

البحث في توجهات المتعلمين العراقيين للغة الإنجليزية... مودة حسين و د. عمر علي
البحث في توجهات المتعلمين العراقيين للغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية تجاه استخدام
المواد الاصلية كمرايا ثقافية

Investigating Iraqi EFL Learners' Attitudes towards the Use of Authentic Materials as Cultural Mirrors

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الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة والثقافة، الثقافة، الاصاله، المواد الاصلية، التوجهات

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الملخص

تبحث الدراسة الحالية في توجهات المتعلمين العراقيين للغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية تجاه استخدام المواد الاصلية كمرايا ثقافية في الأوساط الأكاديمية. تحقيقاً لهذه الغاية ، تم إنشاء دورة تجريبية بعنوان "اللغة والثقافة تم من خلالها استخدام المواد الاصلية بشكل مكثف لتعزيز الوعي الثقافي للمتعلمين. عينة الدراسة هم خمسون طالباً من السنة الرابعة تم اختيارهم عشوائياً من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية / كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية / جامعة الموصل، للعام الدراسي ٢٠٢٠-٢٠٢١. تم جمع البيانات من خلال استخدام استبيان الملاحظات الراجعة الذي تم إجراؤه في نهاية الدورة التجريبية المذكورة أعلاه. كشفت النتائج أن الطلاب لديهم توجهات إيجابية تجاه استخدام المواد الاصلية كمرايا ثقافية داخل الأوساط الأكاديمية العراقية.

Abstract

The study investigates Iraqi EFL learners' attitudes towards the use of authentic materials as cultural mirrors within academic settings. To this end, an experimental course entitled 'Language and Culture' has been constructed throughout which authentic materials have been intensively utilized to enhance learners' cultural awareness. The sample of the study is fifty fourth-year students who have been selected randomly from the Department of English/ College of Education for Humanities/ University of Mosul. Data were collected through the use of a feedback questionnaire that was administered at the end of the aforementioned course. Results revealed that students hold positive attitudes towards the use of authentic materials as cultural mirrors within Iraqi academic settings.

1. Introduction

Given current trends in globalization and new technologies in the 21st century, more people around the globe have more direct and indirect opportunities to contact one another. And because such contact includes people of different languages and cultural backgrounds, a need to address the cultural dimension in foreign language teaching (henceforth FLT) has been increasingly emphasized (Byram, 1997). This need arises from the notion that culture and language are interwoven and interdependent (Kramsch, 2013; Arnaudova, 2006; Byram, 2012). From this perspective, language is a vehicle that transmits culture, and culture is the key that determines the way communication proceeds and how people decipher the messages they get (Kozhevnikova, 2013: 4462). Ignoring the cultural dimension of language in FLT would result in misunderstanding, unintended offense and communication failure when interacting with others from different language-culture backgrounds. In line with this perspective, Bennet (1997: 1) uses the term "fluent fool" to describe those who speak a foreign language fluently, yet with no understanding of the cultural dimension of that language.

Promoting foreign language learners' (henceforth FLLs) cultural awareness is being increasingly emphasized in the 21st century, given its necessity in today's globalized world. To meet this need, a trend of incorporating authentic materials (henceforth AMs) into foreign language classrooms has been increasingly encouraged (Mestari & Malabar, 2016: 126). AMs are materials that are produced by and for native speakers of a community; for example, movies, sitcoms, songs, newspapers, and so on. These materials are not modified or manipulated for educational purposes, thus they mirror various cultural aspects and language variety of the target community in an authentic and effective way (Beresova, 2015: 196). The use of AMs in FLT can

be traced back to at least the 1970s; however, these materials were used mostly to enhance learners' language proficiency. In recent years, AMs have been given the potential to enhance not only learners' language proficiency, but their cultural knowledge and awareness as well (Autio, 2012: 13). In line with this trend, an experimental course entitled 'Language and Culture' has been constructed to enhance learners' cultural awareness. Throughout this course, authentic materials have been intensively utilized throughout the whole academic year 2020-2021.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

