



Integrating culture into Arabic communities EFL learning

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Abstract

Learning a foreign language is mainly learning another culture, and the involvement in language learning is involvement in the culture learning at the same time. Language and culture are two interrelated mutual dependent aspects in language learning and teaching especially in EFL situations. It has been assumed that the efficient achievement of the former necessarily leads to the achievement of the later and vice versa because each language has its own unique link to the culture with which it co-exists (Nunan, 2010). This article addresses this kind of beneficial relation between the two aspects and the effect of each one on the other, as well as the possibility of achieving one without another. In other words, could the foreign language be acquired efficiently without learning all foreign culture's aspects or not? In the same manner, could teaching a language take place in isolation of teaching the target culture? The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate this issue particularly in Arab communities where there are lots of challenges and reservations for learning and acquiring other languages with all their culture's implications due to most Arab communities are very conservative, that is why it has been thought that it might be difficult to take place.

Keywords: culture, EFL learning, Arabic communities

Introduction

Learning a foreign language is mainly learning another culture, and the involvement in language learning is involvement in the culture learning at the same time. Language and culture are two interrelated mutual dependent aspects in language learning and teaching especially in EFL situations. It has been assumed that the efficient achievement of the former necessarily leads to the achievement of the later and vice versa because each language has its own unique link to the culture with which it co-exists (Nunan, 2010). This article addresses this kind of beneficial relation between the two aspects and the effect of each one on the other, as well as the possibility of achieving one without another. In other words, could the foreign language be acquired efficiently without learning all foreign culture's aspects or not? In the same manner, could teaching a language take place in isolation of teaching the target culture? The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate this issue particularly in Arab communities where there are lots of challenges and reservations for learning and acquiring other languages with all their culture's implications due to most Arab communities are very conservative, that is why it has been thought that it might be difficult to take place.

Let us refer to the meaning of culture and language in the literature, culture could be seen as a system of shared objectives, activities and beliefs of a group of a given people, (Judd, 2002). Meanwhile, language could be viewed as only one of the many semiotic systems with which learners make sense of the world expressed in language. From these definitions we could perceive that making sense of the world might imply understanding the set of activities and beliefs of any community through the system of language. Thus, learning a language implies learning these set of activities and beliefs which could alternatively be expressed as culture, and asserting the role of culture means preparing the learner to be not only language learner but also culture learner.

Citron (1995) states that a great deal of foreign language culture learning is important and required for language learning as it increases opportunities of cross-cultural understanding. Meanwhile, Whorf emphasizes that some aspects of language can merely be acquired culturally. Hence, here we could argue that learning a language primarily requires, as much as possible, learning the target culture since without culture's involvement the language acquisition would merely look like acquiring linguistic and grammatical competence regardless of the basic objective of learning any language i.e. language use for social communicative purposes. Studies refer that one cannot learn English properly, and his/her learning would be inaccurate, if he/she ignores the culture of speaking-English countries. Some go further to say that learning could be meaningless and inaccurate without the study of culture and language cannot be learnt in isolation. Based on this view, I might assert that learning English in Arab countries requires learners to be involved in the target English cultures to the highest possible limits; though that would be a real challenge to the learners of such conservative societies.

Learning a foreign language in Arabic societies demands the learner to act linguistically in classrooms and socially in real life like those foreign language speakers. Certainly, it is not solely a matter of how to communicate in a foreign language, but rather how to discover to be flexible in the target language, how language would involve the learner to manipulate its forms and meanings to be reflected and accepted in the target language social norms. Such an engagement in other cultures helps foreign language learners to develop a sense of openness and appreciation of others. According to Bada (2000) ^[3] cultural literacy in ELT is a 'must' if we need the learners to communicate the meaning successfully with the native speakers. However, the question here is to what extent could Arabic EFL learners be involved in the

target culture and at the same time are there any barriers facing them in accepting and practicing some norms? Studies on culture and language learning revealed that EFL learning with its implied culture is an argumentative issue and attitudes towards this process have impeded it into finding its way to the language curricula particularly in Saudi Arabia community, Yemen and alike. I could emphasize here that EFL learners are not favored to be involved widely into the target culture norms for the obvious contradiction between the two different cultures. Moreover, the full inclusion of target culture might lead to a sense of dissatisfaction with the local culture that in turn would demotivate learners to learn the target culture with reference to the local culture.

