

Research Article

An Investigation of Student Teachers' Conceptions on Cultural Aspects for English Language Learning: The Thai EFL Context

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Abstract

The purpose of this mixed-methods research was to investigate student teachers' conceptions of cultural aspects for English foreign language learning (EFL) in Thailand context. The instruments were a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview protocol. The participants included 30 student teachers of English at Loei Rajabhat University, Thailand. The quantitative data were analyzed statistically and the qualitative data were analyzed through an interpretative approach and thematic analysis. The findings revealed that: 1) for the participants' overall conception, culture had two dimensions: visible and invisible with two types of knowledge: subjective and objective; but the distinct characteristic was as a subjective knowledge which was difficult to change and acquiring the knowledge was higher possible through explicit teaching than through implicit learning or self-learning. 2) With regard to the roles of culture in EFL learning, the overall Mean score (\bar{X} = 3.17, S.D. = 0.56) indicated that the participants moderately agreed that learning culture was not the main focus, not a core, and not the primary domain in learning language but an additional feature learned as an option and culture was only a piece of information delivered through language. However, they did not deny its influence on socio-cultural practices; cultural knowledge was an outcome reflected from language proficiency; and tended to enable them to attain the higher language proficiency. Thus, the participants' conceptions on the cultural aspects for English foreign language learning in the Thai context were mainly involved the community perspectives such as perceptions, values, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews rather than the cultural products and social practices, and learning culture was optional for EFL learning in the studied Thai EFL context.

Keywords: Student Teachers, Cultural Aspects, English Foreign Language Learning, Thailand Context

บทความวิจัย

การศึกษาแนวคิดเรื่องลักษณะทางวัฒนธรรมเพื่อการเรียนรู้ ภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาครู: การเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษ ในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศในบริบทประเทศไทย

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บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยนี้เป็นงานวิจัยผสมวิธี มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาแนวคิดเรื่องลักษณะทางวัฒนธรรมเพื่อการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ (EFL) ในบริบทประเทศไทยของนักศึกษาครู เครื่องมือสำหรับเก็บข้อมูลประกอบด้วยแบบสอบถามและแบบสัมภาษณ์กึ่งโครงสร้าง กลุ่มเป้าหมายได้แก่นักศึกษาครูสาขาวิชาภาษาอังกฤษ มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏเลย จำนวน 30 คน การวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลเชิงปริมาณใช้วิธีการทางสถิติ และการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลเชิงคุณภาพใช้วิธีการวิเคราะห์แก่นสาระและการตีความ ผลการศึกษาพบว่า 1) ในภาพรวม กลุ่มเป้าหมายมีแนวคิดว่าวัฒนธรรมมี 2 มิติ คือ วัฒนธรรมที่มองเห็นได้และมองไม่เห็น มีเนื้อหาความรู้ 2 ชนิด คือความรู้เชิงอัตวิสัยและวัตถุวิสัย แต่ลักษณะเด่นคือเป็นความรู้เชิงอัตวิสัยที่เปลี่ยนแปลงยากและมีความเป็นไปได้อาจจะเรียนรู้ด้วยวิธีการสอนอย่างชัดเจนมากกว่าการเรียนรู้แบบซึมซับหรือเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเอง 2) ด้านบทบาทของวัฒนธรรมในการเรียนรู้ภาษานั้นพบว่านักศึกษาเห็นด้วยในระดับปานกลาง ($\bar{X} = 3.17$, S.D. = 0.56) ในประเด็นที่ว่า การเรียนรู้วัฒนธรรมมิได้เป็นเป้าหมายหลัก แก่นสาระหลัก หรือขอบเขตความรู้พื้นฐานในการเรียนรู้ภาษา มีสถานะเป็นเพียงความรู้เพิ่มเติมซึ่งเป็นทางเลือกหนึ่งของเนื้อหาการเรียนภาษา และเป็นเพียงขั้นข้อมูลที่ถ่ายทอดผ่านภาษาเท่านั้น อย่างไรก็ตามกลุ่มเป้าหมายมิได้ปฏิเสธอิทธิพลของวัฒนธรรมที่มีต่อแนวทางปฏิบัติด้านสังคมวัฒนธรรม ความรู้เกี่ยวกับวัฒนธรรมเป็นผลลัพธ์ที่สะท้อนให้เห็นได้จากระดับความรู้ความสามารถทางภาษา และมีแนวโน้มที่จะเสริมสร้างทักษะภาษาให้สูงขึ้นได้ ดังนั้น แนวคิดเรื่องลักษณะทางวัฒนธรรมเพื่อการเรียน EFL ในบริบทประเทศไทยของกลุ่มเป้าหมายจึงเกี่ยวข้องกับทัศนะของชุมชน เช่น การรับรู้ ค่านิยม ทัศนคติ ความเชื่อ และการมองโลก มากกว่าผลผลิตทางวัฒนธรรมและแนวปฏิบัติทางสังคม และเป็นเนื้อหาทางเลือกในการเรียนรู้

