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**The influence of Culture on the Learners' Understanding of Cultural
Specific Jokes**

A Comparative Study

The Case of First Year Master Students of English- Mentouri University

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master Degree in
Applied Language Studies

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Dedication

No words would describe my indebtedness to my parents whose love and devotion have been my allies against all the constraints I encountered during my work on this research.

I would also like to thank my sister, my brothers and every member of my big family whose interest in my whole thesis provided me with an endless motivation to go forward.

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Abstract

This research intends to shed some light on the influence of culture on the learners understanding of culture specific jokes. For this purpose, the responses of the volunteer students of first year master of English at Constantine University have been collected.

The research work is mainly concerned with finding whether the high exposure to the foreign language culture has anything to do with the learner's level of understanding of jokes.

Both the quantitative and qualitative analysis indicated that there is an association between the learners' level of understanding of the jokes and their exposure to culture.

Despite the limited scope of this study, the research findings revealed interesting implications on research to the teaching of the foreign culture to students at university level.

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List of Abbreviations

ALS: Applied Language Studies

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

FC: Foreign Culture

FL: Foreign Language

FLC: Foreign Language Culture

LLC: Language, Literature and Civilization

LS: Language Sciences

L2: Second Language

TL: Target Language

TLC: Target Language Culture

UMC: University of Mentouri Constantine

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Résumé

Introduction

1. Statement of the Problem

Teaching a foreign language entails teaching its culture. An effective teaching syllabus should not be restricted only to macro-skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing), and micro-skills (vocabulary and grammar), but also it should develop culturally competent learners.

As far as the English students are concerned, the teaching syllabus of first and second year students comprises a subject about “general culture”. The department of UMC offers as well for those students who are majoring in the third year three options: Applied Language Studies, Literature and civilization and Language Sciences. For those who choose to study Literature and civilization are supposed to be more culturally competent compared to others.

The main concern of the present study is to investigate to what extent culture influences learners’ understanding of culture specific jokes taking into account that those who are specialized in Language, Literature and civilization would achieve better results.

2. Aims of the Study

Our study deals with the learner’s achievements in understanding culturally based jokes. Considering that culture really fosters the learners understanding of culture specific jokes, we set our primary research aims and purposes as follows:

- a) Fostering the practical use of culture inside language classrooms.
- b) Determining the extent to which high level of exposure to culture would be associated with learner’s level of achievement in understanding cultural jokes.

Additionally, the main concern of this investigation is to establish a positive correlation between the exposure to culture and the achievement of learners. More precisely, we attempt to highlight one of the main reasons which hinder the learners understanding of cultural jokes.

3. The Research Questions

The current study aims at addressing the following questions:

- a) To what extent does culture influence the learners’ understanding of jokes?

- b) Does culture contribute to the learners understanding of jokes?

4. Hypotheses

The general hypothesis on which the present dissertation is based runs as follows:

Culture and language are related, hence, teaching a foreign language entails teaching its culture.

If learners are highly exposed to culture, they would better understand culture specific jokes.

5. Means of Research

This piece of research is divided into two main parts; a descriptive part which includes one chapter about the review of the related literature and a practical part which includes two main sections:

Section one deals with the test designed for the students and section two deals with the data analysis.

In order to test our hypothesis and to obtain the information from our subjects, we will be using one main tool; a test which will be designed for Master one students to investigate how the performance of LLC students in understanding the jokes would differ from that of ALS and LS ones. Seven students will be taken randomly from each option to see the extent of students' exposure to culture and its effect on their performance. This test will comprise a number of jokes and involve two main stages: oral and written. In the latter the students will be asked to explain using their own words whether they understood the jokes or not and what is the reason that causes misunderstanding.

Chapter One

1. Definition of Culture

There is not a single definition of culture but rather a huge number as there are many scholars in many different disciplines who define the concept of culture differently and look at it from different angles.

Some authors define it simply as a variety of ways of saying the same thing. Anthropologists, for example Kroeber and Kluckhohn, may presume that there is a definition that reflects their thoughts. However, within the same discipline there may be a divergence of opinions. Yet, this variety of definitions does not necessarily mean that one definition is worse or better than any other one.

If we deeply examine the different sets of definitions introduced by scholars in many different disciplines, we can determine that whereas many writers see culture in terms of the whole way of life, others prefer to narrow their definitions down to core components of culture: knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom, habits, history and folklore.

While there is no agreed upon definition of culture, the most acknowledged and quoted definition is that of Taylor (1871:1)

“ Culture.....is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. “
(Quoted in Wallace, 1970: 6)

Taylor in his definition emphasizes the fact that culture is a social behavior which is acquired and learned by men in their own society. He also focuses on culture as a shared feature of human group.

From a sociological point of view, culture is "everything that is socially learned and shared by the members of a society; social heritage which the individual receives from the group; a system of behavior shared by members of a society".
(Horton & Hunt, 1984: 545)

Culture accordingly is a learned heritage, which is socially transmitted from one generation to another, rather than any biological capacities that human beings are born with. In addition, this view emphasizes the tremendous capacity for learning that human beings possess.

For ethnographers "culture is understood as the speech community: a group sharing knowledge of rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech."
(Hymes, 1974: 51)

This view is based on the assumption that culture is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately use the rules that individuals of a group must know to accomplish and maintain relationships with people of their society.

2. A Cognitive View of Culture

Goodenough (1964:36), the anthropologist the most associated with the cognitive view, argues:

"A society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members..... Culture is a not a material phenomenon; it does not consist of things, peoples, behavior, or emotions. It is rather an organization of these things. It is the form of things that people have in their mind, their models for perceiving, reacting and otherwise interpreting them."

In the cognitive view, culture is seen as knowledge rather than actual behavior and practice. Goodenough (ibid.) sees culture as the knowledge which exists in people's heads, which knowledge enables them to operate effectively and makes it possible for them to interact in an acceptable manner to their society's members. Culture, for Goodenough, is also the way people organize things in their mind and the way they perceive, react and interpret these things.

3. A Symbolic View of Culture

This view is closely associated with Geertz (1973: 5)

"Believing, with Max Weber, that man [...] is an animal suspended in webs of significance that he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, the analysis of it to be, therefore, not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning."

Geertz has a different view of culture from that of Goodenough. For him, culture is not restricted to exist only in people's heads, it is the significance of meanings that are shared and acted out publicly among those who share the same culture.

4. A Critical View of Culture

The critical view is similarly important in encouraging people to go beyond interpretation and description to explain cultural practice.

"More recently, the symbolic and cognitive views of culture have been criticized for presenting a relatively unproblematic, static, and a historical image of culture."(Roberts et al, 2001:52)

Actually a critical perspective is not only restricted to description; it goes beyond description and interpretation to pose critical question about how such things came to be (ibid.)

A critical view of culture is focused on what is beyond interpretation and explanations of cultural practice.

5. Language and Culture

In fact, language and culture are both unique to humans; hence, they have been the subject of anthropological and sociological studies. Language and culture are inseparable, that is to say, language is the primary source of expressing culture and, therefore, culture is reflected through language. Previous studies of anthropology conducted by Whorf and Sapir (1940), following the theory that words determine thought, believe that language is determined and shaped by culture; hence, language is dependent on the cultural contexts into which it occurs. For example, there are different terms for the word 'rice' not only indicating the different types of 'rice', but also the ways it is cooked. (Holmes, 2001: 329).

In the same vein, when two totally different languages describe the world, then one will perceive the world around him differently because the language they learn will determine the way they think. This theory has been called linguistic determinism in which its strongest version holds that "language determines thoughts." (Yule, 1996: 239). What has become known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is that Sapir and Whorf in the 1930's argue that the American Indians perceive the world differently from those who spoke European languages. Whorf (1940) stated that the way Hopi Indians perceive the world is different from the way other *English speaking tribes* do. In the grammar of Hopi, a distinction between animate and inanimate categorizes 'clouds' and 'stones' as animate. Whorf concluded, therefore, that it is the Hopi's language that affects their way of perceiving things and, hence, they see 'stones' and 'clouds' as animate. On the contrary, English as well as Arabic speakers do not see 'stones' and 'clouds' as the Hopi do.

As Whorf (1940: 212) put it: "We dissect nature along lines led down by our native languages." (Quoted in Hudson, 2001: 97)

However, this view has been criticized because it fails to take into consideration the fact that fixed set of patterns of language are not inherent since language users possess the ability to create expressions and manipulate their language in order to express their perceptions of the things around them. It is true that English does not have an extended list of words to describe the concept of 'snow'; however they can create expressions by manipulating their language to describe 'wet snow', 'powdery snow', 'spring snow' and other types of 'snow'. Additionally, if this view is totally acceptable then the concept of language change would be impossible. (Yule, 1996:239)

6. The Importance of Teaching Culture

Culture teaching allows learners to increase their knowledge about the foreign culture, that is to say about the people's way of life, beliefs, habits, morals, customs...etc.

In fact, learning a foreign language (FL) should go beyond achieving communicative competence and language proficiency, cultural competence should be enriched as well. Foreign language teaching entails foreign culture teaching thus; foreign language teachers should be foreign culture teachers. Teaching any FL should not be restricted only to teaching grammar

rules, new vocabulary items and expressions but include some cultural elements because language cannot exist alone without its culture, that is, culture and language cannot be separated.