Conservative societies are very cautious of what might be called the cultural conversion resulted from another language learning, therefore, we see Stevisck (1976) mentions the fragility of students in the face of learning a culture different from their own, which may arouse some feeling of alienation and estrangement, that is why some scholars and teachers describe them as 'not motivating' (Adasko, Britten, and Fahsi, 1990). Based on actual social and educational observations in Arabic societies, FL learners are very hesitated and reluctant to get involved completely into other cultures because, simply, they live in very conservative societies and such full engagement would show a great social clash and, even more, rejection. On the other hand, acculturation, as much as possible, is required and welcomed for the purpose of achieving the communicative competence in language learning. Alptekin (2002) proposes that learning a language is a kind of acculturation in which a learner receives a new world views reflecting those of target language culture and its speakers. Consequently, there should be more research deals with the role of culture and language learning in such conservative communities. Adamoski (cited in Lessard-Clouston, 1996) suggested that instructors feel culture has an important role to play, but no systematic ways of approaching how to teach it yet were revealed.

With reference to the aforementioned barriers EFL learners encounter, yes, English learners wherever they are, in home land or in the target language society, feel that there are some cultural barriers prevent them from learning a language properly. Some studies talk about the mobility (if female learner) as one barrier against achieving very successful language learning especially in western communities. The use of different cultural teaching strategies, not similar to what learners used to in their home lands, could be another kind of barriers that would affect their effective language learning. Such barriers might be considered as less effective factors for successful learning of target cultural values and norms. Indeed the historical and geographical distances between Arabs and English speaking countries result in many cultural differences that may, in turn, hinder the process of learning and acquiring the target culture to high levels. Consequently, it is necessary to raise learners' awareness to such differences to come over these barriers; and consider the new cultural needs that go in harmony with their original norms and values.

The assumption of transferring and practicing the entire English language situation, with culture, to the conservative societies like Yemen and Saudi Arabia might be far reaching if not impossible for several reasons. One of them is that some target cultural norms collide with the learners' culture because what might be

acceptable in one society might not be so in another. For example, some cultural aspects like celebrating Christmas day or having a girlfriend/boyfriend relations and exchanging the words or phrases referring to such occasions in Arab societies are prohibited and not allowed for some religious and cultural considerations. In this respect Tucker and Lambert (1972) proposed that teaching a culture implies developing an awareness of the target language values, norms and traditions; however developing an awareness does not mean, at all, accept all or some of these values and norms especially in the contrasted conservative communities. Furthermore, even in classroom setting only one gender pair work takes place because classes are not mixed, this certainly reveals how much complex is to practice the target culture properly and entirely on the learning of foreign languages. The complexity lies in the fact that every culture could be unique in some norms and traditions that distinct each of the two cultures and might regard it as totally strange and ambiguous to another. Meanwhile, In fact, this kind of complexity and barriers are not limited to the learning situation and societies in Arab world; however, all immigrants, from whatever area and culture, who moved to live in other western societies face similar such problems of rejecting or resisting some cultural values. Irfaaya, Maxwell, Karmer (2008) all state that immigrant families in the western schools and communities are also affected by such barriers. They provided some example of a Middle Eastern mother who may experience some language barriers from helping their children with homework, barriers of moving around to libraries or school centers especially for female students without male accompany as well as different cultural strategies they used to have and those used in western schools. Definitely, these cultural barriers truly affect the learners' language performance and success.

Another reason for what might be seen as a difficulty of transferring the entire target cultural aspects is that English language is the most widely studied language all over the world, whereby it has gained a lingua franca status (Smith, 1976). Considering English as an international language, one question might come into mind i.e. which culture should be learnt alongside the EFL learning? Should it be native American or native British or others? Answering such questions is subject to a debate, for instance Nault (2006: 31) argues that the way in which culture is taught to learners of English should be changed. He suggests that educators should try to overlook the idea that the United States and the United Kingdom are the only target cultures of English and that teachers should design more international and inclusive material which would meet the needs of their students better. In the same manner and in supporting to this view Alptekin (2002) highlighted, favouring the international communicative competence rather than the native-like competence; he asserts that since English is used as internationally by much of the world then there is no need for the British politeness or American formality. In other words, he implies the less significance of learning a specific culture beside the language. Others Smith (ibid), among them, asserts on what has Alptekin declared and explicitly state there is no need for culture in the language learning and teaching; and he lists some reasons for supporting his claims will be stated somewhere else in this paper. According to such arguments in terms of transferring all cultural features with the language teaching, we could tackle that some of the target culture values and norms are

recognized as controversial, yet considered as obstacles to culture teaching. In the same respect, Bessmertyni, (1994) argues that acculturation methodologies are vast that is why he classifies it as one problem of teaching a culture.

