2006), on the other hand, suggest that the knowledge of target language culture is one of the key components of language learning. So it should be incorporated in the English language lessons in such a way so as to cause least resistance among the learners. Hence they propose the incorporation of both target and local culture in English language classrooms and thus create a balance between cultures.

English has been variously claimed as a global language, a lingua franca, and an international language as well as the language of power and prestige (Imam, 2005). These statuses, however, awaken widely different feelings among the users of English and have led to various movements for the promotion or abandonment of the language in a community.

The dramatically increasing number of the non-native speakers of English has given English a place that has never been given to any language before. It is now the language of higher echelon of power in non-native communities, a source of securing better paying jobs, a symbol of higher social status, a source to access the bulk of latest research and technology; it is believed to be the mother tongue of internet and has approximately 400 million native users whereas the number of non native users is three times more (Crystal, 2004). This wide spread usage of English has resulted in different phenomena: in some areas, it has led to the abandonment and subsequent death of local languages. Alternatively, the extensive use of English especially in former British colonies has given birth to nativised varieties of English which are growing rapidly and developing so systematically that Jones and Bradwell (2007) claim that English is no more a single language but a family of languages.

Nevertheless, this diffusion of English has not been accepted passively by its non-native users. Hence there have been political movements to diminish the use of English in some communities. The dissemination of English has led to many suspicions as Imam (2005) puts them bluntly:

However, it is the time for the non- English-speaking developing countries to think seriously about who is being most benefited in this language promotion. Why are millions of dollars being invested in language programmes like English Language Teaching (ELT) and Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)? Is it just for the sake of development? What has English language to do with development? Why does one need to adopt someone else's language/identity in order to achieve 'development'? Is it not possible to develop within one's own language and identity? [...] Thus it is high time for the non-English-speaking developing countries to ask questions like whose political, economic and cultural interests are being served through this language promotion mission and what measures can be taken to balance the situation? (pp. 471-72)

Thus English is seen as a usurper and a killer of local languages. This view has been strengthened by the claims of the British colonisers of using English to control the colonised communities (Crystal, 2012). Hence the teaching of English in general and target language culture in particular is also frowned upon in many communities and at best, people are wary of it. In order to counter these objections, efforts have been made to reconcile English language with the local ideologies and religions. A relevant example here is that of Islamic English. Linguists have tried to document how English can incorporate Islamic ideology and propagate Islamic identity. Thus Mahboob (2009) shows how English is a carrier of Islamic ideology in the speech and the text of Pakistani English. He also asserts that the EFL/ESL classes have "Christian undertones" (p. 176) are insensitive to the cultural differences of the non native users of English. He also blames the TESOL training programmes of

promoting western culture and considers as a means of boosting Orientalist attitudes. This echoed Argungu's (2002) earlier claim that English text books infuse Christian concepts and values among the learners.

Imam (2005) had also expressed similar doubts and so had Kadenge and Nkomo (2011) regarding the use of English in Bangladesh and Zimbabwe respectively where English is seen as a barrier to opportunities, a detriment to local languages and a remnant of colonial rule. Thus negative responses to English teaching are by no means limited to the Muslim countries, although they have been by far the loudest.

A number of researches in Saudi Arabia (Abed&Smadi, 1996), Malaysia (Mohd-Asraf, 2005), and sub Saharan Africa (Mazrui, 2004) have recorded the local English language learners' suspicions about English language learning and its association with western culture dissemination. As pointed out by Argungu (2002), Ashraf (2002), and Mahboob (2009), this situation has been aggravated by the insensitivity of English language teaching material towards the local culture.

However, many of the objections raised are not against the teaching of English per se. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, ESL/EFL training programs are perceived as the propagation of Christianity, Muslims ESL/EFL teachers as well as learners are cautious of target culture teaching in the classrooms. This is especially true when the learners are from religious institutions (Shah, Afsar, Haq& Khan, 2012). This wariness is significant, as pointed out by Walker, Shafer, and Iams (2004) because it may influence the attitude of a community towards English language.