The fact is that Algerian schools and universities curriculum teach the FL without offering deep insights into its speakers' culture. Syllabus designers should be aware about the fact that :”If we teach language without teaching at the same time the culture in which it operates, we are teaching meaningless symbols to which the student attaches the wrong meaning” (Politzer, 1959:100-1).

The bringing together of language and culture is for no doubt a necessity; hence, teaching a foreign language without teaching its culture is incomplete. Current studies emphasize the relationship between L2 and culture teaching especially in the writings of Byram and Kramsch. It has been argued that without the teaching of culture, L2 teaching is senseless.

”Culture in language learning is not an expandable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them.” (Kramsch, 1993:1)

What Kramsch emphasized, here, is the fact that to learn a FL is not merely to learn the four skills but also to uncover the advantage of learning a FL with its culture because it is also necessary for L2 learners to know a great deal about the target speakers' culture. A second reason is that they may meet great toughness in communicating meaning to native speakers.

7. Culture in Foreign Language Teaching

Since the world has become a small village, all its citizens are, increasingly, interacting and exchanging ideas and knowledge; these developments lead to intercultural encounters. Therefore, the need for including intercultural courses in education is necessary to cope with these intercultural situations. Nevertheless, the Algerian programs of education at all the levels

and all the branches do not have the means to prepare pupils and colleagues to deal with the possible difficulties and misunderstandings when teaching a foreign language to make them culturally competent when problems of intercultural encounters arise. (Lakehal-Ayat, 2008)

When dealing with people belonging to different countries, one is dealing with people belonging to different cultures. Within these intercultural encounters individuals fall in the trap of realizing that their own beliefs, attitudes, behavior, and values do no longer exist or function, simply because their counterparts do not get what they want to convey and cannot come to understand them. Hence, their communication is an ineffective one so they do not succeed in reaching their goals, let alone the feeling of embarrassment, uncertainty, helplessness, and strangeness. In fact, most of the people do not associate such problems to cultural issues, though it is quite important that the cultural aspect be taken into consideration. (ibid.)

“Intercultural competence’ is knowing about other cultures or the ability to interact effectively with people from other cultures etc.”(Webber, 2003: 199)

He further notes that:

“An interculturally competent individual will interact in such a way that all participants feel understood, respected and supported.”(ibid.)

Webber means that the individuals’ integration with one another will facilitate the task of appropriateness and effectiveness; hence, all people involved in an interaction will feel satisfaction and achieve their goals through discussing a commonly shared meaning.

Within the teaching framework “the role of the teacher shifts from a knowledge transmitter to a facilitator and counsellor.” (ibid.)

Here again, the job of the teacher is to facilitate, organize, and arrange the appropriate learning environments, equipments and processes.

The fact that many students want to carry on their studies abroad must be emphasized: they start to live another life style, so they will find themselves obliged to put all their attitudes

and morals behind them because they have to constantly express themselves according to the context in which they find themselves. So, they need to enhance their exposure to the FLC.

The intercultural knowledge is essential for an enhancement of our awareness towards other cultures; it helps us to have a sufficient background on how peoples are shaped by their cultures and how we are supposed to understand them and overcome problems of embarrassment.

One important feature of intercultural experience is “reconstructing others’ frames of reference and seeing the world through their eyes.” (Bredella, 2003: 228)

For Bredella, we stop applying our values and we refrain from imposing our categories and values on others, but instead learn to reconstruct their frame of reference and see them as they see themselves. (ibid.)

If we want to understand others who speak a different language, we must learn their language. In a similar way, if we want to understand them we must know the cultural rules, conventions and values which govern their behavior, because our values and attitudes prevent us from seeing the others as they see themselves. Education’s role is to shape not an ideal intercultural person, a person who acts, thinks, and behaves exactly the same way natives do, but at least one who does not fear to experience insecurity and uncertainty.

Finally, it is up to foreign language teachers to bring the foreign culture into the classroom: educators can get books, newspapers, journals, recorded news, television programmes, radio programmes, and transmit them to the students to let them know more about the foreign culture. Hence, the classroom can achieve what could best arrived at through direct contact with natives. The classroom is essential for the intercultural experience because it gives students the opportunity to reflect on their intercultural experiences and learn from each other.

“The intercultural classroom needs to have a dynamic and interactive atmosphere where, in addition to traditional questions regarding the material, students are actively encouraged to share their personal experiences” (Bredella, 2003: 230).

Thus, the classroom is not only a substitute for direct contact but a means of developing an awareness of the intercultural experience shaping culturally competent students.

8. Culture in Foreign Language Learning

Some anthropologists define culture as communication and communicative language teaching is based on the notion of communicative competence. “Hymes’ notion of communicative competence stresses the cultural in the development of communicative competence.”(Roberts et al, 2001: 25)

A great deal can be done to introduce authenticity in language learning materials and to provide a rich environment for language use . As a generalization, one can agree with Stern (1983:246) who stated that "language teaching theory is fast acquiring a sociolinguistic component but still lacks a well-defined sociocultural emphasis.”

There are some aspects to be acquired as knowledge and understanding of the target language, language skills and cultural awareness. Students, apart from being able to understand and produce oral and written messages appropriately in their own language as well as in an FL, should also learn to relate with other persons and take part in group activities with tolerant attitudes, overcoming prejudices.

9. What is Intercultural competence

Being very competent in one field does not necessarily mean that you are competent in other fields, and being a very competent student in grammar, writing or whatever else does not necessarily mean that you are also competent in interacting in intercultural situations.”Competence is defined as having the skills, competences or ability that you need to do a certain job to a certain standard.”(CATIT_project: 2007, 46)

In order to achieve competence in a given job, new skills must be learned. In much the same way, learning how to successfully interact in intercultural situations entails mastering new skills or extending already gained and learned ones.

“Intercultural competence means having the ability to appropriately adapt commonly used behaviors, actions and skills to intercultural situations.”(ibid.)

English students are to be intercultural speakers so that they are supposed to interact effectively when they engage in communication with native speakers.

“According to Byram and Fleming (1998), the intercultural speaker is someone with knowledge of one or more cultures and social identities, and who enjoys discovering and maintaining relationships with people from other cultural backgrounds, although [they have] not been formally trained for that purpose.”
(Quoted in Soler & Safont Jordà, 2007: 1)

This is the case of learners who live in bilingual or multilingual communities. They possess knowledge of more than one culture.

For House, an intercultural speaker is:”a person who has managed to settle for the in-between, who knows and can perform in both his and her native culture and in another one acquired at some later date.” (Quoted in Soler & Safont Jordà, 2007: 1)

Accordingly, developing intercultural competence does not necessarily mean that one has to focus only on the other person culture, but it is also the focus on learning and knowing about their own culture.

10. Language and Culture in Language Teaching

Language and culture learning cannot be seen as separate areas of learning or teaching because language learning is culture learning and vice versa. Moreover the components of language learning should be given more attention and be reconsidered and radically re-thought again by the Algerian authorities, especially at the level of integrating cultural notions and practices on the foreign language being taught in order to enhance FL learning.“In recent years,

language learners have come to be described in terms of ‘cultural mediators’, ‘border-crossers’, ‘negotiators of meaning’, ‘intercultural speakers’.” (Roberts et al, 2001: 03)

We cannot teach a “culture-free” language because language should be tied to its culture. “What students [really] need is [to develop] more cultural sensitivity and understanding and not less.” (ibid.) One of the main goals that should be emphasized, here, is that language learners have to increase their intercultural communicative competence.

The notion of interculturality acknowledges that communication is in fact a cultural process, thus, using a foreign language to communicate entails mediating and establishing relationships between one’s culture and other cultures. (ibid.)

Such mediation helps students to compare and contrast their own culture and ways of interaction with the outsiders and the main goal is to make it possible for the learners to develop “critical cultural awareness” (Byram, 1997)

Accordingly, whatever the purpose of language learning is, including and introducing the cultural component in the educational curriculum is an essential part. Hence, the conditions of developing culturally competent learners require new changings and moderations in the curriculum; a curriculum in which, in addition to the grammar and language use competence, intercultural communication and understanding are given more importance and priority for the students to develop intercultural understanding.

“The notion of interculturality adds a further dimension: the recognition of social identities involved in any interaction, and the significance of understanding the constantly changing worlds and lives of ‘the other’, always important but particularly so when the interaction takes learners into other languages and societies.” (Roberts et al, 2001: 241-242)

11. The Problems of Learning and Teaching Culture

When teaching a foreign language, the need to develop the communicative competence of learners who are expected to have a genuine capability of responding to realistic FL situations is an essential step; furthermore, the need to establish learners with culturally based background is also of great importance. However, the teaching of the foreign languages in the Algerian educational system is based on the communicative approach rather than the cultural approach. And the latter aims to:

- Enhance the students' knowledge and understanding of certain sociocultural characteristics of the foreign language speakers through including contents, vocabulary and communicative models for developing positive attitudes towards the other cultures for mutual understanding and co-operation.
- Develop the students' respect and awareness towards the differences and diversities of the other cultures.
- A deeper knowledge about the different factors that influence the types of communication in various cultures will be acquired. (Babamova, et.al, 2004: 69)

Our research demonstrated that learners acquire information about the language but very little knowledge about the foreign culture in their language classes. (Lakehal-Ayat, 2008)

To make a curriculum meaningful, specific information is needed. Both cultural knowledge and knowledge about culture are to be integrated. The former includes those understandings, values, and behaviors acquired in the socialization process within the home culture. The latter, on the other hand, includes the history, beliefs, customs, traditions, and values of a particular group. A really reliable curriculum consistently generates the desirable outcomes because a school curriculum is itself a cultural product. (Hollins, 1996:82)

12. Do Cultures Change over Time?

Some people tend to think that cultures change over time; yet, others believe that cultures do not.