AMs are not properly integrated into Iraqi English language teaching (henceforth ELT) curriculum nor in instructors' activities, despite the rich literature that supports their powerful impact on enhancing learners' command over language. A huge body of evidence drawn from previous studies shows that exploiting AMs inside EFL classrooms is being increasingly encouraged (e.g. Peacock, 1997; Kilickaya, 2004; Kozhevnikova, 2013; Liu, 2016; Sample, 2015, and many others). This is underlay mainly by the assumption that AMs can bridge the gap between English as a foreign language (henceforth EFL) classrooms and real-life communication, especially when interaction with real native speakers is not possible (Wong et al, 1995: 20). Therefore, it is argued that AMs can serve as mirrors that reflect various cultural aspects and expose learners to real language use and varieties that are present within target communities (Autio, 2012: 41). AMs are argued to yield positive outcomes in enhancing learners' cultural knowledge and awareness. Such materials are assumed to be culturally loaded and highly motivating; thus, more preferable by FLLs. Although such remarks are repeatedly reported in literature within various cultural contexts, investigating Iraqi EFL learners' attitudes

towards the use of AMs as cultural mirrors has not been given much attention.

1.2 Aim of the study

The current study aims at investigating Iraqi EFL learners' attitudes towards the use of AMs as cultural mirrors within Iraqi academic settings.

2. Theoretical Background

This section is dedicated for presenting a general theoretical background concerning the key concepts that are of relevance to this study.

2.1 The Concept of Authenticity

Although the concept of authenticity has long been a subject of interest in education, still there is little agreement regarding its meaning. This debate over what is meant by the term authenticity, and how it is achieved inside the classroom, immerses the whole concept with complexity and ambiguity. Over the years, the issue of authenticity has been addressed from different perspectives that inevitably sparked a number of considerably controversial interpretations of the same term (Gilmore, 2007: 69).

Most authors agree that the concept of authenticity is interpreted as exposure to natural language produced by and for real native speakers of a particular community to convey some messages (Rogers & Medley, 1988: 467). Building on this, authenticity is related to language spontaneously generated with no modifications or any pedagogical considerations (Namaziandost et al, 2021: 2). Exposing language learners to such AMs is commonly believed to mark the classroom environment with authenticity. This perspective is supported by various authors who agree that authenticity is manifested by the use of AMs (Gilmore, 2007: 69). In other words, authenticity is linked to text/material's authenticity that is considered as the cornerstone of this concept.

Another interpretation of authenticity has emerged in literature which concentrates on learners' authenticity, as the core of the whole concept, rather than the materials that are used. In other words, it is learners' response and reaction to AMs that are believed to generate

authenticity inside the classroom. Additionally, authenticity has also been linked with carrying out authentic tasks which are part of the task-based learning approach. Nunan (1989: 40) defines authentic tasks as classroom activities that are designed to replicate real-life experiences. A further interpretation of the concept of authenticity in education, which has been commonly addressed in literature, revolves around principles of testing or assessment (Gilmore, 2007: 70). Accordingly, Bachman and Palmer (1996: 23) defines authenticity as “the degree of correspondence of the characteristics of a given language test task to the features of a target language task”. In this sense, a test is authentic if its items stimulate performance that is likely to take place in real-life situations.

Many other interpretations for authenticity have been introduced in literature. Nevertheless, despite such controversial perspectives regarding how authenticity is manifested, the use of AMs is regarded as the core of any attempt to achieve authenticity inside the classroom (Liu, 2016: 1775). As such, the “authentic language input is the one that serves as the fundamental role, thus receiving much more attention than the other features.” (ibid).

2.2 Defining Authentic Materials

As it has been stated earlier, it is agreed that the key element to achieve authenticity basically revolves around the use of AMs (Liu, 2016: 1775). Many definitions for AMs have been introduced throughout literature. Although each definition tends to highlight some particular aspects, yet they are somewhat similar with no major contradictions. Morrow (1977: 13) defines AMs as “stretch of real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of some sort”. Similar definitions are found in literature in which AMs are perceived as materials that have been naturally produced by and for native speakers of a given

community. Additionally, another feature that is commonly highlighted when defining AMs is related to the purpose behind their production. Accordingly, Porter and Roberts (1981) define AMs as real materials that “were *not* initiated for the purpose of teaching” (ibid: 37). In other words, such materials are authentic in the sense that they use real language which is originally “not intended for non-native learners” (ibid).

Rogers and Medley (1988: 468) propose another definition for AMs that focus on the cultural aspects that are embedded in these materials. According to their perspective, AMs refer to “language samples-both oral and written-that reflect a naturalness of form, and an appropriateness of cultural and situational context that would be found in the language as used by native speakers” (ibid). That been said, one can summarize the above mentioned salient features of AMs as follows:

1. AMs are produced by and for native speakers of a community
2. AMs are not created for pedagogical reasons.
3. AMs reflect natural language use.
4. AMs are cultural mirrors.
5. AMs have a communicative social purpose behind their production.