Based on real observations on the EFL learning situations, I might argue that not all cultural aspects could be learnt or efficiently employed in the learning culture due to the different denotations or social references of each culture; for example, some words in the target culture may bear positive connotation such as the term 'owl' refers to wisdom or grace in English culture, whereas it has totally different connotation in Arabic culture i.e. the symbol of pessimism and other negative associations. Therefore, employing such strange terms and using them in the FL learning culture would not be socially or culturally acceptable because they do not do the same effect as they do in the original culture. It is worth mentioning here that cultural activities include several aspects such as dancing, singing, and even some worm friendly expressions might be illegal or forbidden in the conservative societies mainly Saudi and Yemen, so they are not allowed to be taught or used. In supporting of this view, Kramsch and Sullivan (1996)^[10] state that foreign language pedagogy should help learners feel at home in both international and national cultures, avoiding those patterns which are alien or irrelevant. Therefore, there must be a balance between the teaching of the learners' own culture and the teaching of other cultures. In this respect Kramsch (1993)^[10] proposes that language teaching and learning should be reflected on both target and native cultures. Such integration of both cultures could be more beneficial for EFL classes.

Undoubtedly, such instances support the claim that not all target cultural aspects are necessary for the learning of a foreign language. In other words, language can be learnt regardless to the occurrence of the little variations in each language with its peculiar culture. Some conservative communities view the learning of another culture as an extra superfluous issue; hence many social and religious communities explicitly do not support, or even reject, such kinds of learning or acculturation. In supporting of this claim Bada (2000)^[3] reminds us that awareness of cultural values is not necessary for learners to conform such values. This could be taken as another view with some kind of reservation on the vitality of learning culture besides language. Others go further, e.g. Smith (1976), among them, concluded that there is no need for what he calls internalizing the target cultural norms for the purpose of learning a language is just to facilitate communication via the language itself. Here Smith deemphasizes the assumed role of learning the target culture within language learning because he adds the international language is denationalized. In contrast to Smith's view, Michael Marcal, 2010,^[14] and Frantzen, (1998)^[6], Jortstad (1981), Seelye (1981, 1994), Crawford-Lange and Lang (1984), Byran (1988) and Kramsch (1993)^[11] emphasize the need for incorporating and integrating culture into everyday studies to retain the language skills for a long period of time; they also state that culture cannot be something done only on every Friday or once a month for a couple of days. Thus, the debate on the role of culture and significance of teaching it through language teaching is still going on. Meanwhile, we could emphasize that culture teaching is vital because there is no such a thing as human nature independent of culture (McDevitt, 2004); moreover, the limited exposure to cultural elements of the society seem to encounter significant difficulty in communicating meaning to native speakers. So

culture cannot be avoided for teaching any language, however, not the whole aspects of any specific culture can be transferred into the learning situation culture.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper is mainly concerned with investigating the role of teaching culture within language teaching in EFL communities mainly Arabic. Language and culture are very interrelated notions that cannot happen in isolation of each other. Learning language primarily means learning its culture, and learning cultures renders meaning to the language learning. This paper paid much attention to question whether language could be learnt without full target culture involvement in the learning situations or not? As per scholars' arguments, this paper concludes that it seems difficult for all target culture's aspects to be included and taught in the EFL Arabic conservative communities due to many controversial and peculiar cultural issues. Yes teaching a language should correlate with teaching culture to the top possible potentials that enable learners of making meaningful communication with native speakers, with fending privacy of each culture. There are some barriers affect the proficient culture learning can be summarized in the clash between the source and target cultures in some norms and values as well as the difficulty of transferring all target culture's aspects to the EFL Arabic situation. This paper concludes that there must be a balance between maintaining the learners' own culture and teaching the target culture in the way that guarantees successful language achievement with its cultural implications and that enable language learners to manipulate the language for communication with the native speakers.

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