Patriotism has also been associated with the rejection of target language culture. Gershon and Pantoja (2011) state national loyalty leads to the preference of one language over another and one culture over the other. Thus for the Muslims in the Sub Continent, English has always been the language of the outsiders and the invaders. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, in the last decades of 19th century, urged Indian Muslims to learn English language to secure government jobs. Yet despite all his efforts and the subsequent glorification of English as the language of power and success in Pakistan, English continues to be seen as the language of the British. A dialogue in Khan (2012) is an interesting illustration of this feeling. The dialogue between husband (Maqsood) and wife (RoohAfza) is quoted here (My translation of Urdu dialogues). The first dialogue was delivered in English and the rest in Urdu.

“RoohAfza: ... I am very conscious about my clothes.

Maqsood: Look, avoid speaking English in the holy month of Ramadan. It is the language of the British, you understand.

RoohAfza: Oh don't you worry. I'll only speak pure idiomatic Urdu in Ramadan....”

This conversation demonstrates that in Pakistan, Islam and English language are seen as contradictory to each other.

Notwithstanding, Jabeen, Mahmood and Rasheed's (2011) study shows that Pakistani English language learners have ambivalent attitude when it comes to English language learning. Festinger (1962) had termed this as “Cognitive dissonance”. This inclination to support conflicting emotions towards English may be explained in economic terms. Jabeen (2013) found that English is viewed as a source of securing better paying jobs in Pakistan. Jabeen and Shah's (2011) study also showed that an important objective of learning English in Pakistan is securing jobs.

In this context, the stance of the learners of English is very significant as they are active agents in the process of learning and their attitudes and perceptions will influence the learning process (McKenzie, 2010). Hence this research aims to investigate the attitude of English language learners towards the teaching of different aspects of target language culture. As Walker, Shafer, and Iams (2004) have pointed out the role of communal context is a significant determinant of attitudes, the present survey studies the difference of attitude among the English language learners of rural agrarian Bahawalnagar and Urban industrial Faisalabad in Pakistan. This article investigates if there is any difference among the attitude of the English language learners of these areas regarding target culture teaching in EFL classroom.

3. Methodology

This study aims to trace the preferences of English language learners in Pakistan regarding the teaching of target language culture. A similar study has been conducted by Jabeen and Shah (2011) who analysed the attitude of the students of Government College University, Faisalabad (GCUF) Pakistan. This present research is a continuation of the one carried out by Jabeen and Shah and draws on the data collected by them to compare the attitude of English language learners from GCUF and The Islamia University of Bahawalpur (IUB) Bahawalnagar Campus, Pakistan. This comparison is meaningful as GCUF and IUB cater to population from industrial and agrarian economies. In addition, IUB was founded as a religious university in 1925 and was later upgraded as a general purpose university in 1975. However, the religious influence still clings and IUB is claimed to be the only university in Pakistan experimenting with the provision of Islamic and technical education simultaneously. So it was hypothesised that the religious agrarian background of IUB and the industrial

inclination of GCUF will affect the attitude of their respective English language learners towards the teaching of target language culture. Therefore the data was collected from the graduate EFL learners of GCUF and IUB.

The questionnaire used by Jabeen and Shah (2011) was used to collect data from IUB as well. The first part of the questionnaire collected personal information about the respondents such as their gender, age, income per month, and educational background. The respondents were also asked to rank their objectives for learning English. The options provided were the desire to get higher education, access latest educational research, to learn about American culture, visit an English speaking country, to enhance social status, to acquire a better paying job and to appear as an educated person. The next part of the questionnaire was divided into different aspects of culture such as beliefs (religious, political and, moral), customs (social, emotional, psychological, funeral, marital, and, festivities), social organization, speech acts (cursing, swearing, and greeting), gestures (body language, dressing and, food preferences), notions of personal space, and arts. These categories were developed on the basis of the review of existing literature.