If we take a tree as an example to explain the factor of culture change, one might say that the trunk and basic form of the tree remain the same over the years, however the leaves of the tree do change over time; they change color every season to be replaced and the entire branches may break off and fall to be replaced as well by new ones. (Pederson 28)

Human languages are inherently variable and dynamic, culture as an essential component and a raw material of language do change.

Today, no culture is as it has been always, all cultures change and for a variety of reasons. As the physical and sociocultural environments constantly change, people adjust their behavior accordingly. (Naylor, 1996: 1)

Change is, henceforth, inevitable since people from different cultures come into contact with each other, and the change will occur when these people from a vastly different cultures exchange ideas. This constant change is due to the increasingly, and the steadily contact between people representing different cultures. Thus cultures contact leads to culture change.

13. Definition of Humor

Sometimes you hear someone telling a joke, and then you hear a listener saying “that’s not funny, that’s sick”? Here, we just witnessed a clash of definitions. So, humor is really hard to define. Findlay defines humor as follows: “Humor is the use of verbal discourse, pictures, and other media of expression with the intention of producing laughter in an audience.”(Findlay, 1998: 86)

Humor is optimism; a sort of saying yes to life, humor is creativity, if you communicate with humor you will communicate creatively and playfully; you will play with words and information as if they were toys.

Through humor we knock many challenges down to size. The psychologist Rollo May says, “Humor is a healthy way of feeling a ‘distance’ between one’s self and the problem.”(Quoted in Tamblyn, 2003: 34)

Essentially, he is talking about the perspective that best allows people to face their problems and how can we better solve them without making mistakes or with making fewer mistakes. It is one of the cheapest, most effective time management strategies we can use. Besides, psychologically speaking, it relieves physical and psychological stress.

Moreover, if humor is used appropriately, it makes learners willing to listen to one another; it makes them also appreciate to talk to each other. It has also a great contribution in facilitating the task of learning.

Humorous interaction in cross-cultural, bilingual couples may well be an important bonding agent to help overcome the myriad of intercultural difficulties such relationships inevitably face. (Norrick & Chiaro, 2009: 230)

14. The Advantage of Using Humor in Foreign Language Teaching

Most teachers, trainers and even learners believe that humor facilitates the task of learning; learners can achieve better through humor. However, some teachers resist the idea of using humor in their teaching. A reason that may lead them to such a fear is that they fear negative repercussions. They may hesitate to use humor because they fear that they will make an inappropriate joke, or their topic is too serious for using humor, or facing humorous audience when learners are too hard to control. (Tamblyn, 2003: 2)

Most laymen cannot see the difference which exists between humor and a joke. As (Tamblyn, 2003: 9) put the difference between the two is that humor is a state or quality while

joke telling is an action among many others through which you can express humor. He also stresses the fact that we can use humor without telling a single joke.

Here are some reasons why humor is desirable in the classroom:

It facilitates the retention of novel information.

It increases the learning speed.

It improves problem solving.

It relieves stress.

It reduces test anxiety (Torok, et al, 2004: 52)

Laughter and humor are an invitation to bridge the social distance. Teachers who use humor in the classroom for the sake of enhancing the students' learning can produce a shared understanding because humor reduces conflict and enhances human relations; it also reduces the tension, relieves embarrassment, and entertains and alleviates boredom. (ibid. 52)

Using humor is more enjoyable and more successful under the condition that the used humor be related to the educational material and purpose. "Successful use of humor depends on employing the proper type of humor, under the proper conditions, at the proper time, and with properly motivated and receptive students" (Oppliger, 2003: 269).

Using humor, as a classroom strategy, increases second language learning instead of hindering it as some people may think. Puns, for example, do contribute in helping students to learn about homophony by making them distinguish between words with similar sounds or spellings. The same thing can be said about idiom-based jokes which provide memorable contexts for idioms that cause difficulties for learners to memorize. Furthermore, humor usually rests on cultural concepts; thus, humor can lead to a deeper understanding that is necessary for real fluency. (Bergen & Binsted, 2004)

Generally speaking, humor can improve second language learning because it motivates students to learn. However, it is the most underexploited and neglected area within language

teaching and learning since there are few sections in our course books on humor or that includes the ability to tell or understand a joke. Still, understanding the sense of humor of peoples is the key to understand their cultures and languages. Besides, humor contributes to reducing the level of anxiety on the learners' ability to learn; hence, using humor in FL classrooms plays an important role in making the students more relaxed and more receptive to learn.

15. Definition of Joke

Using jokes in teaching can generate better results so, teachers can change their educational process; they may use jokes to better introduce their lectures, or as a means to start a discussion, and as it was mentioned earlier, as a means of helping students to relax and remove anxiety, and to bring a pleasant and a happy end to the lecture. And what is more rewarding for a teacher than to see the students leaving the classroom with a smile on their faces and, at the same time, being sure that they achieved better results in learning and understanding their lectures. (Findlay, 1998:96)

One of the important aims of foreign language learning, in addition to achieve language proficiency, is to know and to be aware about the nation's culture and to learn to respect it. Humor reveals the most hidden parts of a nation's culture. Nevertheless, only few teachers include humor systematically into their teaching process because most of them tend to think that students can learn less if they are laughing. But the truth is quite the opposite. Laughter brings people closer together, and it is the best way to reduce the distance between them. Therefore, it effects, in the same way, teachers and students.

Actually, some English jokes are quite difficult for learners to understand because of cultural gaps. This is due to the insufficient exposure to the native speakers' culture and to the lack of including formal cultural learning in the FL syllabus. Learners, still, cannot arrive at achieving real communicative competence not only because of the lower linguistic competence, but also because of the lack of cultural competence. Therefore, joke reading or joke telling is one way of making the students appreciate the target culture. In addition, jokes offer the learners the opportunity to easily recall the information.

“Humor can easily be seen as a way of activating motivation and directing attention, but it can also be used in other events as well, from stimulating recall to eliciting performance and providing feedback.” (Maurice, 1988: 26)

Schmitz (2002:93) claims that we can distinguish three groups of humorous discourse: (a) universal jokes, (b) cultural jokes, and (c) linguistic jokes. A universal joke “includes humor that is obtained mainly from the context and the general functioning of the world”. And a cultural joke is based on cultural-background knowledge. For the sake of understanding and appreciating this type of jokes, possessing a great amount of knowledge about a target society is very essential. The third group is a linguistic joke, “based on specific features in the phonology, morphology or syntax of particular languages.”

By the use of jokes in teaching FL, learners will experience the joy of learning and get more comfortable with the learning environment and, hence, achieve better results in their learning.

University courses focused, if not mainly but to a great extent, on achieving grammar competence and appropriate language use rather than focusing on competence in the social and cultural practices. Still, the focus on the cultural learning should be emphasized because the context of teaching and learning English in Algeria “offers the learners very little opportunities to get involved in real life communication situation. It is, therefore, considered unnecessary to

help the learners develop their intercultural communicative competence inside the classroom context by teaching them language as culture.” (Atamna, 2008: 88)

The task of the educators is to develop the student to an intercultural speaker so that learners should be taught about the FL culture for the sake of providing them with the necessary sociocultural knowledge needed to infer the social meanings or values of utterances. (Roberts et al, 2001)

Learners of the FL have to understand and make sense of different behaviors of natives and try to interpret them because they may find themselves very often in situations where they have to understand the relationship between different cultures.(Byram, 1995:54)

Conclusion

Culture is considered as an important topic which involves many issues that are still debated by many scholars. This chapter has provided a short discussion about some interesting points that are related to the topic of culture, and its importance in the foreign language teaching and learning. It focused on the main challenges that teachers and learners face when it comes to teach or learn a foreign culture, and how important is to introduce the learners to the foreign culture. Then, it showed the importance of using humor in education and its positive effects on the learners' performances and productions. This chapter showed, too, that jokes are introduced as one way among many others to use humor in order to achieve better results, and the numerous advantages of including the sense of humor in the teaching process.

The following chapter describes the practical part of this study which consists in presenting jokes to students and evaluating their understanding.

Chapter Two

The Practical Part

1. Introduction

We hypothesized earlier that the more the students are exposed to culture, the more culturally competent they become; and this competence will be reflected in their comprehension of culturally based jokes which is the main concern of this research. Still, this hypothesis needs to be proved. Hence, in order to test our hypothesis an experiment was carried out.

2. The Test

The main concern of this research was to investigate how the performance of the LLC students in understanding the jokes would differ from that of ALS and LS ones. To this end, a test was designed.

2.1. Administration and Description of the Test

The test comprises ten jokes, two of which are long. Each consists of a specific notion of the TLC. Three of them were easy, simple, with no culture free concepts, but rather common knowledge and accessible notions of culture. The selected jokes required neither highly specialized nor large background knowledge. They also suited the learners of the three options.

The test involved two main stages: the first one has to be done orally in order to see the learners' reaction towards the jokes, whether they laugh, or do not, smile, or hesitate. The next step was to consider their understanding through the written part in which they had to acknowledge faithfully whether they understood the jokes or not, and then to provide full explanations for both the jokes they understood and the ones they did not, by saying what exactly prevented them from understanding the jokes.