คำสำคัญ: นักศึกษาครู ลักษณะทางวัฒนธรรม การเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ บริบทประเทศไทย

Introduction

In Thailand, English language is the foreign language prescribed for the entire basic education core curriculum since it serves as an important tool for communication, education, seeking knowledge, livelihood and creating understanding of cultures and visions of the world community in the present global society (Ministry-of-Education, 2008). English language learning becomes more important presently in the world of communication which has focused more on social and cultural aspects with the reason that cultural understandings are generally accepted as fundamental to learning foreign languages for contextually appropriate communication with people from different cultural backgrounds. Culture is embedded in language and language is used to record culture (Agar, 1994). That is language learning and culture learning are strongly related. Thus, it is necessary for English language learners, especially, the student teachers of English who learn English for teaching, to be aware of this relationship and to be able to understand and follow social and cultural practices acceptable to the native speakers of English. In the countries, like Thailand, where English is not used as the first language, most learners have little experiences and background knowledge of the cultures of the native English-speaking countries. This tends to negatively impact their English language learning with cultural awareness and sensitivity. Cultures, and cross-cultural and interpersonal understanding were recommended as essential skills for English language learners in Thai context by some recent studies i.e. Jhaiyanuntana & Nomnian (2020), Phumpho & Nomnian, (2019), Phongsirikul & Thongrin, (2019), Saemee & Ra (2021) and Loo, Trakulkasemsu, & Jimarkon Zilli (2019). Thus, learning English language is not limited

to only developing communicative competence in English language; but, it also includes the acquisition of the cultural knowledge related to the language or the countries where English is spoken as the first language. That means, to learn English is to learn English culture, which obviously involves cultural communication. Since most Thai learners have less opportunity to directly experience the authentic culture of the target language, teachers, learning media, texts and student resources play a significant role in providing them with cultural information. Classroom learning is; therefore, considered the most efficient way to raise their cultural awareness and motivate them to learn more about the culture. To systematically build up Thai learners' understanding the link between English language and its culture for communicating in English appropriately, the dimension of language and culture has been placed in The Basic Education Core Curriculum of Thailand B.E.2551 (Ministry of Education, 2008) as one of the four main strands: 1) language for communication, 2) language and culture, 3) language and relationship with other learning areas, and 4) language and relationship with community and the world, in which all students, from the primary school level to the secondary school level, are required to learn compulsorily. According to the core curriculum, the strand of language and culture involves the use of foreign languages harmonious with their cultures; the relationships, the similarities and the differences between the languages and the cultures of native speakers and those of Thai learners'; and the learners' appropriate application of the knowledge. The description indicates the importance of culture in communication with people from different cultural backgrounds and aims to promote the learners' awareness