2.3 Types of Authentic Materials

Unlimited number of AMs can be found in any community that are produced on daily basis as part of natural daily-life routine. Any material that matches the descriptions mentioned previously can be regarded as an AM. This would include weather reports, magazines, horoscopes, advertisements, restaurant menus, songs, street signs, paintings, etc. (Kozhevnikova, 2014: 4464). Reviewing relevant literature reveals that the classification of AMs typically revolves around the following major types:

- **Audio materials:** they cover various non-visual audio materials including non-visual songs, music, radio podcasts, interviews, discussions, conversations, audio-books, etc. (Ahsanu, 2019: 271).
- **Audio-visual materials:** they encompass videos drawn from a wide variety of resources including TV shows, movies, sitcoms, documentaries, cartoons, visual advertisements and many other materials. (Mishan, 2005: 31).
- **Visual materials:** They include photographs, postcards, magazine pictures, paintings, food, drawings, stamps, sculptures, memorials, and many other images of all kind (Reid, 2014: 162).
- **Written materials:** they cover a wide range of articles, songs' lyrics, catalogues, books, poems, speech scripts, food labels, etc. (Hedge, 2000: 68).
- **Realia:** they encompass real objects taken from the target community such as masks, flags, dolls, clothes, tickets and other real objects that are unique to a specific community (Oguz and Bahar, 2008: 330).

2.4 Authentic Materials as Cultural Mirrors

Throughout FLT literature, it has been increasingly argued that creating an authentic environment for FLLs by the use of AMs can positively develop their command over language. This perspective is underlay by the rationale that FLLs need to be exposed to real-life language, rather than artificial language input which is typically found in contrived textbooks (Belaid & Murray, 2015: 26). Looking into FLT's literature, AMs have also been given the potential to serve as cultural mirrors as early as the late 1940s with the works of T. S. Eliot. In his terms, Eliot (1948: 92) argues that "even the humblest material artefact which is the product and the symbol of a particular civilisation is an emissary of the culture out of which it comes". Nevertheless,

despite such early remarks that supported the use of AMs and their probable benefits, their incorporation into language teaching was not seriously appreciated till the 1970s (Mestari & Malabar, 2016: 126). AMs are believed to bring reality into FL classrooms and familiarize learners with how language is used communicatively (Beresova, 2015: 196). Bringing real-life language inside the classroom is believed to help FLLs generalize this authenticity outside the classroom, and use language effectively in real situations. AMs materials are given such potential due to the social communicative purpose that underlies their creation (Mishan 2005: 71). As such, it is argued that AMs have positive pedagogical implications, especially where interaction with real native speakers is not possible (ibid: 155). Wong et al (1995: 20) remark that AMs can bridge the gap between FL classrooms and real-life communication given their genuineness. Consequently, AMs are given the potential to serve as linguistic and cultural mirrors that exposes FLLs to various cultural aspects and language varieties within the target community (Autio, 2012: 41). This perspective is shared by Rahal (2017: 266), Martínez-Flor (2007: 247), Mishan (2005: 37) and many other authors who agree that such materials can effectively reflect various linguistic and cultural aspects. Accordingly, Ziębka (2011: 270) remarks that, in the context of FLT, “books should contain more authentic materials, as they seem to be the best carriers of cultural background in the environment of L1 culture”. Similar remarks that support AMs’ powerful impact over culture learning can be found throughout FLT literature (Kilickaya, 2004; Kozhevnikova, 2014; Beresova, 2015; Zhou, 2017; Gómez-Rodríguez, 2018; Zhang, 2020).

3. Methodology

This section is intended to describe practical procedures implemented in line with the aims of the current study.

3.1 Experimental Course: “Language and Culture”

The course Language and Culture has been designed to investigate AMs’ potential to enhance learners’ cultural awareness. Accordingly, AMs have been intensively utilized throughout this experimental course that lasted for approximately six months. The course started on the 14th December 2020 and continued till 10th July 2021. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Iraq issued some regulations regarding the educational system, which the current study had to comply with. Following these regulations, the course was offered online for some time; however, the blending teaching system was utilized for some months; namely, December, June and July.