Each of these sub categories carried two to seven anchor statements. The statements inquired after the respondents' annoyance when taught about the different aspects of target language culture in the EFL classroom. 5 point Likert scale was used to gather the opinion of learners regarding the teaching of target language culture in the EFL classroom. The alpha reliability scale of the questionnaire was .88.

The data from GCUF was collected in March, 2011 and the data from IUB was gathered in the summer of 2012. The data for GCUF was the same as used by Jabeen and Shah (2011) and the data from IUB was collected with the help of the same questionnaire in order to validate the comparison between the learners of the two institutions. The population in both the institutions was selected on the basis of representative paradigm and the data was gathered randomly from the English language learners of Commerce, Economics and Management Sciences departments. The number of respondents from GCUF was 94 (65% males and 35% females) and the population size from IUB was 100 (81% males and 19% females). The gender inequality was the result of the fact that very few female students are enrolled in these departments. The dominant age group from both the institutions was between 19-25 years. The bulk of the respondents in both GCUF and IUB (68 and 67% respectively) fall into the income group of \$588 – 2,948 per annum. The most important objective for learning English among the learners of GCUF and IUB was to attain higher education. The learners of IUB also aimed to enhance their social status and secure a better paying job by becoming skilled at English language. Interestingly, the desire to learn about American culture as a learning objective has been assigned the lowest rank by both groups.

The data was analysed with the help of SPSS 20. As mentioned earlier that each category was divided into sub groups and the number of anchor statements varied in each group, a composite variable was created by combining the responses of learners for each subcategory. Moreover, in the final analysis, five categories of the scale were condensed into three: agreement, disagreement and neutrality. Thus if a category had two anchor statements, its response ranged from 2 to 10 where 2 denotes strong agreement and 10 stands for strong disagreement. These numbers reflect the level of annoyance of the learners with the teaching of target language culture. The minimal number indicates high level of annoyance whereas the maximum number denoted that learners are not annoyed by the use of target language culture in the EFL classroom. The medial point reflects the respondents' neutrality.

4. Data analysis

Figure 1 presents the learners' attitude towards the teaching of religious beliefs of the target language culture. It shows that the learners from GCUF are more tolerant of the teaching of religious beliefs of the target language culture as compared to those from IUB. The figure depicts that 70% of the learners from GCUF as opposed to 59% from IUB agree that the discussion of the religious beliefs of the target culture does not annoy them.

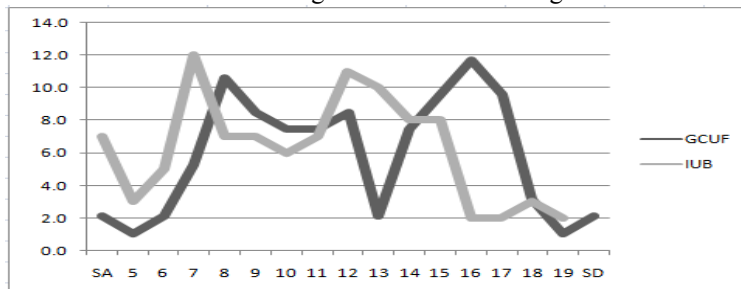


Figure 4.1. Attitude towards the Teaching of Religious Beliefs in Target Language Community

Figure 2 also shows that the respondents from GCUF (61.7%) are more open to the teaching of political beliefs of the target language culture. Whereas 53% learners from IUB are not annoyed by the teaching of the political beliefs of the target language culture.

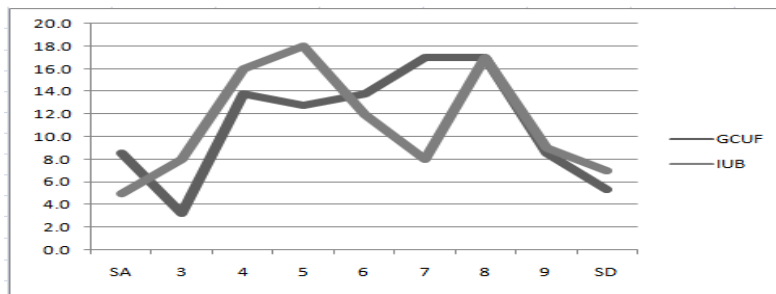


Figure 4.2. Attitude towards the Teaching of Political Beliefs in Target Language Community
 However, the learners from both GCUF and IUB feel comfortable with the teaching of moral beliefs of the target language culture. Thus figure 3 shows that 66% and 70% of the respondents from GCUF and IUB respectively claim that they are not annoyed by the teaching of moral beliefs of the target language in the EFL classroom.