of cultural diversity, the similarities and the differences of cultural aspects in comparison between the foreign cultures and Thai culture with the ultimate goal in developing the learners' ability in applying the knowledge for an appropriate intercultural communication. Thus, student teachers of English need to learn to be aware of the importance of English and its culture as well as the role of culture in English communication for designing an appropriate learning management plan, and a learning activity to promote their learners' understanding of the relationship between the language and culture especially in terms of communicative competences across cultures which do not only require them to have the language knowledge, they are also required to have culture knowledge and understand cultural aspects in order to use the foreign language for different purposes, functions, settings, and participants appropriately. With regard to the term "English culture", the recent study by Labtic & Teo (2020) revealed that the culture of American or Britain were found presented in a series of English textbooks used in Thailand for high schools and the cultural content was presented in the receptive skills (e.g. reading and listening) in a larger proportion than in the productive skills (e.g. speaking and writing). In addition, Ulla (2019) indicated that western-published ELT textbooks were popularly used as a primary teaching material in English classrooms in Thailand with the positive reasons that it was easy for teaching preparation, had a reliable model language with expert source of language. However, some challenges were also found in terms of difficulties in explaining some western concepts, inappropriate language level for learners, irrelevant language activities, and mismatching linguistic level with the learners'.

From the above studies, it can be said that the challenges in English textbooks may cause a misconception of cultures and socio-cultural practices among the learners, as well as among the student teachers of English if they did not have a firm knowledge of culture although the texts were considered reliable as an expert source of language knowledge. From the point, it is necessary that the student teachers need to have a clear and firm understanding as well as a right conception of the cultural aspects for English language learning. For most student teachers of English at Loei Rajabhat University, it was found from their learning management plans that the learning standards for the strand of language and culture were likely to be overlooked even though the lessons obviously contained cultural topics such as food, festivals, greetings, and politeness. Such phenomenon led to a question on their conceptions of cultural aspects for English language learning since their knowledge on cultural aspects in the English language could relate to what the learning objectives would be like in promoting the learners' intercultural communicative competence in response to the strand.

Purpose of the study

The present study was conducted to investigate the conceptions of cultural aspects for English foreign language learning among Thai student teachers of English. The objectives were to answer the following questions: 1) what were the main characteristics of culture as perceived by the student teachers of English at Loei Rajabhat University? and 2) what were their conceptions of the cultural aspects for English language learning?

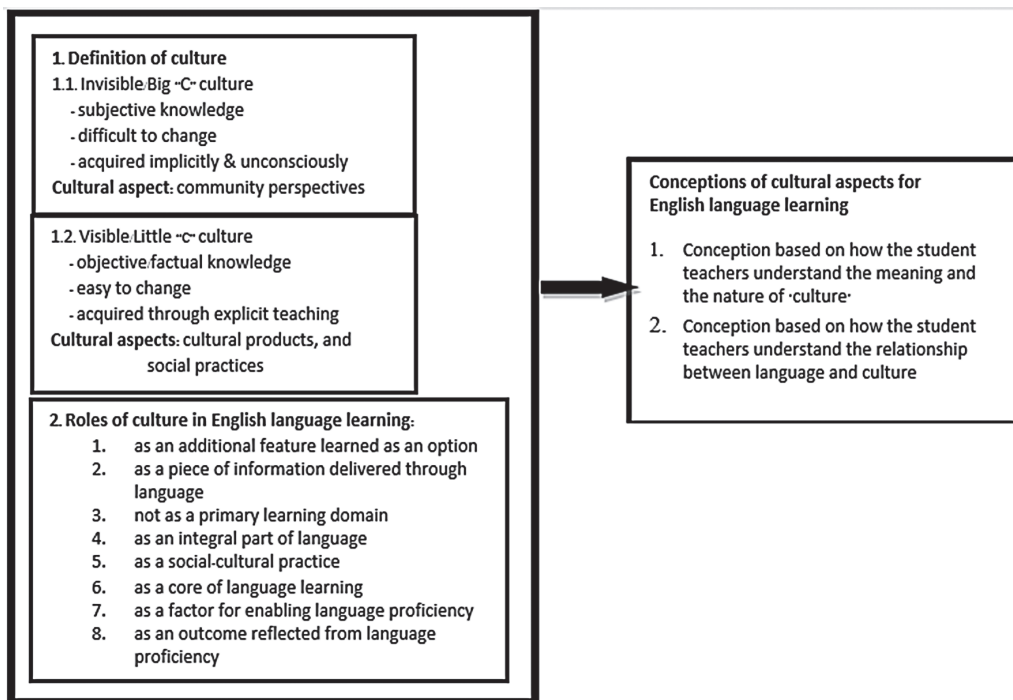
Research framework

To address the above questions, the

following conceptual framework was applied for the present study.