We faced some difficulties in the administration of the test: although it was done orally, some unforeseen problems arose due to the lack of seriousness on the part of the test takers. We were sometimes misled because when we heard them laugh, we thought it was related to the funny aspect of the jokes; but in reality, they were laughing because of a complete misunderstanding.

In order to avoid a biased study, only those students who were willing to take part in our research were selected. So, they were under no pressure. To assure a maximal reliability of responses, students were free to choose whether to take the test or not.

During the test we insisted on the fact that the students should answer as sincerely as possible, and we tried every means possible to ensure test takers' willingness to cooperate.

To assure anonymity and avoid bias while scoring, the responses of the students and every sheet were given a code number that would help their recognition at later stages of scoring.

There was a pilot study to fulfill certain objectives:

- Few jokes were eliminated because of their toughness.
- Some difficult vocabulary items were replaced by easier words to facilitate comprehension.
- Some words were even explained in the source language during the oral stage.

- The presentation of jokes was modified; we intended first to read the jokes and see the students' reaction. But we decided that to perform them would give better results.

It took students 45 to 60 minutes to finish the test.

3. The Sample

The population chosen for this study is First year master Algerian students of English in the English department at Constantine University. The students are supposed to be exposed to culture for three years. In order to ensure representativeness, we had to take 1/5 of the whole population of Master 1. But unfortunately, and due to time constraints, the population was narrowed down to twenty one students: seven from each option. They were randomly chosen from the three options because this would enable us to differentiate between three different populations of learners to attempt comparisons. One factor of crucial importance was the avoidance of repetitive students because they would have biased our study.

4. Research Findings

Although the sample was not large enough to enable generalizations, interesting observations can be made out of the students' responses to the jokes.

It would be claimed to some extent that laughter actually correlates with higher levels of understanding, whereas remaining silent is much related to lower levels of understanding. However, this cannot be taken into consideration since laughter results from the students' misunderstanding as explained earlier. Henceforth, the results obtained from the learners' written responses will be analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively to illustrate and give more precision to the students' performance across the test. What learners seem to know and what kind of difficulties they have in their interpretations of the jokes is our purpose, here. A table showing

the number of students who understood the jokes and those who did not will be presented first. Then, will be followed by a graph showing the results by option.

1. Applied Language Studies

Students' Comprehension		
Jokes' Number	Understood	Did not understand
1	2	5
2	0	7
3	0	7
4	0	7
5	7	0
6	6	1
7	3	4
8	6	1
9	1	6
10	7	0

Table 1: The Rate of ALS Students' Comprehension (All the Jokes)

It could be claimed according to the results shown in the table above that more than half the students did not understand joke 1. Among the participants only 2 students understood the first joke, while the remaining 5 did not.

As it has been given, none of the ALS learners understood the joke 2, 3, and 4. All of them found the jokes very difficult to comprehend. Though collecting the number of difficult words in every response could be more reliable than just recollecting students' impressions about the jokes difficulty.

As the above table shows, the level of the learners' understanding gets higher; all of them understood the joke 5. It is clear that only few students understood the seventh joke while 04 of them did not.

An important portion of students, six, achieved a higher understanding level of joke 8, and only one student failed to comprehend it. A very low number 1 compared to the whole number of participants 7 understood the ninth joke. It is noticed, however, that higher grades of understanding seem to correlate positively with the learners responses. In other words the joke seems easier and familiar to the students.

2. Language Sciences

Students' comprehension		
Jokes' Number	Understand	Did not understand
01	4	3
02	0	7
03	0	7

04	0	7
05	2	5
06	5	2
07	3	4
08	4	3
09	0	7
10	6	1

Table 2: The Rate of LS Students' Comprehension (All the Jokes)

As the table above shows, four students responded positively to joke 01 while the rest found it difficult or very difficult to understand.

A glance at the table shows that all respondents did not comprehend the jokes 02, 03, 04, and 09.

It is worth noting that only 2 students understood the joke 05.

It may be worth mentioning also that the level of understanding is highest in responses to the jokes 06 and 10, while only few 3 understood joke 07.

3. Language, Literature and civilization

Students' comprehension		
Jokes' Number	Understand	Did not understand
01	4	3
02	3	4
03	0	7
04	0	7
05	7	0
06	7	0
07	7	0
08	6	1
09	3	4
10	7	0

Table 3: The Rate of LLC Students' Comprehension (All the Jokes)

As it is demonstrated in the above table, among the 7 LLC students, 4 were placed at the level of understanding of joke 01.

It is true that the rate of LLC students is at higher level of comprehension of joke 02 overweigh that of ALS and LS students.

Concerning joke 03 and 04, it is striking that none of the students understood them.

It could be claimed, according to the table, that all of the students' level of understanding is not bad and it is clearly shown in their responses to jokes 05, 06, 07, and 08. All of them get the jokes' meaning and only one of them misses the meaning of joke 08.

The same remark could be made for joke 10 all of the learners understood it.

A sharp difference which the LLC students scored is that three of them got the meaning of the ninth joke, while none of the LS students understood it and only one student belongs to the ALS option comprehended the joke.

Joke 01

The table shows the distribution of comprehension among the test takers. It reveals that almost half the students did not understand the joke.

Joke 1	Understood	Did not understand	Total
Number of students	10	11	21

Table 2: Rate of Comprehension (Joke 1)

As the graph below shows, the ALS students ranked at the lowest level of understanding; the 5 students who represent the percentage of 24% failed to get the joke's cultural meaning compared to those of LS and LLS who achieved an identical level of understanding 19%.

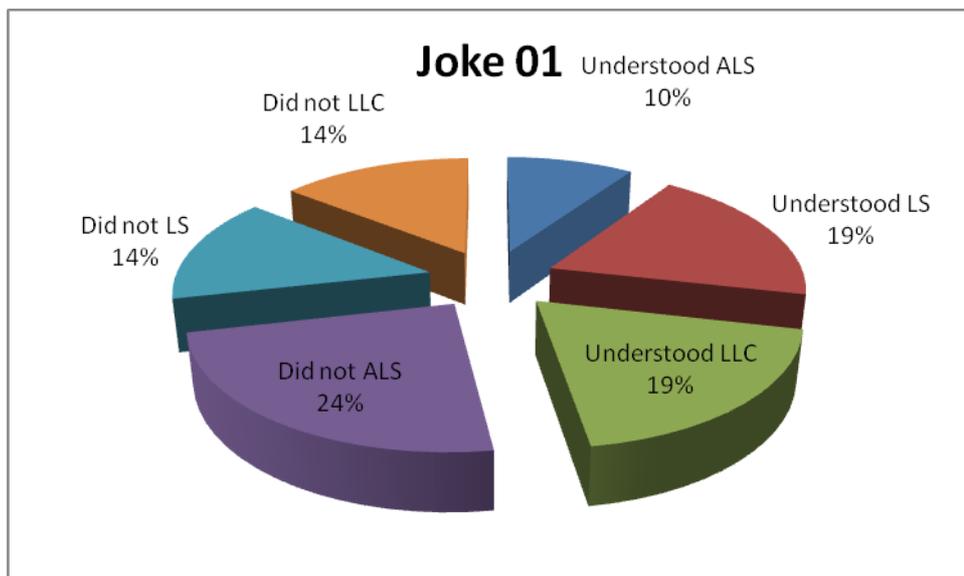


Figure 1: Distribution According to the Options (Joke 1)

This is clearly seen in their responses. They limited their responses to give very vague and unclear interpretations about the joke by saying that they do not know the relation which exists between the Americans and the Mexicans.

If we consider the following responses, the respondents provided many interpretations for the punch line of the joke:

“The Americans hate the Mexicans.”

“I understood from the joke 1 that the American people do not produce a lot of computers; so the Mexican says to the American do not even think to do like Japanese do.”

“May be the boat is very heavy for that the American looks at the Mexican to throw him but the Mexican said don’t even think about it.”

“Because the American will say we produce so many bombs.”

“The American did not react while the Cuban and the Japanese are proud about their productions, the American and the Mexican who are from the same continent are superior.”

Instances of such responses, belonging to the three options, reveal that the students’ responses are detached from recognizing why the punch line causes laughter. The earlier examples also show remarkable lack of cultural awareness.

What was clearly seen from the subjects’ responses is their inability to predict the cultural implication in the joke. This may lead us to confirm that EFL learners have difficulties in predicting the cultural implications, however proficient they are, in the joke. Hence, if cultural aspects of the TL are not considered, misunderstanding or difficulty in achieving a complete understanding would occur.

Joke 02

The table below indicates that only few number of the students understood the joke, whereas most of them misunderstood it.

Joke 2	Understood	Did not understand	Total
Number of students	03	18	21

Tableau 2: Rate of Comprehension (Joke 2)

Most of the English jokes are based on such play on words. As non-native speakers of English, many EFL learners have difficulty and fail to identify the key word or phrase—the so called punch line—that makes the joke funny.

The graph below indicates that the distribution of the ALS and the LS groups is exactly identical; none of them came to understand the joke, while 14% is the percentage that represents the LLC students who comprehended the joke.