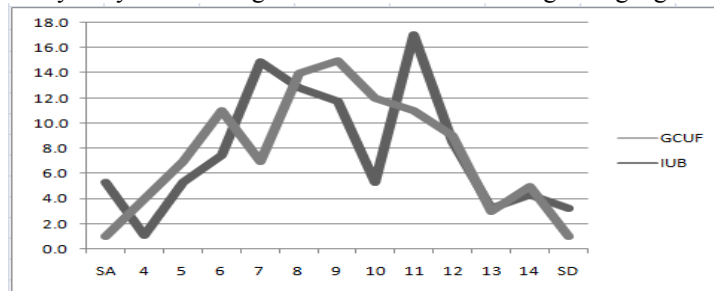


Figure 4.3. Attitude towards the Teaching of Moral Beliefs in Target Language Community
 Figure 4.4 also portrays that 74.5% of the respondents from GCUF and 77% from IUB are not annoyed by the teaching of the social customs of the target language culture.

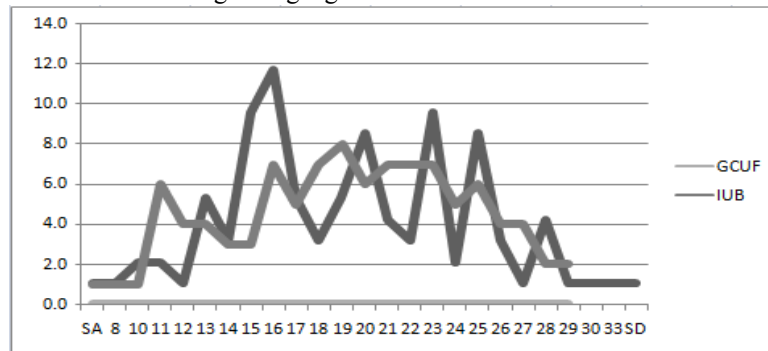


Figure 4.4. Attitude towards the Teaching of Social Customs in Target Language Community
 Conversely, the opinion is rather divided about the teaching of the emotional aspect of the target language culture. Approximately 33% of the respondents from GCUF and IUB agree that the emotional facets of the target language culture should be taught in the EFL classroom whereas the similar percentage of the respondents either disagrees or is uncertain about the teaching of this side of the target culture.

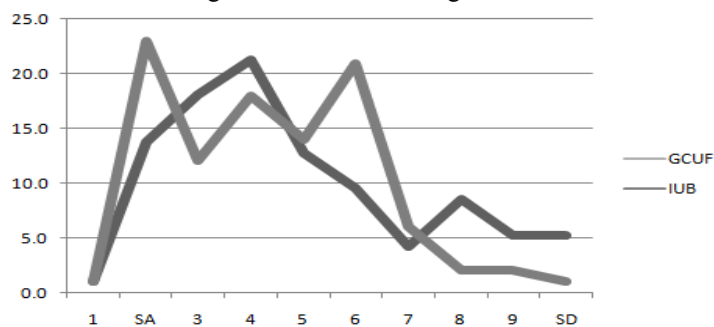


Figure 4.5. Attitude towards the Teaching of Emotional aspect of Target Language Culture
 Figure 6 illustrates that the respondents' from GCUF clearly agree that the teaching of the psychological aspects of the target language culture does not annoy them. The opinion of the learners from IUB is rather divided. Although 46% of them agree with the learners from GCUF, 34% of them are still uncertain while 20% simply feel that the teaching of the psychological aspect of the target language culture annoys them.