Figure 1

Conceptual framework for the present study



The framework was designed based on the concepts on culture and the relationship between language and culture as follows.

Concepts of culture

There are different perspectives on the concepts of culture, to specify the cultural aspects for the present study, 3 widely-known concepts of culture were reviewed as follows.

Big C culture and little c culture

Tomalin & Stempleski (1993) proposed two concepts of culture: big C culture and little c culture. The big C culture refers to the achievement culture which comprises the cultural

themes of history, geography, institutions, literature, arts, music, and the ways of life. The little c culture refers to behavior culture which deals with the culturally-influenced belief and perceptions as expressed through language and cultural behaviors such as socio-cultural practices, ways of life, and daily living.

Cultural iceberg

Some scholars view culture as an iceberg with two parts: visible and invisible (Weaver, 1993). The visible part is on the surface of the water and is compared to the material culture that can be seen, heard, and touched such as

food, music, dance, performance, arts and crafts, festivals, holidays, everyday language use, gestures, facial expressions, etc. The visible culture is an objective, or factual knowledge. It changes easily and can be learned explicitly and consciously. The other part is under water, invisible, and large. It is characterized as a subjective, or perceived knowledge which has been culturally shaped and difficult to change. The invisible culture comprises beliefs, values, thought patterns, attitudes, and myths. Such culture cannot be learned explicitly but implicitly and unconsciously. It plays a major role in directing changes in the visible culture. However, Peterson (2004) suggested to consider the intersection between the concept of the big C and the little c cultures and the concept of cultural iceberg. The tip (Visible culture) and the bottom (Invisible culture) parts included both the big C and the little c cultures as their sub-categories. The cultures in the bottom of the cultural iceberg are: 1) core values, attitudes, beliefs, society's norms, legal foundations, assumptions, history, and a cognitive process which are under the big C culture or the grand cultural themes; and 2) the popular issues, opinions, viewpoints, preferences, tastes, and certain knowledge which are regarded as little c culture, the minor, or the common cultural themes. The cultures on the tip of the cultural iceberg are: 1) architecture, geography, classic literature, political figures, and classical music, which are categorized as big C culture; and 2) gestures, body postures, use of space, clothing styles, foods, hobbies, music, and artwork, which are viewed as little c culture. In conclusion, Peterson (2004) classified culture into two main concepts: the visible and the invisible; and the grand and the minor cultural themes of the big C and the little c cultures are sub-concepts of the two main

concepts. Thus, from Peterson's perspective, to understand a particular culture, people need to consider all levels of cultures and all cultural themes.

Cultural dimensions

According to Barrett et al. (2014), culture is formed with three dimensions: material, social, and subjective. The material dimension refers to the physical artefacts commonly used in a cultural group such as the tools, goods, foods, clothing, etc. The social dimension is related to social institutions of the group e.g. the language, religion, rules of social conduct, folklore, cultural icons, etc. The subjective dimension involves the beliefs, norms, values, attitudes, collective memories, discourses, and practices commonly used in a cultural group for making sense of the world.

Moran (2001) viewed culture through its relationship with language since language is a product of culture and it plays a distinct role in mediating culture. The concept of culture is revealed in five dimensions: products, practices, perspectives, communities, and persons. The cultural products include the isolated objects, artifacts, tools, places, complex social institutions, and other constructions such as language, literature, architecture, and music. The cultural practices refer to the actions and the interactions among the members of a particular culture. The cultural perspectives involve the worldview or how the members of a particular culture perceive and interpret the meanings of the experiences gained. The cultural communities are seen as a specific social context or circumstances that influence the members' social status, roles, relationships, ways of life, and choice of language use. Persons refer to each member of a particular culture. Although each person shares the characteristics of the culture, each

of them has his/her own version of communicative style based on the experiences they perceived. Thus, persons influence and are influenced by culture. All cultural dimensions are interrelated in a cycle.

It can be concluded that the cultural aspects for English language covered 3 aspects under 2 dimensions of the cultures as follows.

