

## **VIDEO GAME AND CULTURE: A CASE STUDY OF EFL STUDENT PLAYERS' VIEWS ON THEIR ACQUISITION OF CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE AND SENSITIVITY.**

Ali Soyooof  
*Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran.*

### **ABSTRACT**

Language learners generally encounter a set of problems in the cumbersome journey of learning a new language. One of the most pivotal of these is their ability to understand the differences between the culture of their first language and their target language. A common belief has been that for learning language aptly, practitioners should concentrate on the cultural aspects of the target language (L2), which assumes that students' L1 cultural awareness already sufficient given they are first language speakers. However, recent studies show that there is a growing interest in language learners' ability to understanding cultural differences realistically, with research emphasizing the need for intercultural literacy. However, in addition to the limitations of classroom learning environments teachers may not have enough time to allocate to this aspect of teaching or may not have sufficient knowledge and awareness themselves to address intercultural literacy needs or it is possible that they may be biased and do not reflect cultural differences appropriately. One of the current tools to be considered by researchers that may assist this aspect of language learning is video games. Video games can provide a virtual situation not only where students need to attend to these cultural differences, but where they can participate in a given context within an atmosphere to engage in the L2 culture in a simulated way for a significant time. Thus, this research explored the views of six Iranian EFL language learners who were well acquainted with video games of a variety of genres, through the use of interviews. Although a small exploratory case study the results indicated that these EFL language learners believed that that the video games in their experience were a superior tool through which they could experience 'real' cultural differences. Moreover, after participating in the interactions of the game this raised awareness of cultural differences was seen as fostering them to make unbiased decisions about the English language and culture. What is more, through the video game experience it was suggested that these students' cultural learning was at a deeper level of understanding such that they were more able to tolerate L2 cultural differences more optimally than in the typical teaching situation. The result also showed that videogames can be a new method for minimizing the cultural shock between two languages.

**Keywords:** Cultural learning, Culture sensitivity, EFL learning, EFL students' views, Meaningful learning, Second language acquisition, Video game, Video games and intercultural literacy

### **INTRODUCTION**

Videogames have been identified with several social disadvantages, namely, addiction, increased aggression, medical, psychological and ethical issues (Keaton & Cheng, 2018; Ryan, Formosa & Tulloch, 2017), despite evidence of their ability to contribute education and

training (Soyooof & Jokar, 2014; Uttal et al., 2013). Therefore, when considering opportunities for selecting video games to support language learning there is a need for some caution and the critical evaluation (Ashraf, Motlagh & Salami, 2014). With this in mind it is noteworthy that Klimova and Kacet's (2017) systematic literature review of the efficacy of computer games on language learning did not raise the issue of their usefulness for acquiring cultural knowledge of the target language. Issues in the main related to the need to be aware of whether a game has applicability to language learning objectives (Kirriemuir, 2002) and whether teachers are able to evaluate their usefulness besides understand how to use them to best effective (citing in particular deHaan, 2011; deHaan, Reed & Kuwada, 2010 and Higgings, Xiao & Katsipataki, 2012). However, their citation from Ang and Zaphiris (2008), although from a decade ago, reflects the direction in which games have moved today. They point out "in the future, however, they may be designed as virtual learning environments in which learners may be able to congregate and engage in communication, thus learning from each other in a social context." This reflects current developments as outlined by Stuart and Webber's (2015) reference in section four, "blurred lines between games and social media":

We've already seen plenty of virtual worlds – like Moshi Monsters and Club Penguin – that operate both as games and social spaces. But a new generation of games is exploiting improvements in broadband connectivity and networking features to make more dynamic social experiences. Minecraft has become a popular venue for friends to meet and talk while working collaboratively, and titles like *Destiny* and [The Crew](#) have emphasised the sense of socialising, sharing and connectivity. Forthcoming co-op titles are likely to build on the idea of multiplayer titles as social rather than just gaming experiences.