As for the timetable, the Department of English allocated two successive hours for the course Language and Culture on weekly basis. Besides these two hours, the students are occasionally invited to watch some selected movies online with the course instructor and the researcher. The choice of these movies is made in line with the cultural themes that are the central focus of this course. These themes are: Holidays, Myths, Legends, Superstitions, History, Geography, Language Varieties, Social Norms and Hidden Values and Beliefs.

3.2 Population and Sample of the Study

The population of the current study is 286 forth-year undergraduate students at the Department of English, College of Education for Humanities, University of Mosul, for the academic year 2020-2021, the morning study. As for the sample, 50 students are chosen from the aforementioned population following the simple random sampling strategy. Accordingly, participants were selected

randomly from the whole population. The rationale behind choosing this sampling strategy is related to its acknowledged high external validity and generalizability.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

In order to elicit data necessary for the sake of experimentation, the current study utilizes a Feedback Questionnaire (henceforth FQ) that has been designed to elicit students' opinions regarding the experimental course Language and Culture. This questionnaire is intended to collect data regarding students' attitudes towards the use of AMs as cultural mirrors in academic settings.

4. Data Analysis

Data collected through FQ were analyzed to draw on students' attitudes towards the use of AMs. In this regard, students were asked some questions related to the experimental course Language and Culture. Accordingly, all FQ items will be addressed separately as follows:

Item 1 - Did you find this course helpful? Did it help you improve your understanding of the UK and USA's cultures?

Results related to this item reveal that forty-seven of the students (94%) found this course beneficial; thus, responded with 'Yes'. However, three students (6%), answered with 'No' indicating that the course was not helpful for them.

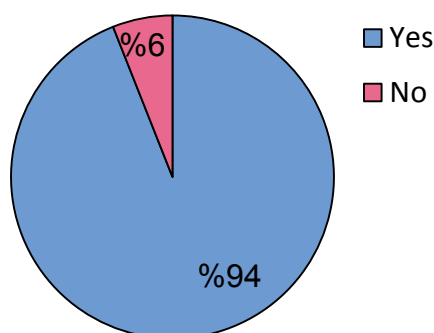


Figure (1)

Students' Responses for Item-1 in FQ

Item 2 - Did you learn in this course some new aspects related to the UK or USA's culture that you did not know before?

Looking at students' responses, all of the students (100%) seem to have learned new cultural aspects related to UK and USA throughout this course.

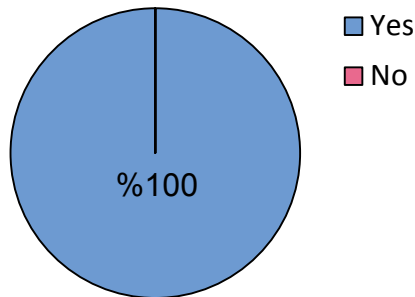


Figure (2)

Students' Responses for Item-2 in FQ

Item 3 - Did you find watching authentic materials fun? (like movies, videos, songs, etc.)

Thirty-nine students (78%) reported that dealing with AMs is fun; however, eleven students (22%) reported the opposite.

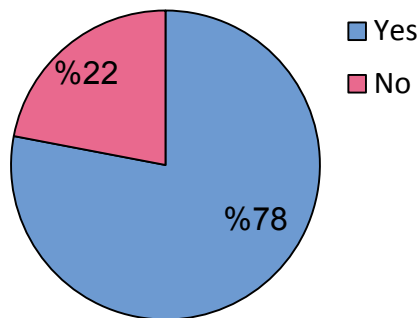


Figure (3)

Students' Responses for Item-3 in FQ

Item 4 - After finishing this course, do you think authentic materials (like movies, sitcoms, songs, newspapers, etc.) can help developing one's cultural knowledge and awareness?

Obtained data show that forty-eight of the students (96%) responded with 'yes', whereas the other two students (4%) answered with 'No'

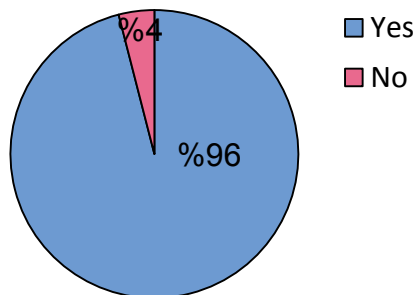


Figure (4)

Students' Responses for Item-4 in FQ

Item 5 - Would you consider using authentic material like movies, sitcoms, newspapers, etc. when teaching your own students?