1) *Visible dimension of culture*; it referred to an objective, or factual knowledge which could be learned explicitly and consciously; known as little c culture. Under this dimension, there were 2 cultural aspects: (1) *cultural products* and, (2) *social practices*. The cultural products involved isolated objects, artifacts (e.g. the tools, goods, foods, clothing, etc.), places, social institutions, and other constructions (e.g. language, literature, architecture, music, etc.). The social practices included the native English speakers' ways of life, social manners, and behaviors; for example, the interactions among the members of the two main English-speaking countries based on their social norms, values, rules of social conduct and, the choice of language use. These cultural aspects were easy to change and easy to be seen and touched. Their changes were influenced by the community perspectives under the invisible dimension of culture or the big C culture.

2) *Invisible dimension of culture*; it was dealt with only one aspect: *community perspectives* which referred to all subjective knowledge known as big C culture. It was related to the major themes of culture or the acceptable achievement found in the UK. This aspect of culture involved how the English first language speakers in the UK perceived and interpreted the meanings of an experience gained. Such cultural aspect was difficult to change. It was hardly acquired through explicit teaching but it

had a powerful influence on other cultural aspects under the visible dimension of culture or on the native English speakers' ways of life, social practices and behaviors. The examples of the community perspective aspect of culture were perceptions, values, attitudes, and beliefs.

Relationship between language and culture

Culture is a highly complex phenomenon. It indicates people's membership in a community where society, history, and imagination are shared (Kramsch, 1998). It is a complex system related to a particular group of people with similar ideas, attitudes, values, beliefs, customs, traditions, behavioral practices, rituals, ways of life, and created art work, or products. Such group is called a cultural group (Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino, et al., 2003). Language and culture have a tied relationship which is inseparable because of the mutual support in developing the learners' language knowledge and skills (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). This concept of relationship reflects through the terms such as 'linguaculture' (Risager, 2012), languaculture (Agar, 1994), and language-and-culture (Liddicoat et al., 2003), which imply that the concepts of culture and language, cultural norm in communication, and the role of language as a media for determining the social structure in a culture are embedded in the meanings of the terms (Byram, 1989; Kramsch, 1993). The interaction of the two elements can be seen in the link between cultural aspects and all levels of language structure i.e. at the mechanism level: grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciations, which relates to the culture as shown in the nature of language and the body language normally used by the native speakers to help conveying the messages; at the level of the norms in using language for interaction in the society: culture in using language in an organization

and the choice in using language contextually; at the level of pragmatic norm: cultural practices in speaking or speech communication as intended by the sender; at the level of the genre in using language for speaking and writing culturally according to the native speakers' practice; and at the level of language use contextually in global community and culture. Thus, language expresses culture, is embedded in culture, and is a cultural symbol system (Liddicoat et al., 2003; Kramsch, 1998). The relationship between language and culture is raised as a meaningful language learning with the reason that a person who learns a foreign language without learning its culture is risky to be a fluent user of the language without the cultural knowledge and a proper manner acceptable to the native speakers socially and culturally (Bennett, Bennett, & Allen, 2003) which may cause a low tendency to achieve the goal in communication through the foreign language.

Research methodology

The study was a mixed-methods research: an explanatory sequential design. The quantitative method was adopted in Phase1 to survey the participants' perception on the main characteristics of 'culture' and the roles of culture in English language learning, and followed by the qualitative method in Phase2 to elicit the participants' conception of cultural aspects for English language learning as well as their ideas for applying the aspects to enhance students' language skills. The 2 methods were integrated in the interpretation phase of the study.

Research participants: the research participants were an intact group of 30 fourth-year student teachers of English at Loei Rajabhat university, in the east-northern part of Thailand.

They were in the same class and the same program. They were in preparation for their teaching practicum in schools in the following year. Thus, they were considered a homogeneous group having the closest academic background, similar motivation for the future career, and being a rich source of information for the present study. Research instruments: the research instruments included a 4-point-scale questionnaire (Likert Scale) and a semi-structured interview protocol. The rating scale in the questionnaire was ranged from strongly agree (4), moderately agree (3), slightly agree (2) and disagree (1). The questionnaire consisted of 2 parts: the participants' perception on the main characteristics of "culture" and the roles of culture in English language learning. The questionnaire was validated with the IOC test showing that all the questions were acceptable (rated from 0.8-1) with good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.75$). The in-depth interviews involved how they identified the cultural content in an English textbook, what language skill could be related to each content, and how they could apply the cultural knowledge to enhance their English language proficiency. The interview protocol was tried out with 5 non-targeted student teachers in the same university and the result indicated its validity to obtain the comprehensible data as required.

