Introducing the Target Language Culture to EFL Learners to Enhance Sociocultural Competence

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Abstract
This research attempted to investigate the effect that teaching English language culture has on Algerian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' sociocultural competence. It also aimed at showing that having no exposure to English language culture alongside learning the English language itself will affect learners' understanding and production of the language. In this light, the study attempts to answer the following questions: to what extent is the culture of the English language present in the lessons of English language that are introduced to secondary school students? What cultural background do secondary school students have about the English language? And if they do have any cultural background, what is the source of that background and whether culture teaching enhances EFL learners' socio-cultural competence? We hypothesised that teaching culture to Algerian EFL learners will increase their sociocultural competence and improve their understanding of the language. This hypothesis was tested through conducting a quasi-experimental study with a group of eighteen students from Habba Abd El-Madjid Secondary School in El-Meghaier, El-Oued (Algeria) The final results revealed a remarkable improvement among the majority of students concerning their sociocultural competence and their perception and understanding of authentic English language. Therefore, it is recommended that the element of culture should be integrated into English language curricula of Algerian schools and that, if done, it will take students' level one step further towards a better acquisition of English language.
Keywords: Competence, Communicative Competence, Socio-Cultural, Target Culture

Introduction

In 1966, communicative competence was first introduced to the field of applied linguistics by Hymes (1972). This term means that successful communication requires more than only having linguistic competence. To be identified as a competent foreign language learner, sociocultural competence was among the competencies that Hymes believes they should be possessed in addition to linguistic competence. Sociocultural competence means to have enough knowledge about the target language culture and social norms to be able to communicate effectively in that language and to behave appropriately in the target language society. This competence is considered crucially important for the reason that language is deeply affected by its culture, and its utterances can hardly be free from any cultural interpretations.

To gain such competence, one should be sufficiently aware of the target language culture and the target society's norms. However, we noticed that culture lessons are missing as far as Algerian English language curricula are concerned. The absence of such experiences results in the formation of weak language learners with little ability to produce socio-culturally appropriate utterances, not to mention the keen understanding of the interlocutor's messages. These lessons are supposed to give learners insightful views about the culture of the foreign language under study and to enable them to have enough knowledge in order to communicate smoothly with little breakdown in conversation.

This study is an attempt to show how the different cultural aspects in the target language society can be realised in the target language itself. Furthermore, it tends to show how the possession of a considerable social and cultural knowledge can help learners to achieve the right interpretation of any utterance, form more socially and culturally fitted statements and avoid misunderstandings and breakdowns in communication.

1. **Literature Review**

Most of us learn a foreign language to be able to communicate in that language. Therefore, one crucial fact that we need to bear in mind is that the way people communicate differs. It is influenced by their norms, values, beliefs, attitudes, history, social status, geographical area and many other interrelated factors. In one word, we can say that their culture influences the way they communicate. Tang (1999) suggests that culture is language and language is culture which is true since language represents the mirror that reflects any society's culture and is also influenced by that culture and any changes that it may carry. Another evidence of the strong relationship between language and culture by Kramsch (1998) is the fact that language expresses, embodies and symbolizes cultural reality which clearly shows that language and culture are bounded together.

Since language is how culture is clearly expressed, then "Language teaching must inevitably be accompanied by teaching about cultural phenomena." (Risager, 2006, p.9). It is now proved that language learning should go along with culture learning and that understanding the

social and cultural aspects of any language is a crucial element to understand and produce the language itself. It is because how people create and receive the language varies from one society to another and what may be regarded as ordinary or appropriate in one society may be considered as confusing and rude in another. Recent studies in the field of foreign language teaching and learning emphasise the idea that mastering a foreign language does not only mean mastering its grammar but also having the ability to produce the language in its appropriate cultural and social context. One should be, to a considerable extent, aware of the cultural identity of their interlocutors so that they can communicate information successfully. Gao (2006) claims that the interdependence of language learning and cultural learning is so evident that one can conclude that language learning is culture learning and consequently, language teaching is cultural teaching. The same goes for Wang (2008) when he states that teaching a foreign language is teaching a foreign culture and that the foreign language teacher is a foreign culture teacher.

Foreign language learners have their own cultural identity; their own body language, hand movements, facial expressions and other linguistically distinguished expressions. When they are involved in the process of foreign language learning, they tend to subconsciously use what they have already acquired from their mother culture to fulfil specific communicative goals in the target language. For this reason, students need to learn the appropriate verbal and non-verbal behavior that goes along with any communication situation bearing in mind that any linguistic expressions, gestures or body movements that are ordinary and acceptable in their society may be perceived otherwise in another and that if the grammatical mistakes are to be tolerated by the members of a speech community, sociocultural errors are not. They are strongly emphasized and can contribute to immediate rejection by the members of the target language community.