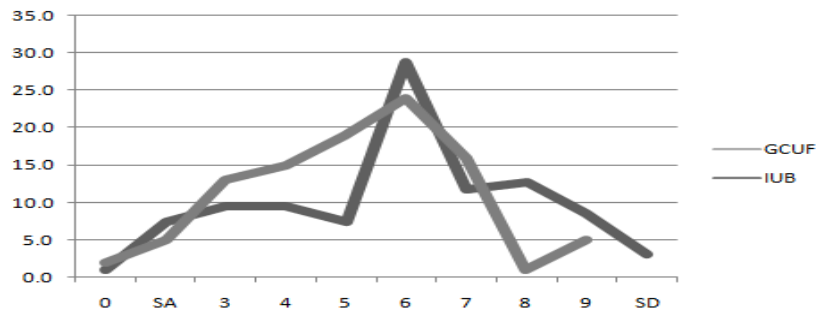


Figure 4.6. Attitude towards the Teaching of Psychological aspect of Target Language Culture
 A high degree of agreement is evident between the respondents from GCUF and IUB regarding the teaching of the festivities of the target language community. Figure 7 illustrates that 64% of the respondents from both GCUF and IUB agree that they are not annoyed when taught about how the festivals in target language community are celebrated.

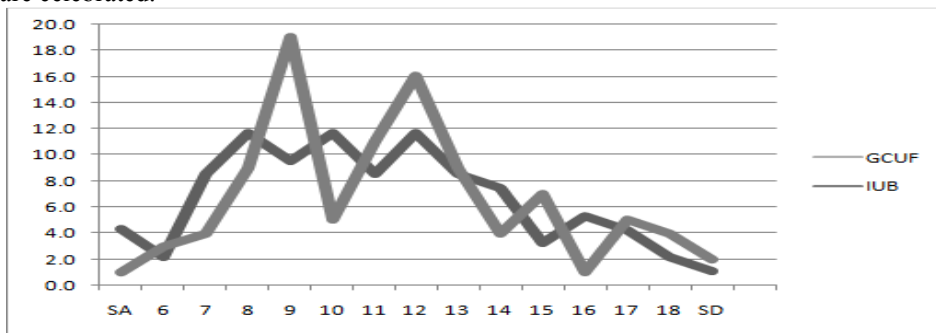


Figure 4.7. Attitude towards the Teaching of Festivities in Target Language Culture
 The figure 4.8 shows that 58% of the respondents agree that the teaching of the funeral customs of the target language culture does not annoy them. The opinion of the respondents from IUB, however, is divided as only 39% of them agree with the opinion of the respondents form GCUF and 33% of them disagree whereas 28% are uncertain.

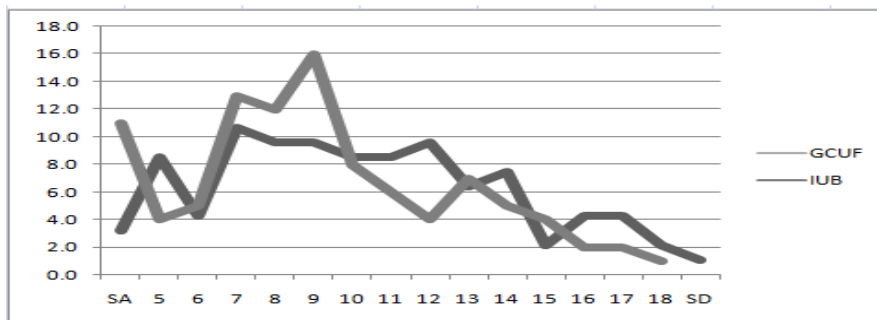


Figure 4.8. Attitude towards the Teaching of Funeral Customs in Target Language Community
 On the other hand, the respondents from both GCUF and IUB show interest in learning about the marital customs of the target language community. Thus 75.5% of the respondents from GCUF and 66% from IUB are comfortable with the teaching of the marital customs.