Data collection and analysis

The questionnaire was conducted through google platform followed by face-to-face on-line interviews which were taken approximately 10 minutes each on a one-by-one basis. They were asked to choose a piece of cultural information provided in an English textbook and discussed what they could learn from the content. The quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed through

descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation). The qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed through an interpretative approach and thematic analysis. The quantitative and qualitative data were triangulated for the most reliable answers to the research questions.

Research findings

The quantitative data from the questionnaire indicated that, overall, the participants viewed culture as invisible rather than visible ($\bar{X} = 2.90$, and 2.80 , $S.D. = 0.73$ and 0.50 respectively). However, although they strongly agreed that culture was a subjective or perceived knowledge with the highest mean score ($\bar{X} = 4.00$, $S.D. = 0.00$), they also showed their moderate agreement to the other contrast aspect of culture as an objective or factual knowledge ($\bar{X} = 3.87$, $S.D. = 0.35$). From this point, it can be said that, for them, culture had two dimensions: visible and invisible with two types of knowledge: subjective and objective knowledge; but the distinct characteristic was as a subjective knowledge which was difficult to change and the acquisition of the knowledge was higher possible through explicit teaching ($\bar{X} = 3.03$, $S.D. = 0.32$) rather than through implicit learning or self-learning ($\bar{X} = 1.57$, $S.D. = 1.04$). With regard to the roles of culture in English language learning, the overall Mean scores ($\bar{X} = 3.17$, $S.D. = 0.56$)

indicated that learning culture was rated at the moderate level as a low focused knowledge in learning language. This result was confirmed by the low mean score for culture as a core of language learning ($\bar{X} = 1.70$, $S.D. = 0.47$) and the much higher mean score for culture was not the primary learning domain for language learning ($\bar{X} = 3.00$, $S.D. = 0.00$). Learning culture was perceived at the moderate level as an additional feature learned as an option ($\bar{X} = 3.20$, $S.D. = 1.21$) and culture was only a piece of information delivered through language was rated at the upper moderate level ($\bar{X} = 3.80$, $S.D. = 0.48$). However, they did not deny the influence of culture on social-cultural practices ($\bar{X} = 3.27$, $S.D. = 0.45$). They placed a moderate agreement ($\bar{X} = 3.20$, $S.D. = 0.66$) to the statement that cultural knowledge was an outcome reflected from language proficiency and slightly agreed that cultural knowledge tended to enable the higher language proficiency ($\bar{X} = 2.43$, $S.D. = 0.50$). In conclusion, the answer to the RQ1 was that the main characteristics of culture as perceived by the student teachers of English at Loei Rajabhat University were mainly invisible, subjective, difficult to change, and it was the issues to be explicitly or directly explained and taught in a school context rather than implicitly learning in a community context. The statistic results were as follows.

Table 1.

Main characteristics of culture perceived by the student teachers (N=30)

	\bar{X}	S.D.	Level of agreement
Dimension of culture: Visible			
Cultural aspects:			
1. An objective/factual knowledge	3.87	0.35	Moderately agreed
2. Easy to change	1.50	0.82	Disagreed
3. Acquired through explicit teaching	3.03	0.32	Moderately agreed
Overall	2.80	0.50	Slightly agreed
Dimension of culture: Invisible			
Cultural aspects:			
1. A subjective knowledge	4.00	0.00	Strongly agreed
2. Difficult to change	3.13	1.14	Moderately agreed
3. Acquired through implicit learning	1.57	1.04	Disagreed
Overall	2.90	0.73	Slightly agreed
Roles of culture in English language learning			
Significant as			
1. an integral part of language	2.80	0.66	Slightly agreed
2. social-cultural practices	3.27	0.45	Moderately agreed
3. a core of language learning	1.70	0.47	Disagreed
4. a factor enabling language proficiency	2.43	0.50	Slightly agreed
5. an outcome reflected from language proficiency	3.20	0.66	Moderately agreed
Overall	2.68	0.55	Slightly agreed
Not significant as			
1. an additional feature learned as an option	3.20	1.21	Moderately agreed
2. a piece of information delivered through language	3.80	0.48	Moderately agreed
3. not a primary learning domain	3.00	0.00	Moderately agreed
Overall	3.17	0.56	Moderately agreed