Thus, video game playing provides many opportunities for interaction, including social interactions (Cole & Griffiths, 2007), and overall investigations have indicated that videogames have their own merits (Stuart & Webber, 2015). Tellingly, videogames can promote learners' reaction-time, hand-eye coordination, and self-esteem (Griffiths, 2002; 2014). In a parallel vein, they can enhance a learners' sense of curiosity and fun, as well as being a challenge (Mitchell & Saville-Smith, 2004). Intriguingly, one of the very unique aspects of videogames has encouraged learners to allocate more time for their learning experience owing to the "edutainment: of these games" (Griffiths, 2002). In recent years, designers have created far better games with a highly improved sound and graphics. What is more, the expansion and development of video games continues (Wolf, 2012). For instance, today's games are immensely improved in comparison to *Pacman*, a game that was produced three or four decades ago. Nonetheless, the fundamental traits of games have not changed drastically. Like several decades ago, games are typically classified into simulation, role play, sports, puzzle, and adventure (Min, Lee & Lee, 2015) but now there is more recognition of their applicability to learning and relevant to this research specifically designed to support language learning (Jian, Chen & Chen, 2015). However, commercial role play video games may also be applicable in the language learning context where a player's role may vary from playing the role of a pilot of an F-14 to leading the development of a civilized society (*Civilization*, *Age of Empires*, *Alpha Centauri*), and participating in a fantasy role play (*Final Fantasy VIII*), (Chik, 2014; Squire, 2003). Nevertheless, while research has highlighted the potential of video games for developing vocabulary there is a paucity of research into their potential to contribute to the development of cultural learning related to second language acquisition.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **EFL Learning and The Challenge of Acquiring Cultural Knowledge and Intercultural Sensitivity**

One of the most crucial strategies that can improve students' language learning is being attuned to their knowledge of the target language culture and the development of cultural sensitivity. The intertwining of language with culture can be appreciated when UNESCO's (2002) definition of culture is considered as "the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs" (p. 4). Thus, while it is well established that in order to do these language learners need to first be aware of their own culture, which is not always easy, since this knowledge is typically embedded in their daily social practices. Thus, the language teacher's job is two-fold in needing to develop students' awareness of their own culture as well as their sensitivity to the culture of the target language and acquisition of cultural knowledge. As Liddicoat (1996) emphasizes, as a result of 'intercultural exploration' through 'intercultural language teaching' ideally students can discover a 'third place', where they are conversant with the language and culture of both their L1 and L2. Kiss and Weninger (2017) studied the role of visuals in cultural learning in the EFL classroom and through semantic analysis of students' responses they identified three categories of meaning that they can make as part of their semiotic processes. These are universal, cultural and subcultural, and individual. They also cite Risager's (2011) work in identifying three aspects of language pedagogy where culture is a core consideration. These are (1) the content, which is usually available for analysis in published language teaching materials; (2) the learner, how they develop knowledge of and competence in (inter)cultural communication; and (3) the context, how language and cultural learning (and teaching) are situated in general education and society in a changing world. More specifically, Newton, Yates, Shearn and Nowitzki (2010, p. 63) identifies six teaching strategies as underpinning "intercultural communicative language teaching (iCLT) as follows:

1. integrating language and culture from the beginning
2. engaging learners in genuine social interaction
3. encourages and develops an exploratory and reflective approach to culture and culture-in-language
4. fostering explicit comparisons and connections between languages and cultures
5. acknowledging and responding appropriately to diverse learners and learning contexts
6. emphasizing intercultural communicative competence rather than native-speaker competence.

However, in spite of the wealth of strategies and resources available, the acquisition of cultural knowledge and intercultural sensitivity continues to be a major challenge in EFL learning. Firstly, restrictions in classroom learning environments are common and may stem from teachers not being skilled to implement such strategies as those outlined by Newton et al. (2010) or they may not have the resources or physical space to change from a traditional pedagogy. Thus, it is not surprising that researchers are investigating the potential of cultural learning (Hockly, 2012) to be acquired through resources that engage students in semiotics, including multimodal texts and video games (Chen, 2010; Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Cowie & Sakui, 2013).

### **Video Games: Drill and Practise**

The computer generally has been used in the educational context as a supporting and facilitating tool for both the practice and drill of factual recall (Jonassen, 1988). Drill-based