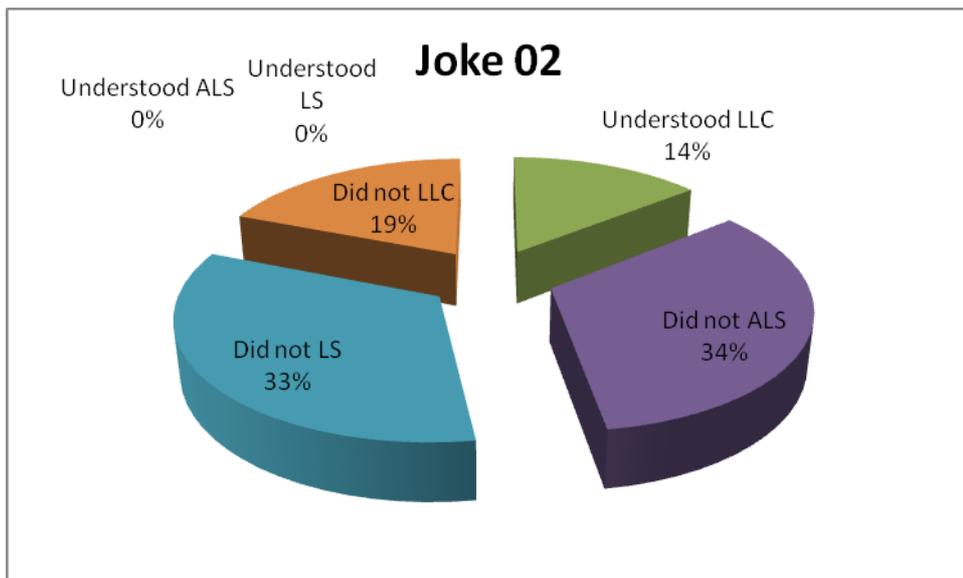


Figure 2: Distribution According to the Options (Joke 2)

The responses below go beyond the literal meaning of the joke, as some learners did, to make some inferences and predictions:

“Is that because the rude baseball umpire feels shame because he fears other people see him sothe British Empire is long and large.”

“I have not understood this joke, because of word’s meaning e.g.: umpire.”

“I didn’t understand the second joke because I think that the speaker means empire instead of umpire.”

“I didn’t understand it, because I have never thought that the baseball umpire has something to do with the British Empire.”

“The oddness was in the word umpire.”

“I feel that there is no relation between the parts of this joke.”

“The second joke is semantically understood but the implied meaning is not because it has to do with the culture itself.”

It is indisputable that the above responses show a remarkable difficulty that the learners faced, with vocabulary, which is not our concern here. All the learners ignore the meaning of the word “umpire”, so they could not manage to read between the lines by making inferences about such play on words. This, however, cannot really be considered as an obstacle against departing from the literal meaning towards more abstract levels.

In addition to the students’ failure in comprehending some terms used in the text, they misinterpret the joke which its punch line is a play on words and a call for cultural background knowledge as well.

Joke 03 and 04

The table shows that none of the students understood the joke.

Joke 3	Understood	Did not understand	Total
Number of students	00	21	21

Tableau 3: Rate of Comprehension (Joke 3)

Conversely to what was expected, the graph below shows that all students belonging to the three options (ALS, LS, LLC) did not understand the jokes 03 and 04.

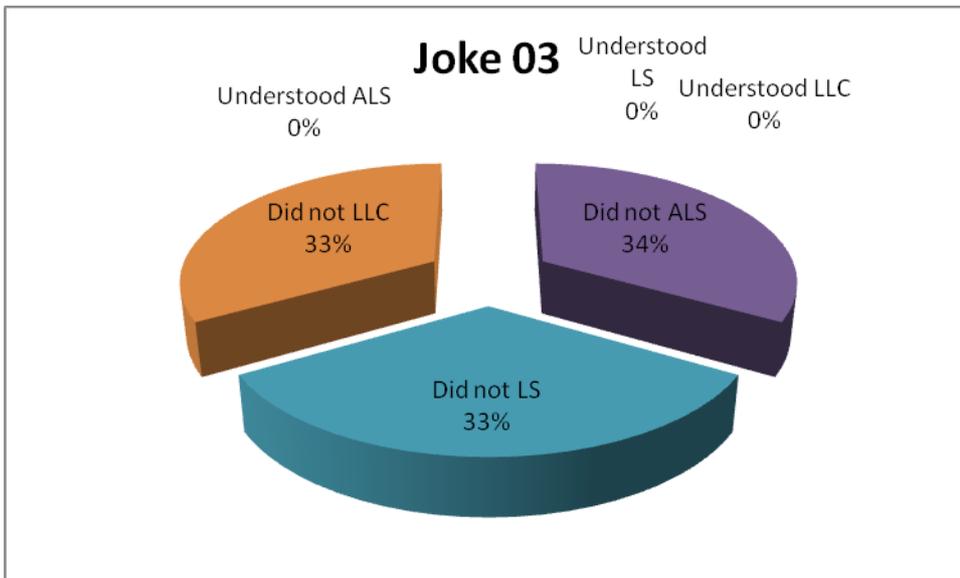


Figure 3: Distribution According to the Options (Joke 3)

A glance at the table below demonstrates that all the respondents did not comprehend the joke.

Joke 4	Understood	Did not understand	Total
Number of students	00	21	21

Tableau 4: Rate of Comprehension (Joke 4)

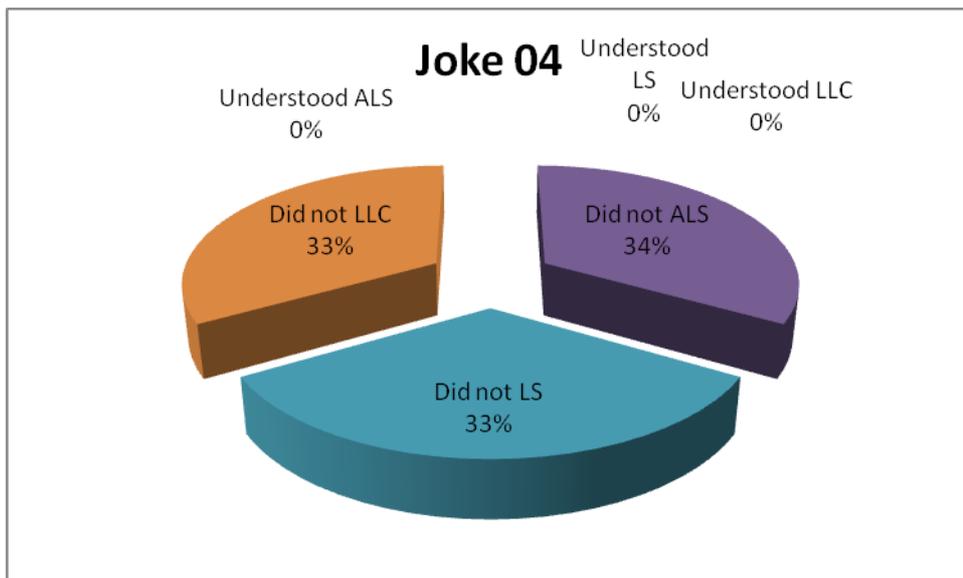


Figure 4: Distribution According to the Options (Joke 4)

Here are the learners' responses:

“Yes I understand this joke because the policeman understands the person as if he is asking him how to make or take a bath but in fact he was asking him about the bathroom.”

“I’ve not understood the joke as far as I don’t belong to the same society & I don’t understand their objective behind utterances.”

“The expression turns hot and cold taps then was ambiguous to some extent. Any one would find it difficult to understand.”

Very few students commented that joke 03 contains unfamiliar words, and that is the reason why they did not comprehend it.

It is striking to note that all the students were detached from the joke and that the jokes' miscomprehension lies in the misunderstanding of the words “Bath” which is interpreted as bathroom by all the students.

The responses below are associated to joke 04:

“I don’t understand the meaning because of tow words such as burglar and Rottweiler”.

“The oddness was in the word Rottweiler.”

“The parrot is making fun of the Rottweiler trade mark.”

Here again, more interesting was the observation that no one of the students could recognize the meaning of Rottweiler which is the fact that hinders the students’ understanding.

It is noticed that responses at this level are characterized by the lack of cultural awareness. The call for fostering the cultural awareness is for no doubt a necessity. Besides, the cultural awareness is better developed in class atmosphere through including a satisfactory number of classroom activities and training programs in order to overcome the learners’ deficiency of expertising in culture.

Joke 05

It is worth noting here that more than half the subjects came to understand the joke.

Joke 5	Understood	Did not understand	Total
Number of students	16	05	21

Tableau 5: Rate of Comprehension (Joke 5)

Apart from the LS students, if not all of them, most of them, who failed to understand the joke 24%, the LLC and ALS learners achieved an identical percentage of understanding 33%.

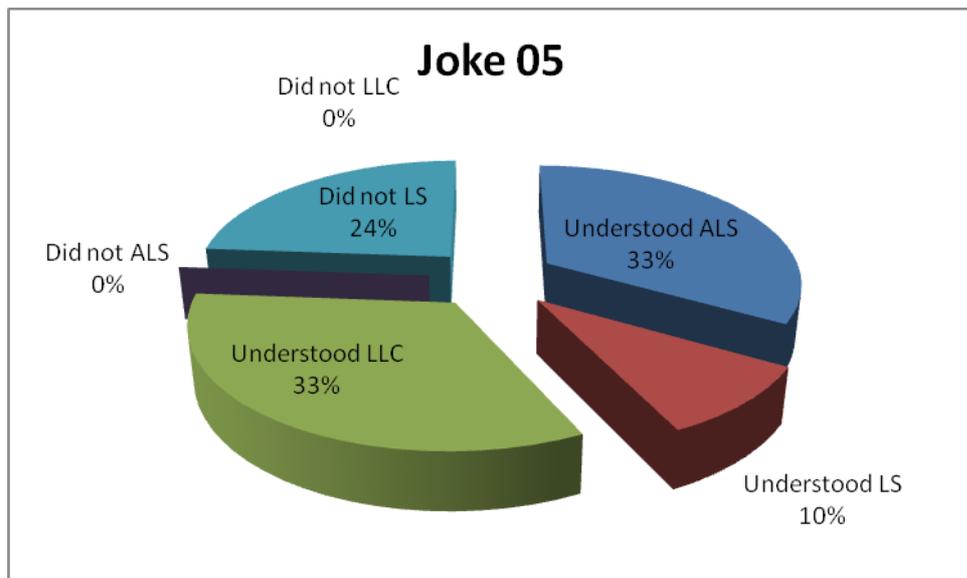


Figure 5: Distribution According to the Options (Joke 5)

Nearly all of the students' responses indicate a positive attitude towards the joke.