The findings from the interviews demonstrated that the participants could identify the cultural content and understand the relationship between language learning and culture learning; in addition, they viewed that all types of cultures should be learned through explicit teaching in classrooms. Only some could be a self-study

and the most popular platform was through the internet. From the interview discussion, some of the participants were able to explain the nature of the cultural knowledge in both the tip and the bottom of the iceberg as shown in the following excerpts (translated from Thai to English by the researcher).

Excerpt 1: *“...I chose the lesson about Multicultural society because I can learn how people in the UK live their lives and what they think about immigrants and human rights. I think if I were in the UK, it’s necessary for me to understand what my friends from other nations are thinking especially the UK people...”*

Excerpt 2: *“...when people in the western countries greet each other, they shake hands and say how do you do? I think this is how to show politeness in their culture. I can learn and teach my students how to greet people and how to act politely from the YouTube or an application for language learning.I think saying hello without doing any appropriate gesture is embarrassing”*

The answer to the RQ2: the participants had clear conceptions of the cultural aspects for English language learning. They perceived that the nature of culture was static rather than dynamic, and mainly dealt with a subjective or perceived knowledge. In other words, culture was likely to be difficult to change as it was cultivated and shared in a group of people or community which required a long process of learning by doing or self-experiencing. Thus, from their view, cultural aspects for language learning mainly involved the community perspectives or big C culture such as perceptions, values, attitudes, and beliefs rather than the cultural products and social practices or the little c culture.

It was found that the results from the quantitative data were supported by the findings from the qualitative data in 2 points. First, the main characteristics of culture, through

the student teachers’ conceptions, culture was invisible and subjective knowledge as indicated by the strongly-agree level at the highest mean score (\bar{X} = 4.00, S.D. = 0.00) and by the in-depth interviews (e.g. the excerpt 1). Second, there was a mutual support of the data on the student teachers’ overall conceptions on the main characteristics of culture (\bar{X} = 2.90, and S.D. = 0.73) and the information from their interviews that the cultural aspects described as the big C culture according to Tomalin & Stempleski (1993) and as the invisible culture under water according to Weaver’s cultural iceberg (Weaver, 1993) were selected as the main focus for learning English. As a result, for them, the cultural contents for English learning with critical thinking about people’s worldviews were to be taught in school rather than to be learned naturally, and majorly through reading passages or videos available on the websites. That is, culture was preferably learned through receptive skills rather than productive skills.

The quantitative result from their perceptions also demonstrated that learning culture was optional in English classroom, and it was not the primary learning domain (overall \bar{X} = 3.17, S.D. = 0.56). The conception was reinforced by the interview which, for example, was informed by one of the participants that *“...most students in my classes were very poor in basic knowledge of English like vocabulary, grammar, and spelling, which is the first thing they should have before learning cultural contents. Social manners can be told or taught later...”* It can be interpreted that the student teachers had a misconception that language was not culture, and learning English language was independent from learning cultural aspects for English language learning. Language knowledge and cultural knowledge were not related

despite the fact that cultural system is reflected through language as explained in Liddicoat (2003) and Krasmich (1998).

In conclusion, as perceived by the Thai student teachers, culture tended to be invisible, and was a subjective knowledge. The cultural aspects for English language learning were generally about people's worldviews and community perspectives whereas cultural products and social practices were not their main focus for learning. Language rules were not considered an aspect of culture. Thus, learning a language was not about learning an aspect of culture. Culture was able to be learned or taught separately from language knowledge and skills, and language rules were the first priority in language teaching.

Discussion and recommendations

Based on the study objectives, there were 2 interesting points to be considered and discussed in relation to other studies reviewed.