and practice-based games such as *Alga-Blaster*, *Reader Rabbit*, or even *Knowledge Munchers* have been widely spread because of to their easy adaptability to both traditional as well as didactic curriculum “enrichment exercises.” One of the best kinds of drill and practice game is the “action” genre of videogames that can enormously enhance students’ participation (Bowman 1982; Griffith, 2014; Malone 1980). However, few investigations have been conducted to find out whether the afore mentioned games are effective or not with respect to language and cultural learning. Nonetheless, there are some reasons that support why a well-designed videogame might lead to a far better learning than a non-computer based one (Clark, 1983; Klimova & Kacet, 2017; Laws, 2017). While drill-based and practice-based games, that include memorization of facts can have a pivotal role in learning by supporting students’ mastery of basic skills/formulaic skills, as Deen (2015, p. 35) notes: “[D]rill and practice learning teaches the ‘what’ and the ‘when’, but not the ‘why’ and the ‘how’. It may therefore allow less for creative thought or out-of-the-box thinking” that is more attuned to social constructivist views of learning (O’Neill, 2017; Vygotsky, 1978) besides the development of learner autonomy as advocated in Tochon’s (2014) project- and problem- based approach to language learning. Besides it would not necessarily be expected that drills and practice would be the best way for students to acquire cultural knowledge and intercultural literacy because of the absence of dialogue and meaning making.

### **Simulation and Strategy Games**

In contrast with games, which abstain from using actual world rules in order to use their own rules, simulation games are designed to be highly adaptable to reality (Bacalja, 2017; Heinich et al., 1996). Simulation games try to create a system that is similar to physical and social systems by taking advantage of another symbol system, like a computer interface. Bacalja (2017, p. 60) cites Journet’s (2007) argument that “use of *Myst*, and Ruch’s (2010) work with *Fable 2*, both showed that the combined effect of narrative, action, stories, immersion, agency, and transformation, produced an environment which encouraged active learning, and subsequent engagement and success”. Interestingly, the military are argued to have taken advantage of this aspect of simulation and strategy games by developing and releasing their own to the market as entertainment/software e.g. ARMA series (Herz, 1997; Pearson, 2015). High-fidelity versions simulate every possible action a player should do, but the low-fidelity version has an edge over the high-fidelity in terms of providing the main components of a system with a lower cost (Squire, 2003). The effectiveness of learning as a result of these video games is evident in Pearson’s concern, for example, that “PlayStation and Xbox controllers have been used to create interfaces, blurring the line between fiction and fatality yet further. The military, it seems, is quite happy marketing real-life killing as a game”. While, in the main, research into simulation games has been conducted in learning in science, mathematics, engineering and technology (STEM) and found to have educational benefits (D’Angelo et al., 2014) there is less research regarding the learning of English/EFL (Lin, 2015), although Peterson (2015) concluded they have been shown to be effective in this field.

### **Video Games and Cultural Learning**

In language learning it is well recognizing that language and culture are deeply intertwined (Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino & Kohler, 2003) and as noted above language learners require knowledge of their own culture in order to understand that of the target language. They need to be aware of the language and cultural knowledge and skills that are embedded in the socio-cultural practices in order to communicate and make meaning. Thus, it is incumbent upon learners to learn cultural knowledge, since this knowledge, in a far broader sense, is synonymous with their pragmatic competence that must embrace interpretations, schemata and scripts of a specific culture (Takkaç Tulgar, 2016). Tschirner (2001) maintained

that “language is a cultural product”. In the multicultural societies of the information age, intercultural understanding and appropriate cross-cultural behavior are likely to become essential skills for all humans.” (p. 8). This is borne out by Bindé (2005) and O’Neill (2019) who emphasize the importance of collaborative skills for effective global communication. It is central to Dahlgren’s (2015) cosmopolitanism in acquiring agency in global citizenship. Hence, to learn cultural knowledge and analytical reasoning can play a role very similar to the acquisition of functional competency. Learning cultural knowledge can be assisted when players interact with the cultural artefacts of the video game content. Nonetheless, pictures, photographs and other graphical information alone cannot be considered as suitable aids for providing in depth knowledge of the culture of the target language. As Tschirner (2001) explains, acquiring intercultural literacy is much more complex: “human action, mimic and gesture, etc. have to be seen if one wants to gain insights about the semiotic systems representative of another culture.” (p. 8). Owing to this complexity and the pace of human interactions, for video games to support language and cultural learning and student engagement, they must be carefully designed. For instance, through each repetition, a body of signs can be evident to catch learners’ attention so that they can grasp the connections but such design needs to ensure authenticity. In keeping with Terantino (2017) a culture-based framework might be used to foster intercultural sensitivity or like Joseph and Diamond (2017) culturally responsive pedagogy. Moreover, in Soyoo and Jokar’s (2014) qualitative study it was found that video games are fruitful in enhancing not only language learning but better cultural understanding. Similarly, Benson (2018), in a seminal study, found that video games are beneficial to be used as a tool for augmenting cultural knowledge. On this basis the present research sought to answer the question: How do seasoned EFL video game players view the usefulness of video games for acquiring cultural knowledge and intercultural sensitivity?