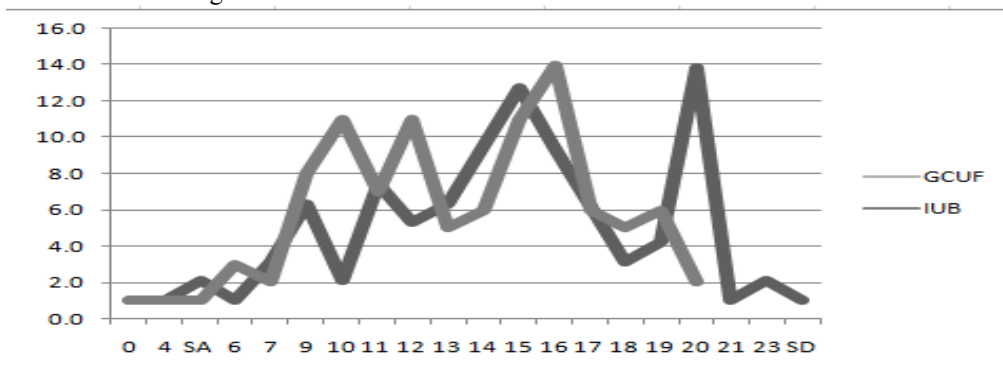


Figure 4.9. Attitude towards the Teaching of Marital Customs in Target Language Community
 Figure 4.10 demonstrates strong agreement among the respondents regarding their favourable attitude towards the teaching of the social organisation of the target language culture. Thus 78.7% and 81% of the respondents from GCUF and IUB respectively agree that they want to know about the organisation of the target language society.

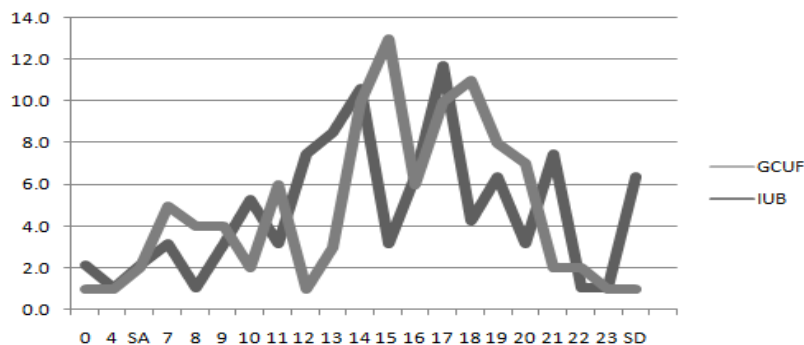


Figure 4.10. Attitude towards the Teaching of Social Organisation in Target Language Community
 Furthermore, 59.6% of the respondents from GCUF claim that they are not annoyed when taught about different speech acts performed by the target language community. On the other hand, only 42% from IUB agree with the respondents from GCUF. While 48% from IUB are either uncertain or disagree.

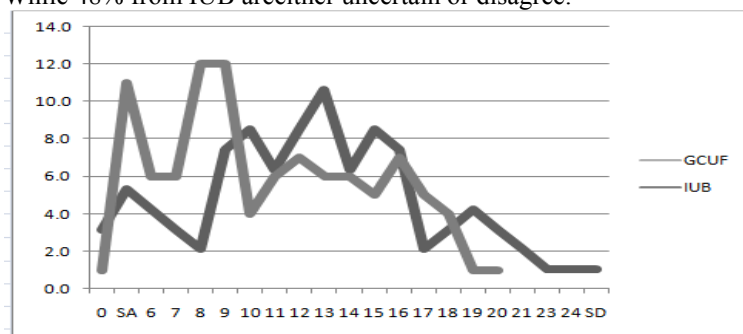


Figure 4.11. Attitude towards the Teaching of Speech Acts in Target Language Community
 Figure 4.12 displays that 66% of the respondents from GCUF are open to the teaching of gestures used by the members of target language community. 55% of the respondents from IUB also agree.