(1) The conceptions on the main characteristics of culture: meaning and nature

Through the Thai student teachers' conceptions, culture generally referred to community perspectives and worldviews which were invisible in nature. They were difficult to be seen, heard, touched, and learned. It was a subjective knowledge and tended to be static. Due to these characteristics, the student teachers viewed that culture should be explicitly taught in schools rather than implicitly learned in day-to-day life. This implied that the culture as the community perspectives and worldviews was more important than the culture as the cultural products and social practices. Thus, the invisible characteristics of culture were recommended to be taught first in order to pave the learners' way to further understand

other aspects of culture for developing intercultural communicative competence which consisted of 5 competencies: attitudes, knowledge, skills of discovery and interaction, skills of interpreting and relating, and critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997). The result was similar to the study by Jhaiyanuntana & Nomnian (2020) which indicated that critical cultural awareness, attitudes, and knowledge, which were in the invisible dimension of culture, were the first three elements to be obtained prior to applying the knowledge to develop the skills of discovery and interaction and the skills of interpreting and relating to attain an intercultural communicative competence. This implied that the knowledge on the invisible dimension of culture (e.g. cultural group's worldviews, or community perspectives) was a prerequisite to raise the learners' awareness of cultural aspects and sensitivity as the base for enhancing intercultural communication skills for Thai students. Thus, cultural knowledge was essential to achieve communication goals and to understand the counterparts. This conclusion was supported by the study results in Saemee & Ra (2021), Jhaiyanuntana and Nomnian (2020), Phumpho and Nomnian, (2019), Phongsirikul & Thongrin, (2019), and Loo, Trakulkasemsu, & Jimarkon Zilli (2019).

(2) The conceptions on the cultural aspects for English language learning: relationship between language and culture

The Thai student teachers demonstrated their awareness of cultural aspects for language learning through their presentation of the cultural issues to be learned in the textbooks. The findings indicated that they emphasized on learning invisible culture through receptive skills (e.g. reading and listening). This point corresponded to their conceptions on culture

as invisible and subjective. Thus, interpretation, translation, and explanation were the strategies reflected through their learning objectives in their lesson plans. As influenced by these conceptions, other competencies, according to Byram (1997), for promoting the learners' intercultural communicative competence in response to the strand of Language and Culture in The Basic Education Core Curriculum of Thailand B.E.2551 (Ministry-of-Education, 2008) had been overlooked. In addition, according to Ulla (2019), western-published ELT textbooks were popularly used as a primary teaching material in English classrooms in Thailand due to the convenience and the reliable model language. Most of the cultural contents were related to American and Britain cultures and for developing receptive skills (Labtici & Teo, 2020). It can be concluded that the significant factors influencing the Thai student teachers' conceptions of cultural aspects for English language learning were 1) what and how cultural aspects were presented in the popularly used textbooks in schools in Thailand, 2) how they understand the intercultural communicative competency, and 3) how they understand the relationship between language and culture: language as a cultural aspect to be learned in socio-cultural context, or as a linguistic knowledge to be learned separately from culture.

The findings suggested implementation of learning activities to emphasize more on the cultural-product and the social-practice aspects to raise the learners' awareness and sensitivity

of the relationship between language and culture in order to develop their intercultural communicative competence which is essential in the era of globalization and digital technology. There are many types of advanced technologies to be chosen as a platform to facilitate an active intercultural communication practice (e.g. Facebook, Messenger, Instagram, Twitter, Clubhouse), as a tool for learning (e.g. podcast, Netflix, YouTube, and applications for language learning), or as a source of cultural knowledge (e.g. a website categorized according to its purpose). Although the findings cannot be generalized to all student teachers under the whole Thai EFL context, the main contribution of this study was an insight into how some parts of Thai student teachers of English as EFL learners and as the future teachers of English perceived cultural aspects for English language learning and teaching which could be of benefits to the Thai learners in self-improving English skills, to the Thai teachers of English in considering incorporating socio-cultural aspects into their learning-activity design, and to the policy makers in making a decision on promoting the cultural awareness and sensitivity among the foreign language learners as the world citizen. The future study on the larger scale under the same issue, and a comparative study on the effects of using advanced technology for explicit teaching and implicit learning of culture on Thai EFL learners' socio-cultural practices and perspectives were recommended.

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