## **METHODOLOGY**

A case study approach was taken, which focused on the collection of qualitative data through the use of a semi-structured interview schedule. This was administered individually to each of six Iranian, male EFL language learners to explore their opinion as to whether their frequent experience playing video games of different genres was effective in enhancing their cultural knowledge and sensitivity. The duration of each interview was approximately 60 minutes. The interview data were analysed to ascertain the students’ views about the usefulness of video games for acquiring cultural knowledge and cultural sensitivity relevant to the learning of English as a foreign language.

### **Sample Selection**

The participating students were purposively selected as EFL language learners with extensive experience playing video games of different genres and for their English language proficiency levels sufficient to warrant their ability to contribute to the research being at least elementary level according to the Oxford Placement Test (2007), with the highest at advance level. Their ages ranged from 16 to 23.

### **Results**

The researcher sought to describe the students’ views of the usefulness of playing video games in terms of acquiring cultural knowledge and developing cultural sensitivity

relevant to the learning of English as a foreign language. Each student's view is silhouetted through an extract from their interview.

### **Student 1**

#### **Video games as a story-based game**

*I like to learn the L2 culture through videogames. There are many reasons why I would like to learn it via videogames; one of them is the quality of videogames in offering L2 culture, videogames provide a virtual world that is very similar to L2 culture. I believe that it is impossible to teach culture in classrooms, since culture is far more complicated than a few pictures and a general oral description.*

This student's response contrasts the traditional approach of explaining culture with the help of pictorial resources within the confines of the classroom with the more experiential, interactive learning that can take place through playing an appropriate video game. From this response it can be inferred that videogames can provide a very similar situation to the real L2 culture. What is more, videogames use the most current technology for teaching students their L2 culture, which can encourage and motivate them to learn more effectively, because its interactivity and explicit objective or goal can be very interesting. In addition, culture is more complex and requires deep learning (Tochon, 2014; Valerio, 2012), which cannot be achieved through perusal of mere pictures. In addition, it is very hard for students to become acquainted with L2 culture through traditional classroom learning environments, which are relatively static compared with being deeply engaged in a video game.

### **Student 2**

*In my opinion, it is ridiculous for me to try to learn culture within the classroom context. There are limitations in classrooms. For instance, the majority of cultural differences cannot even be mentioned in a classroom, because the norms of different societies vary according to their beliefs, but video games do not have such limitations.*

Based upon this student's response, it can be concluded that merely mentioning some of the cultural differences within the language classroom context is insufficient for effective learning, whereas the deep and consistent experience within a video game which may be likened to simulation is perceived as more effective. Besides, the norms for the new/L2 culture can be considered strange or ridiculous when taken in isolation and compared with the learners' own culture practices in which they are deeply entrenched.

### **Student 3**

*As far as I know, the classroom has its own limitations, but, learning language via videogames is very amusing and intriguing. In addition, videogames offer a culture as it is, and simply put, they are not biased. Additionally, videogames facilitate the process of students' participation because of their edutainment nature.*

Based upon what was mentioned by this student, it can be understood that learning a language using videogames is interesting because of the atmosphere they provide for learning. In addition, the edutainment nature of videogames stimulates learners to participate more in such games and the cultural learning on offer. Moreover, in this EFL student's view video games present the L2 culture in an unbiased manner. What is more, according to flow theory (Csikszentimihalyi, 1991), the optimal environment for the maximum participation is offered by videogames, where students enthusiasm is sustained through the built-in system of reward

or feeling of success. Thus, the edutainment essence of video games promotes students' participation.

#### **Student 4**

*In my experience, videogames are the best way for learning new materials, history, and culture. One of the benefits that can be ascribed to videogames is their ability to teach material implicitly, or put it in a nut shell, videogames provide a situation where students can experience learning, which in my opinion, has a more relationship to my mind, and due to their discovery-based traits, videogames can create an atmosphere where learners can experience not only the most basic feature of a culture but its most detailed ingredients.*

According to student four's response, videogames are seen as being able to make cultural learning possible compared with typical EFL learning experiences that cannot provide the same communicative interactions tied to purposeful meaning making and therefore deeper learning. What is more, this student's description of his learning experience is in line with second language acquisition (SLA) principles that emphasize the importance of implicit learning to ensure learning languages successfully. In addition, it is suggested that the idea of learning the L2 culture implicitly through video game playing offers room for language learners to first learn the general characteristics of the culture as well as in more depth.