“It’s very funny, I understood from the joke 6 that the students tie the queen with royalty and my god with religion, pregnant with sex and Mystery with I wonder who did it.”

“It was funny for the tricky way the student wrote this sentence.”

A significant difference was observed in the level of understanding and a possible explanation that the subjects scored better in this joke is that the learners are acquainted with the cultural concepts the joke includes. Therefore, the subjects attained understanding.

Joke 06

As it is shown in the table below, among the 21 students 18 were placed at the level of understanding of joke 06.

Joke 6	Understood	Did not understand	Total
Number of students	18	03	21

Tableau 6: Rate of Comprehension (Joke 6)

As the graph below shows, the percentages represent the level of understanding of the three groups which is almost identical:

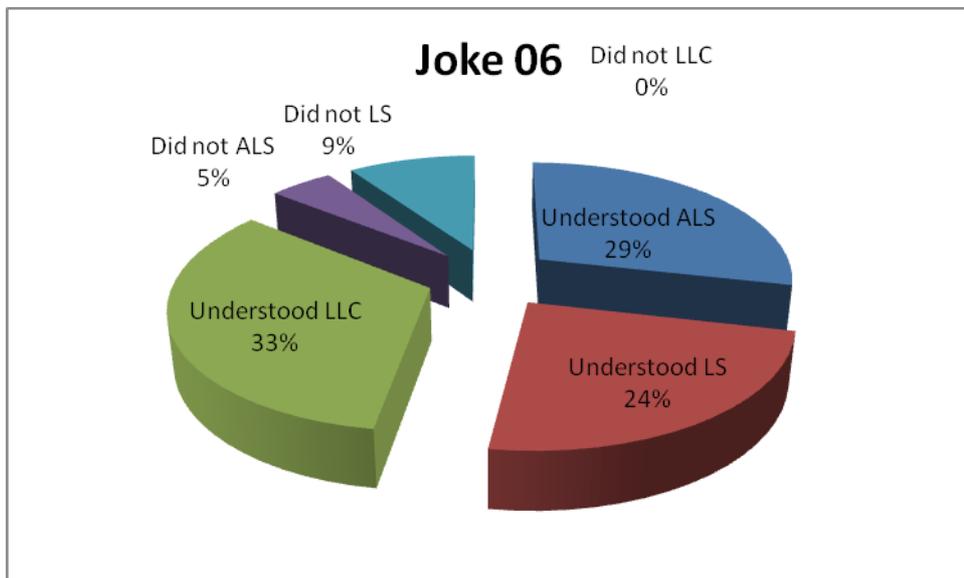


Figure 6: Distribution According to the Options (Joke 6)

It can also be noticed from their responses that the students are aware about the fact that the American people hate G. Bush:

“The joke shows that the kid’s father hates George W. Bush.”

“The little boy would become crippled once his father would learn about his son saving his sworn enemy.”

“It was so long that I lost interest.”

From the responses above, it can be concluded that the small portion of the students who did not come to understand the joke is simply because, it was too long that they lost their interest and concentration. This is the sole reason why they failed to understand it, otherwise they would recognize that the only reason that makes the father beats his son is that he abhors G. Bush.

Joke 07

It is extremely clear from the table below that more than half the participants understood the joke.

Joke 7	Understood	Did not understand	Total
Number of students	13	08	21

Tableau 7: Rate of Comprehension (Joke 7)

A quick look at the graph below will let us know that the LLC students achieved better level of understanding 34% than did the other two groups of LS 14% and the ALS 14%

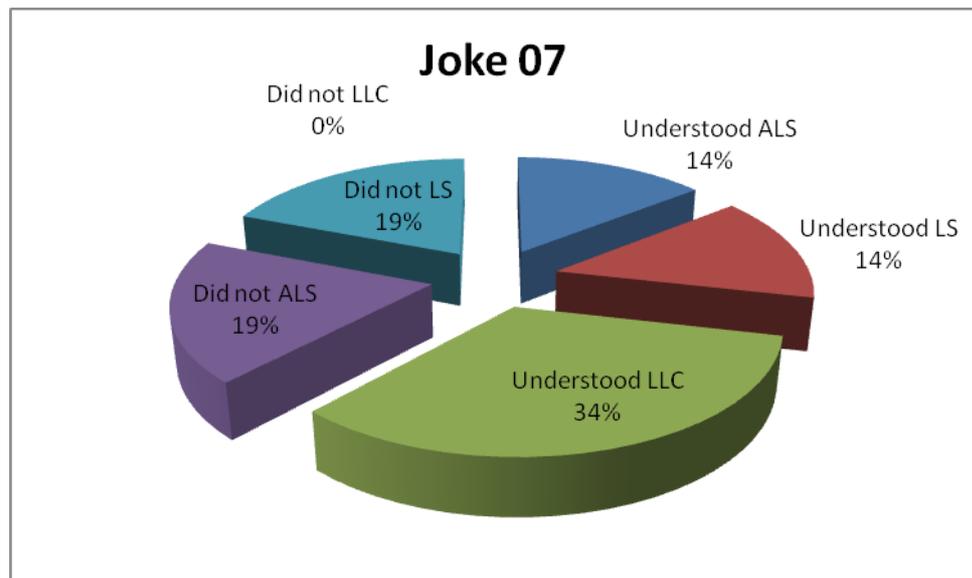


Figure 7: Distribution According to the Options (Joke 7)

A careful examination of the students' responses, except those of LLC, reveals that they lack cultural knowledge which prevented them from interpreting the meaning of the abbreviation S.P.C.A.

“I do not know what S.P.C.A. represents.”

“The abbreviation is not really easy to know.”

“One who doesn't understand the abbreviation of SPCA couldn't deduce the meaning of the joke.”

Though has been said in different words, it targeted the same goal. The students' responses did not go beyond the misunderstanding of the abbreviation S.P.C.A.

Joke 08

It could be claimed, according to the table below, that the students' understanding level was not bad.

Joke 8	Understood	Did not understand	Total
Number of students	15	05	21

Tableau 8: Rate of Comprehension (Joke 8)

Both responses of LLC and ALS students are nearly identical 29% vs. 28%, however, (19%) of the LS participants understood the joke.

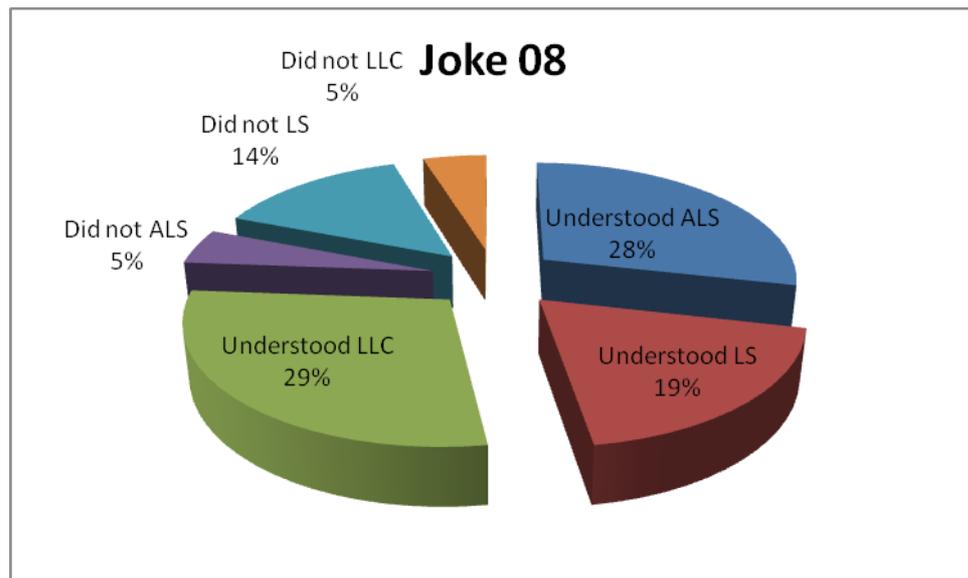


Figure 8: Distribution According to the Options (Joke 8)

The responses expressed personal judgements about the joke reflects their knowledge of the joke if not necessarily in English but in their mother tongue. Here are the examples:

“I guess the joke is bothering I do not like it even though I have understood it”

“The boy shook the cow for the purpose of having milk shake. It’s similar to the one we tell in Arabic.”

Most of our participants’ performance on that joke is distinct from the previous one, because the notions that do relate to our native culture are better understood than those which are remote.

Joke 09

As it is shown in the table, the rate of the learners' understanding level is very low.