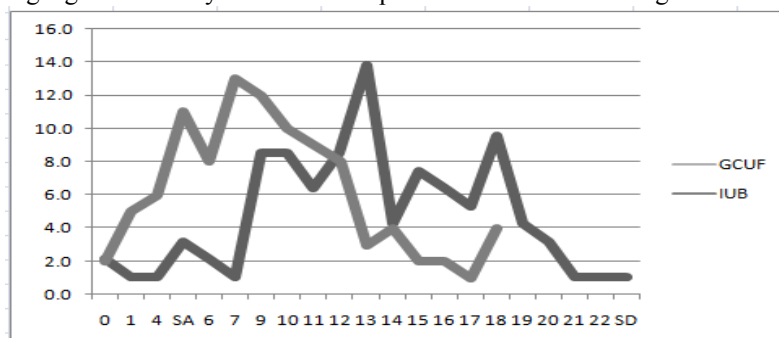


Figure 4.12. Attitude towards the Teaching of Gestures used in Target Language Community
 Nevertheless, the respondents are not so open to the teaching of the notions of personal space prevalent in the target language community. Only 48% of the respondents from GCUF and IUB each desire to know about this aspect of the target language culture whereas the majority (23.4% from GCUF and 34% from IUB) is uncertain.

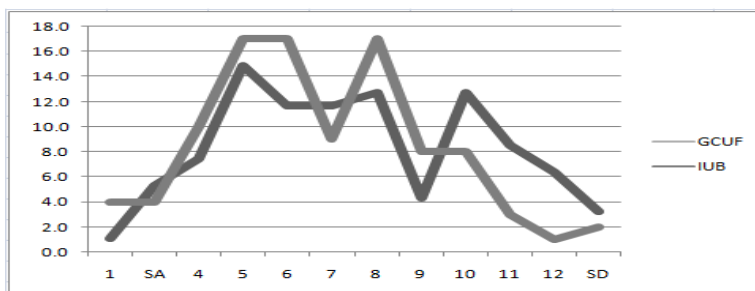


Figure 4.13. Attitude towards the Teaching of Notions of Personal Space in Target Language Community
 Figure 4.14 depicts that 64.9% from GCUF and 55% of the respondents from IUB agree that they are not annoyed when taught about the art forms of the target language culture.

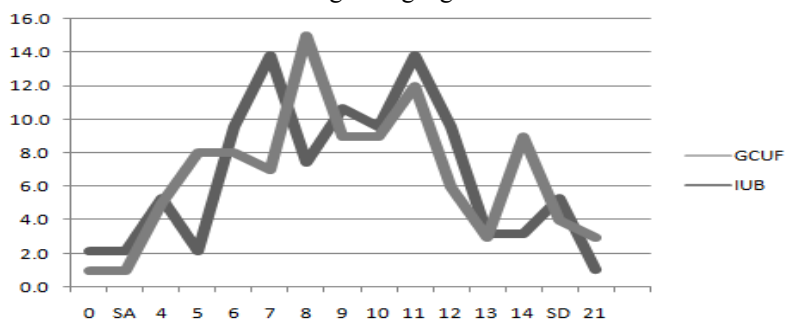


Figure 4.14. Attitude towards the Teaching of Arts produced in Target Language Community

5. Discussion and Findings

The results indicate that overall there is a high rate of agreement between learners from GCUF and IUB. But taken individually, the difference of opinion regarding the different aspects of culture is enlightening. The data shows that the learners from GCUF are more open to learning about the religious and political beliefs of the target language community as compared to the learners from IUB. The difference in the ratio of agreement is not high though. Here it must be kept in mind that both GCUF and IUB are located in areas marked for their religious extremist tendencies. Moreover, IUB claims to support an Islamic system of education. Yet, interestingly, the learners do not feel annoyed when they are exposed to the religious, political and moral beliefs of the target language community.

As far as social, festival, psychological, funeral, and marital customs are concerned, the learners from GCUF and IUB indicate high level of agreement regarding their acceptance of these aspects if target language culture. However, the teaching of emotional customs in the target language community has received mixed response. These aspects of culture included the teaching of the concept of homosexuality which is a taboo in Pakistani society. So, it is understandable that the respondents from both GCUF and IUB are not sure if they want to be exposed to this aspect of target language culture. Similarly, the American funeral customs of singing hymns or hiring funeral houses are also frowned upon in Pakistani society. Therefore the degree of agreement in this category is lower as compared to the other aspects of culture.