#### **Student 5**

*I believe that videogames are a useful tool for learning a new language as well as a culture. One of the rare features that most videogames are imbued with is the motivation they provide for language learners both intrinsically and extrinsically. In my own experience, accomplishing each phase of a game can promote a learner's self-confidence that can help him or her to be successful in other spheres of their lives.*

From Student five's statement, it can be extrapolated that videogames provide motivation both intrinsically and extrinsically. Scholars in the realms of motivation have ascertained that if learning is a car, then motivation is as influential as an engine or fuel for movement (Dörnyei & Clément, 2001; Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014; Soyooof, 2018). Moreover, some other ingredients for successful learning can be observed in videogames, namely the building of self-confidence through the continued graduated success that is built-in, via staged or structured levels of attainment. This builds students' capacity through play which is well established as having a crucial role in learning as well as daily life.

#### **Student 6**

*I like videogames, and I believe that they can be considered as a way for teaching new materials, especially culture; one of the unique aspects of videogames is learning subconsciously, which can ease learning the target language culture. Also, videogames are story-based, which facilitates remembering cultural details.*

From Student Six's point of view, it can be inferred that his reference to learning subconsciously while playing video games means that the demands of playing are uppermost in the experience but at the same time cultural knowledge and understanding is being acquired implicitly. Thus, through play video games can entice language learners to embrace

the target language and culture, and it would seem that ‘a third place’ (Liddicoat et al., 2003) could be achievable as differences between L1 and L2 culture are reconciled. As well, the story-based essence of such video games allows language learners to make a connection between different instructions from the most general to the most specific. In effect, in this student’s opinion video games can help language learners remember the cultural norms of a particular society for a longer period of time.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

It is argued that learning a new language is actually learning a new culture (Liddicoat et al., 2003; Newton et al., 2010). Without learning the culture of a particular language, language learners are not capable of communicating successfully. Although a small study the data analysis indicates that, in the view of students, video games can provide a situation where they can learn the culture of a new language enthusiastically through their engagement in playing the game. Owing to the complexity of culture, it is not possible to teach a new culture through pictorial and text book resources and the mere telling or explaining. Rather, since language and culture are closely intertwined it seems that video games provide a vehicle to deliver the L2 cultural experience through it being embedded and practiced in the game. Since video games offer a range of high quality video and multimedia experiences and can involve simulation and role play the student’s language learning can involve communicative interactions at the optimum level for SLA. Moreover, they allow language learners to attend to the new culture in the context of virtual reality, and in the students’ opinion by involving their feelings they are learning more deeply. Video games, through their ability to present an intriguing atmosphere and provide systematic feedback are able to persuade language learners to maximize their participation and in Csikszentmihalyi’s (1991) terms sustain their involvement and experience ‘flow’. Additionally, it is suggested that videogames can teach the L2 culture in an unbiased way.

Furthermore, since videogames teach the L2 culture subconsciously, the influence of students’ first language ego (Soyooof & Jokar, 2014) is minimized. Finally, from the students’ perspective, videogames can enhance other learning principles, including motivation and self-confidence. Overall the students in this research showed significant awareness of their L2 cultural learning and the challenges involved in SLA. Their responses were insightful and highlighted the contrast between the inadequacy of traditional language pedagogy and that fostered by the communicative approach and additionally the importance of social constructivism. In fact, their responses were confirmatory regarding in terms of Newton et al.’s six teaching strategies for intercultural communicative language teaching, particularly with regards to integrating language and culture from the beginning, engaging learners in genuine social interaction and emphasizing intercultural communicative competence rather than native-speaker competence. However, it is recommended that further research be undertaken to focus on students’ actual play to investigate further the pedagogical issues raised in terms of the language and cultural learning and students’ intercultural literacy.

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Address for correspondence: Ali Soyooof, School of Foreign Language Studies, Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran. Email:<[alisoyooof@gmail.com](mailto:alisoyooof@gmail.com)>

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