Joke 9	Understood	Did not understand	Total
Number of students	04	17	21

Tableau 9: Rate of Comprehension (Joke 9)

Expectedly, as the graph below demonstrates, a rather high percentage of understanding was achieved by the LLC students 14% compared to those of ALS 5% and LS 0%.

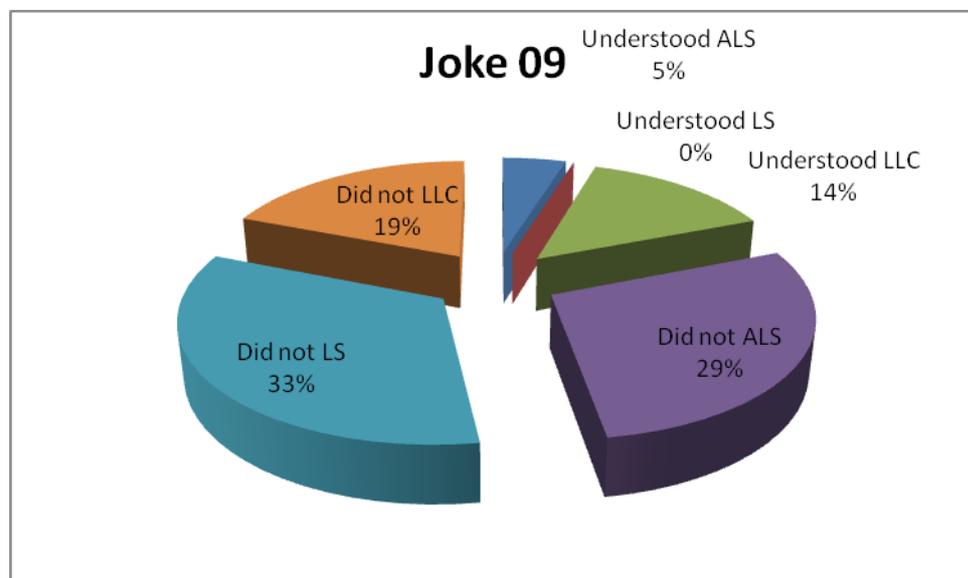


Figure 9: Distribution According to the Options (Joke 9)

It was also noticed that most of their responses were either vague or did not go beyond the literal meaning of the word “hot dog”:

“These images did not associate with the comparisons.”

“The joke means that a dog became a hot dog at the beach because of the heat.”

“What is the relationship between the tomato, the lettuce and the dog?”

“I did not understand this joke because I don’t know what the relationship between vegetables and animals is.”

“I understand that in naming some kinds of food is not at random, I knew that as an Algerian we say: a head of lettuce and ketchup is made of tomato, but what is a hot dog.”

A close examination of these responses shows that most of the students did not come to recognize what “hot dog” means. For them the only meaning is the literal one .

A fact most students seem to ignore is that everyday language embodies cultural notions. Nearly all the students who did not come to understand the joke associate the word hot dog, not to that hot sausage served in a long bread roll, but to the animal. This significantly means that they lack background knowledge about the FLC, in addition to their little exposure to it.

Joke 10

From the table below, it is remarkably seen that the rate of the participants understanding is very high.

Joke 10	Understood	Did not understand	Total
Number of students	20	01	21

Tableau 10: Rate of Comprehension (Joke 10)

Supposedly, the three groups achieved a high level of understanding. It is clearly indicated in the graph below that the percentages show a high understanding level.

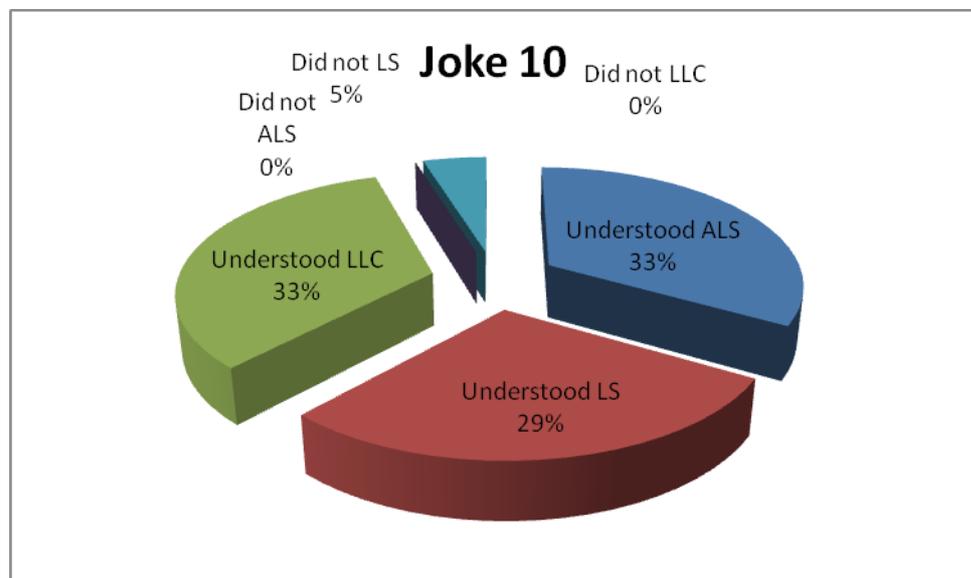


Figure 10: Distribution According to the Options (Joke 10)

All the students in the three options, except one belongs to LS, expressed a positive attitude towards the joke:

“I like the joke it is very laughable the students thought that the teacher made a reference to Mike while he was asking about Columbus.”

“In this joke, Mike seems as Djeha.”

All of the students seemed not to ignore these cultural bits about the discovery of America and its discoverer.

This joke was included in the test on purpose, because we know that the students are acquainted with the cultural information, concerning the discovery and the discoverer of America, the joke hidden.

Hence, the previous responses could reflect the general belief that there exists a relationship between the students' level of understanding and their exposure to such cultural bits, since all of the learners seemed to not ignore this cultural information concerning the discovery of America and its discoverer.

Discussion

The results obtained in this study can help make inferences about the learners' miscomprehension of the jokes, and enable too, the researcher to derive conclusions and provide useful insights for making further research.

As it has been mentioned in chapter one, teaching culture allows learners to increase their knowledge about the foreign language culture. Furthermore, the students' cultural competence should be enhanced to develop better cultural speakers.

However, the results gained in this research indicated that the limited exposure to the FLC increases the learners' miscomprehension and misinterpretation of the culture specific jokes. This is clearly seen in their responses which were detached from the jokes' tag line. This is mainly due to the lack of cultural awareness and knowledge that should be emphasized and fostered through the task of teaching and learning.

In order to understand the humor in a joke, knowledge of several types is required; apart from the linguistic knowledge and the language proficiency, one must have background knowledge about the culture of the humorous text language. But, our schools and universities teach students to achieve grammatical competence and language proficiency rather than developing the learners' cultural awareness and competence. As we already highlighted his quotation in chapter one, Politzer (1959:100-1) said that if we teach language without teaching its culture we are teaching meaningless symbols to which the student attaches the wrong meaning.

Developing cultural awareness could also be accomplished through oral expression courses where the time devoted, in the class period, to teaching cultural notions is not enough to enhance the learners' cultural competence. As has been mentioned earlier in chapter one, learning

and teaching a foreign language cannot be complete without developing cultural awareness. Students have to be aware about the differences and similarities across cultures.

Moreover, culture acts as a great hindrance for the learners' understanding, no matter how good is their linguistic and pragmatic knowledge. Without the mastery of the FLC, learners lose the key tool for solving the humorous mystery.

One possible explanation that the subjects scored better in some jokes is their exposure to daily news which is considered as a rich source for cultural information. It seems that television, radio, and the internet have great influence on the development of cultural awareness.

In this case, it is worth saying that learners' learning of the FLC goes beyond the classroom limits. Actually, the comprehension of culture specific jokes requires cultural specific knowledge to recognize and correctly interpret the punch line of the joke. Here, our subjects lack knowledge of such cultural notions, in addition, they have little chance to learn and be exposed to the FLC.

Because cultural knowledge has a significant importance in comprehending the humorous text, the selected cultural content of the program may concentrate more on the basic characteristics of the FC as it is mentioned earlier in chapter one.

It goes without saying that cultural jokes are difficult to understand by the EFL learners; however, they might be easy depending on the degree of similarity between one's mother culture and the foreign culture. How distinct or how similar the two cultures are makes a sharp difference in the learners' understanding level of the jokes. Because throughout the exposure to the foreign language culture, students can draw some comparisons and clear cut lines between the home culture and the target culture.

Actually, some students are aware about the fact that things are looked upon differently across cultures. Few students inferred that as an Englishman, we say “a head of lettuce” which is not the case for a Frenchman who says “un pied de laitue” literally translated as “a foot of lettuce.”

The LLC students performed a little better, though not as expected, than those of ALS and LS. This is a significant indicator about the learners’ insufficient exposure to culture. Again, this means that the students are not able to determine the cultural notion the joke includes.

Clearly some of the previous responses could reflect the general belief that there exists a relationship between the students’ level of understanding and their exposure to some cultural bits, since all of the learners seemed to not ignore this cultural information concerning the discovery of America and its discoverer.