When the students were asked whether or not they would consider using AMs, thirty-nine of the students (78%) responded with 'Yes', and seven (14%) answered with 'No. Other responses were reported in which one student (2%) wrote 'Probably' and another one (2%) noted 'Maybe'. In addition, one (2%) student pointed out that 'If authentic material are available, of course will do'. Whereas another student (2%) responded with 'Maybe on rare occasions, but most part I would not'.



Figure (5)

Students' Responses for Item-5 in FQ

Item 6 - Do you think this course helped you in increasing your confidence that you can communicate with British/American people?

Students responses reveal that thirty-eight student (76%) chose 'Yes', whereas eleven students (22%) answered with 'No'. Additionally, one student (2%) remarked that 'I knew most of their culture before entering this course yet it was really helpful'.

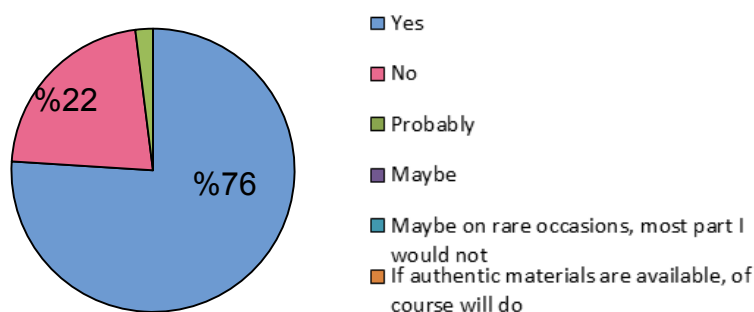


Figure (6)

Students' Responses for Item-6 in FQ

Item 7 - In few words, can you tell us something about your own experience in this course? How did you find learning about UK and USA's culture by the use of authentic materials (like movies, sitcoms, songs, newspapers, etc.)?

Students' comments were read several times and they were found to cluster around three major themes or ideas that reflected students' satisfaction towards the efficiency of this course. These three themes were repeatedly expressed throughout students' comments, and they revolve around: (1) '*Increased Knowledge and Awareness*', (2) '*Favored use of AMs as cultural mirrors*', and (3) '*Fun and interesting experience*'. It is noteworthy that some comments were found to relate to more than one of the aforementioned themes; as such, they were relabeled under other relevant themes as well. In addition to those major themes, another minor theme is added. This theme was found in one comment only, and it revolves around (4) '*Moderate level of efficiency*'. All of these themes were converted into numerical percentages that are intended to reveal how frequently these themes reoccurred across students' responses (see *Table 1*).

The first major theme (1) '*Increased Knowledge and Awareness*', revolves around the efficiency of this course to enhance students' intercultural abilities. Accordingly, forty-seven comments (94%) reflected students' satisfaction towards this course pointing out that it has indeed enriched their cultural knowledge and awareness. The following is a sample from students' responses in this regard:

- "I learned a lot of things about their cultures and it was very helpful to me and it is also fun and i did not feel bored and this great thing".
- "In fact, I had no information about other cultures, their occasions, or the history of their nation. My information was very modest. But through this course, I got a lot and a lot of information about British and American culture. It was a very useful and interesting course for me".
- "Learned many customs and norms that I did not know, such as the difference between V-shaped, frankly, I was surprised when I read

- it, I did not know that there was a difference, and I also liked studying the holidays”.
- “For me this course was the most beautiful experience because I learned new things about USA and UK by using new methods like movies songs and so on I found their culture totally different from us”.
 - “that was a great experience for me I learned more about culture of UK and USA and more about their history and life, i have known something is really important is to learn any language you have to study their culture and history to understanding what they mean when using their own words or idioms”.

The second major theme is (2) ‘*Favored use of AMs as cultural mirrors*’. This theme covers students’ comments that revealed positive attitude towards the use of AMs as cultural mirrors. Accordingly, thirty-one comments (62%) were found to favor and encourage the use of AMs. The following is a sample from students’ responses:

- “I found learning about UK and USA culture by using authentic materials very interesting”
- “Honestly it was interesting to read all those papers i was given throughout this year about this new course , actually using authentic materials made the process easier and funnier and more interesting”
- “It was very interesting experience especially by using authentic materials which help a lot in learning about UK and USA's cultures”
- “I think there is a noticeable development in our learning of American culture and UK by watching movies and songs because they contain new information that we have not heard before”

- “During the first course, Dr. Omar gave us films about racism and the Civil War in America, which contributed to increasing my knowledge about racism in America.”