Furthermore, the respondents are not annoyed by the teaching of social organisation, gestures, and art of the target language community. The learners from GCUF are also open to the teaching of speech acts performed by the target language users but respondents from IUB do not appear to be enthusiastic about learning how to curse, swear, greet and use polite expressions in English. This is strange as these speech acts are regularly performed by our respondents in English. They are a common part of their everyday language use, even if the rest of the conversation is conducted in Urdu language.

The respondents were not enthusiastic about teaching of the notions of personal space in American culture. These notions included allowing pets in the bedroom and kitchen, leaving the bathroom doors ajar, minimal body contact with the strangers and calling people by their family names. All these notions are either considered taboos (body contact with strangers especially with the opposite sex) or bad manners in Pakistani society. Moreover, the respondents traditionally call each other by their given names and calling someone by their family name is a rare occurrence. Instead they may use caste names to address each other. So the lack of agreement about learning this aspect of target language culture is rooted in respondents' own cultural norms rather than their negative attitude towards the teaching of the target culture itself.

Hence the data shows the willingness of respondents from both GCUF and IUB to learn about the target language culture. Besides, there are no differences of opinion on the basis of different social and economic

backgrounds of the learners from GCUF and IUB. This coincides with findings of Jabeen (2013) and Jabeen, Mahmood and Rasheed (2011).

However, the informal interview and discussion with the respondents as well as the discourse taking place on social media indicate otherwise. Urdu is widely believed to be a symbol of national unity and English as the remnant of foreign rule. The screen shot below is a Facebook status posted on 14th August, 2013, the Independence Day of Pakistan. The admin here urges everyone to comment in Urdu language as a “proof of their Pakistani spirit”. Thus Urdu here has been associated with patriotism and Pakistani identity.



Figure5.1. Status Update on a Facebook Page

This relationship has also been discussed by Gershon and Pantoja (2011) in their discussion of English as the official language of the U.S. Their research indicates that the patriotic sentiments of the Anglos and the Latinos play a vital role in determining their attitude towards America’s policy regarding the official language.

In this context, the respondents’ acceptance of the teaching of target language culture appears contradictory. Nevertheless, English in Pakistan is believed to be the language of power (Khalique, 2007; Rahman, 2002; Shamim, 2008). It is also a means of acquiring social prestige. The knowledge of music in English language and interest in Hollywood movies is also perceived as a signal of good taste and coolness. The native varieties of English and the culture associated with them are believed to be more prestigious than the local languages and culture. This influences the respondents’ attitude and results in the lack of annoyance when exposed to aspects of target language culture. This opinion gains strength by the fact that enhancing social status by acquiring English language was a prominent learning objective for the respondents of this study.

Furthermore, it is suggested that the respondents’ attitude is grounded in economic factors. Proficiency in English language is a prerequisite for all administrative and superior jobs in Pakistan. Therefore it is mandatory for all aspirants of achieving better paying jobs to be proficient in English. This necessitates respondents having to learn English for the economic benefits associated with it. The knowledge of the target language culture is assumed to be a part of the language proficiency hence learners’ lack of annoyance. Bilaniuk (2003) addresses the same phenomenon and claims that sometimes economic motives manage to overwhelm socio-cultural and political forces.

However the findings of this study must not be used to advocate for an unqualified inclusion of target language culture in the course contents in Pakistan. Many nuances of this issue need to be explored yet. It is suggested that difference of opinion may be traced in the opinions of rural and urban communities as well as the learners of government and private sector institutions. Moreover, the learners’ lack of annoyance when exposed to certain aspects of target language culture does not denote their unconditional acceptance for all the other aspects of culture. Thus the issue needs to be further studied before assumptions can be made regarding the teaching of target language culture in Pakistan.

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