Conclusion

As has been mentioned in the previous chapter, analytical statistics have revealed a significant relationship between students’ level of understanding and their limited exposure to culture, confirming to some extent the research hypothesis. It has been shown throughout this

chapter how these findings were reflected in some participants' individual responses, which gave more precision to the students' lack of expertise of culture. The results demonstrate that though a variety of responses occurred, most of them do clearly reflect misrecognition, miscomprehension, and lack of appreciation of the jokes. Consequently, humor based on culture is difficult for people to grasp, though amusing and enjoyable for natives and those who are familiar with the native speakers' culture, but not easy for people belonging to other countries. While limitations related to sampling, participants and jokes choice seem to impede generalizations with total confidence; the results revealed in this study offer promising perspectives for teaching culture on the whole, we would suggest much earlier, at the very beginning of English learning/ teaching.

General Conclusion

The present study has covered the problem of how EFL learners respond to and interpret the culture specific jokes. It was mainly interested in testing how the paucity of cultural knowledge could be a factor of crucial importance that prevents learners from understanding the

humorous text. The main point was to check whether or not the quality of the students' understanding of culturally based jokes relates to their exposure to the foreign language culture. This area of research, actually, has gained a wide interest from educators and researchers.

Chapter one of this thesis concentrates, to a great extent, on the necessity of integrating culture in the English syllabus. It also stresses that the learners' cultural awareness should be enhanced, and the necessity of preparing the learners to be intercultural speakers is emphasized. The fact that culture components are ignored in the syllabus content was declared as well. So, the call for developing a new approach to the teaching the foreign language culture is a must.

With reference to the Algerian system of education which offers very few opportunities for the learners to be exposed to the native speakers' culture, we are far from being into contact with them.

The author of this thesis claimed that teaching the language should not be separated from its culture. Many researches have already called for the importance of culture in the foreign language curricula. We would only agree with their propositions, since our work has shown the extent to which this essential aspect is missing in advanced students.

Statistics confirmed to some extent, not as expected, the research hypothesis that students of lower exposure to culture tend to approach the joke with different interpretations that are far from being related to the cultural notions the jokes hide, while those with higher understanding levels concentrate on the cultural implications of the joke.

Analyzing instances of individuals' responses gave more precision to the claim that the individual interpretations of the jokes are really far from their real cultural meaning.

The results, as demonstrated in the students' performance in the test, indicate a complete lack of awareness and failure to understand the native speakers' culture. Consequently, this is due to the learners' lack of knowledge of the target language culture and its speakers' sense of humor which is a factor that works against good understanding of the humorous text.

For the cultural jokes, if learners have never become acquainted with the concept the joke may include, they would lose the key tool with which they may solve the humorous puzzle, and hence, misunderstand the joke.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations that have been encountered in this study gave outstanding insights for designing and improving research about culture. It could be claimed to have added some interesting evidence for how non-native speakers respond to culture specific jokes as there are only few studies which deal with the subject in a foreign language context.

The study has proved a significant relationship between the main variables of the research that is the influence of culture and the limited exposure to it on the learners understanding of culture specific jokes. It seems that the extent to which the students are exposed to culture influences the quality of their interpretations of a humorous text.

Studying students' responses of the three different options would have been ideal to infer the effects of the lack of exposure to the foreign language culture on students' understanding of the humorous text. Being exploratory in nature, the study is limited to providing data of the existence of the phenomenon, and not the nature of relationship between the two main variables.

The validity and reliability of the research have also been influenced to a certain degree; many responses have been found to be exactly identical with one another, and this is the result of the students' discussion of the jokes' meaning with one another, while others were almost empty.

Concerning the test, though ten somehow accessible jokes were included, still choosing other humorous texts of higher difficulty could have produced more or less divergent responses.

It is also important to note that the sample was not large and does not enable generalizations.

Recommendations

Research works ought to be conducted for the sake of helping course and syllabus designers, as well as instructors and educators in selecting suitable materials and teaching methodologies that meet the aim of enhancing the learners' cultural knowledge and awareness. Since fostering the learners' cultural competence should be the major concern of a syllabus that intends to establish a permanent relationship between the language and its culture because the

teaching of culture is important and of great usefulness and should never be neglected or separated from the language being taught.

We recommend that the learners be given as many opportunities as possible to be exposed to the target culture. This would enable them to be intercultural speakers and to use and understand the everyday language which most often embodies cultural notions, norms and conventions.

It is worth emphasizing that students should be well introduced to the foreign language culture especially through some specific subjects such as the oral expression; otherwise it is preferable to set new specific subjects which their main objectives will be to develop the learners' cultural awareness and cross-cultural communication.

Our study suggests that culture is considered as one of the major components of the foreign language proficiency. The syllabus designed for teaching the target language lacks the culture of the language. As for the university teachers, they have to give considerable amount of time and activities on and about culture.

It may be thought that foreign language learners have to achieve only the linguistic and grammatical proficiency in their task of learning; however, this fallacy has to be remedied because students' cultural knowledge and competence need to be strengthened.

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Appendix

Test to the Students

MENTOURI UNIVERSITY CONSTANTINE

FACULTY OF ARTS AND LANGUAGES

DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

The Influence of Culture on the Learners' Understanding of Cultural Specific

Jokes

A Comparative Study

TEST

Dear mates,

I'm carrying out a survey on the influence of culture on the student's understanding of jokes as part of my master degree, and would like you to answer the following test.

Thank you

In advance!

MOUNES SIHEM

2009_2010

The Test

1. A Cuban, a Japanese, an American and a Mexican are in a boat. The Cuban pulls out a box of cigars, takes one and throws the rest in the water. He puffs twice and throws it in the water. He says, "We have so many cigars in Cuba, we can spare a few." The Japanese guy pulls some computer chips out of his pocket and says,

"We produce so many of these, we can spare a few." The American looks at the Mexican and the Mexican says "Don't even think about it."

Did you understand the joke? Yes No

2. And why couldn't the rude baseball umpire have his little boy sit in his lap?

Because the son never sits on the brutish umpire.

Did you understand the joke? es No

3. Tourist: Can you tell me the way to Bath please?

Policeman: Well, first you turn on the hot and cold taps then...

Did you understand the joke? es No

4. Late one night a burglar broke in a house. He froze when he heard a loud voice say:

“Jesus is watching.” Silence returned to the house, so the burglar crept forward.

“Jesus is watching.” The voice bloomed again. The robber stopped dead in his tracks and frantically looked all around. He spotted a parrot in a cage.

“Was that you?” asked the burglar.

“Yes,” answered the parrot.

The criminal sighed in relief and asked, “What’s your name?”

“Clarence”, said the bird.

“That’s a dumb name for a parrot,” sneered the burglar.” what idiot names you Clarence?”

“The same idiot who named the Rottweiler Jesus.”

Did you understand the joke? Yes

5. According to the internet: students in Harvard English 101 class were asked to write a concise essay containing four elements: religion, royalty, sex, and mystery.

The only A+ in the class read: "My God," said the queen, "I'm pregnant! I wonder who did it!"

Did you understand the joke? Yes

6. George W. Bush was out jogging one morning along the parkway when he tripped, fell over the bridge railing, and landed in the creek below. Before the Secret Service guys could get to him, 3 kids who were fishing pulled him out of the water. He was so grateful he offered the kids whatever they wanted. The first kid said, "I want to go to Disneyland." George W. said, "No problem. I'll take you there on Air Force One".

The second kid said, "I want a new pair of Nike Air Jordan's."

George W. said, "I'll get them for you and even have Michael sign them!"

The third kid said, "I want a motorized wheelchair with a built in TV and stereo headset!"

George W. was a little perplexed by this and said, "But you don't look like you are handicapped." The kid replied, "I will be, after my dad finds out I saved you from drowning!"

Did you understand the joke? Yes No

7. "Why do you beat your little son? It was the cat that broke the vase of flowers."

"I can't beat the cat. I belong to the S.P.C.A."

Did you understand the joke? Yes No

8. "Why is the boy shaking the cow?"

"He wants a milk-shake!!!"

Did you understand the joke? Yes **No**

9. Did you hear about the race between the lettuce and the tomato?

The lettuce was a "head" and the tomato was trying to "ketchup"!

"What do you call a dog at the beach?"

"A hot dog".

Did you understand the joke? Yes **No**

10. Teacher: Mike, come find the United States on the map.

Mike: Yes, Teacher. (He finds it.)

Teacher: Very good. Now, class, do you know who discovered the United States?

Class: Mike did!

Did you understand the joke? Yes **No**

Explain the jokes that you understood and say why you did not understand the others?

JOKE 01

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JOKE 02

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JOKE 03

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JOKE 04

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JOKE 05

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JOKE 06

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JOKE 07

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JOKE 08

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JOKE 09

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JOKE 10

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Résumé

Ce travail a été réalisé dans le but de montrer le rôle et la nécessité de la culture en comprendre les blagues. Pour atteindre ce but, les réactions des étudiants volontaires d'Anglais en première année Master à l'université de Constantine ont été rassemblées.

Ce travail est principalement dévoué à trouver si le niveau de compréhension des blagues est relié à l'exposition des étudiants à la culture Anglaise.

De plus, il a permis de mettre à nu des problèmes, et des insuffisances. Ainsi, le taux de compréhension et la réaction des étudiants ont été mesurés.

L'analyse des données a prouvé l'existence d'une relation entre les deux variables, confirmant que les niveaux supérieurs correspondent à l'étendue d'exposition à la culture Anglaise alors que les niveaux inférieurs de compréhension sont liés à l'insuffisance d'exposition à la culture étrangère.

Malgré l'envergure limitée de cette étude, ses résultats ont révélé d'intéressantes implications sur la recherche dans le domaine de l'enseignement de la culture étrangère pour les étudiants universitaires.