The third major theme, (3) ‘*Fun and interesting experience*’, covers students remarks that addressed this course as being new, fun, interesting and non-traditional. Accordingly, twenty-seven of students’ comments (54%) were found to relate to this theme. A sample from students’ responses is presented as follows:

- “It was a fun experience getting to know the culture of UK and USA and learn about their customs and traditions”
- “I really enjoyed it. It was the most enjoyable course ever. Especially the authentic materials: movies, songs, and sitcoms”.
- “I found it interesting. This course was fun and helpful as it gave us an insight about the culture and life style in the UK and USA”.
- “It is very interesting and conveys the idea in a simple and smooth way and I encourage teaching in this way”.
- “This way is different from the other ones which are traditional and boring . In result, I have learned a lot about Uk and USA's cluture by the use of authentic materials.”

The forth, and last theme is ‘*Moderate level of efficiency*’. This minor theme covers only one comment (2%) that perceives moderate level of efficiency for this course:

- “Sometimes was be useful and sometimes was does not useful”

Table (1)

Reoccurrence Rate of Students' Responses for Item-7 in FQ

Theme	No. of comments	Reoccurrence rate
(1) Increased Knowledge and Awareness	47	94%
(2) Favored use of AMs as cultural mirrors	31	62%
(3) Fun and interesting experience	27	54%
(4) Moderate level of efficiency	1	2%

Item 8 - Finally, do you think this course could have been better? Do you have any suggestions to improve it?

Students' responses were read several times and it was found that forty-three of the students had given remarks indicating their satisfaction towards the course without pointing out any suggestions:

- No, I have no suggestions. The information was sufficient, good and enjoyable in this course
- Not only the best course, but the best subject I've ever studied
- It doesn't need improvement, it's great
- In my opinion, this course is a very useful and interesting course and there is no better way to do it
- You don't need anything to develop it, it was very helpful, your explanation was clear and smooth, the way you presented this material was in a modern style, you used many means of illustration.

However, the other seven students presented some suggestions which were as follows. Three of them indicated that the course could have been better if it was carried out face-to-face:

- “I think it will be better if we took the course inside the classroom”
- “All information included in the papers and the use of authentic materials and the easy and direct tests it was perfect but the only thing that needed to be done is to teach this directly in the classroom”
- “I think to improve it must be face to face”

One student suggested conducting educational journey to the UK/USA, whereas another student suggested visiting historical places in Iraq:

- “In my opinion, this course could have been better by making an scientific educational journey to the UK or USA”
- “I suggest visiting some historical places in Iraq to improve this course”

Additionally, one student suggested that the course could have been better if students were asked to write reports related to UK/USA cultures:

- “This course may be better by asking students to write reports that expand more information on the topics of the course in order to learn more in depth about other cultures and discuss them later”

Finally, a student suggested that it would have been more preferable if students were allowed to give presentations:

- “It could have been better if students were asked to present or give lecture on the stage about USA and UK”

5. Conclusions

Looking at students responses in FQ, it was found that the majority of the students (96%) agree that the use of AMs can enhance cultural knowledge and awareness. In addition, most students (78%) enjoyed the use of AMs within academic settings and have shown positive attitudes in this regard. It has been observed that the majority of the students (94%) agree that the course was helpful, and all of them (100%) indicated that this course has provided them with cultural information that they did not know before. Moreover, most students (76%) indicated that enrolling in this course made them more confident that they can communicate with British/American people. It is noteworthy that after this experiment the majority of the students (78%) reported that they are considering using AMs when teaching their own students.

When students were asked about their opinions regarding this course, ninety-four percent of their comments indicated that the course helped them increase their cultural knowledge and awareness. Sixty-two percent of students' comments remarked that AMs are culturally loaded, thus they have the potential to serve as cultural mirrors. In addition, forty-four percent of the comments revolved around the idea that the course was fun and amusing. Finally, only one comment found the efficiency of this course as being moderate.

It can be inferred that student's attitudes towards the use of AMs within academic settings are extremely high and positive. AMs were found to have contributed in deepening students' cultural knowledge and awareness. The majority of the students have interacted positively with AMs throughout the whole experiment, which serve as evidence that AMs are engaging, interesting and motivational. Building on these results, the current study supports the use of AMs as cultural mirrors and calls for their incorporation alongside conventional ELT curriculums.

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