Each utterance can have several meanings depending on the context and the circumstances under which it is produced. Only sufficient knowledge of such natural settings and situations can determine the appropriate interpretation of the utterance. However, how would EFL students react if they know the utterances that have been produced as well as the context and circumstances in which they were produced, yet still cannot interpret their meanings? Or even worse, what would they do if something they said has resulted in an unexpected response from their interlocutors? To be able to communicate in a foreign language, one should not only be linguistically but also socio-culturally and pragmatically competent. For this goal to be fulfilled, the culture and social norms of the target language should be explored. This is not merely concerned with knowing and studying about such culture and society to develop awareness and allow tolerance and respect towards the other, but also and most importantly concerned with how such knowledge and information are internalized in the language itself.

Having a Sociocultural competence is of crucial importance for FL (foreign language) /SL (second language) learners. This competence refers to having adequate knowledge about the social and cultural rules that are conventional in the target language society such as the level of formality when addressing others, non-verbal communication including eye contact, gestures, facial

expressions, tone of speech, speed of delivery and length of silence or pause before turn-taking. Not only knowing them, but also appropriately applying them. In other words, to know such rules and to also see how these rules are realized in the target language. According to Hinkel (2001), both non-native speakers and native speakers may be unaware that cultures can vary as much as they do. They subconsciously perceive it to be the same in all societies which may cause a great deal of confusion, misunderstanding and even rejection among people from different cultural and social backgrounds for the reason that what might be reasonable in one society is considered to be rude, unacceptable or even a taboo in another.

Learners need to understand that there is an excellent possibility that people who speak a language other than theirs do not share the same values, norms, beliefs and concepts as they do. Moreover, their perception of the world as well as their interpretation of events and their response to what they see and hear also differs. Smith (1985, p.2), for instance, explains that "the presentation of an argument in a way that sounds fluent and elegant in one culture may be regarded as clumsy and circular by members of another culture." As a result, they need to learn that what is regarded as appropriate, acceptable or conventional in their society is not necessarily the same in the target language culture. Respectively, what is usually very normal to say in their everyday life may be considered weird, rude or even taboo in the target language society and vice versa.

Sociocultural competence is not merely about having plenty of information about the culture and the society of the target language, but it is about using the learners' pragmatic ability with what they already know about the culture and society in order to decode their interlocutor's messages and figure out their intended meanings as well as to respond appropriately to them. There is no use from filling students' brains with plenty of information about the target language culture and society if they do not know how to use them for better comprehension and production of the language.

2. Method

In this section, the sample of the study, the research method and data gathering techniques, as well as the procedure of the experiment, will be introduced.

2.1Participants

This study is devoted to Algerian secondary school students. The sample of this experiment was a group of eighteen (18) Students selected among 254 second-year students at Habba Abd El-Madjid Secondary School 2014\2015. The method that was used is convenient sampling since the criterion adopted in choosing the representatives is their marks in the English language subject during the first trimester of the academic year 2014/ 2015, i.e., those who have highest scores compared to other students in the population were the subject of the experiment. The point to be proved, here, is that even students who manage to have the highest scores in English language exams lack the required amount of knowledge to be socioculturally competent. Besides, we wanted to guarantee that the students whom we are going to work with have the necessary level of English that will enable them to understand the teacher's talk.

2.2 Research Method and Data Gathering Tools

Since the study is about testing the effect of one variable which is learning the target language culture on another which is learners' sociocultural competence and the impact that the manipulation of the independent variable will have on the dependent one, it was set to be a quasi-experimental study. In other words, an experiment was conducted including a pre-test to measure the amount of knowledge students have about English language culture, a treatment that includes lessons about different aspects of the target language culture and a post-test to examine whether or not their sociocultural competence has been improved. Also, the quantitative method of data gathering and analysis was used for it is the most helpful in measuring the difference in performance before and after the treatment as well as the extent of the relationship between variables.

2.3Procedure

The experiment was conducted in three phases.

The pre-test was administered to all eighteen students (N= 18) to answer in a period that does not exceed one hour and a half. The test included ten questions all of which are supposed to be answered by any person with basic knowledge about English language speaking countries. The pre-test aimed to measure cultural knowledge among students which, itself, indicates their level of sociocultural knowledge. The pre-test results revealed that students do not have any cultural understanding given the fact that they could not answer questions that any person with basic cultural knowledge, regardless of being an English language learner, could answer.

Based on the analysis of the students' performance in the pre-test and after knowing their real levels on cultural knowledge, the phase of treatment and lessons preparation began. The treatment consisted of six lessons, and every lesson was devoted to a particular aspect of culture and had specific objectives that students were supposed to accomplish by the end of each session. The main aim of this treatment was to enrich students' knowledge about English language speaking countries and to implicitly make the connection between such knowledge and the language itself.

The post-test aimed at testing sociocultural competence among students and their ability to work out the learned information the cultural knowledge in a way that enables them to correctly interpret what is being said or referred to according to different social contexts. It did not have the same form and content as the pre-test. It was more in-depth and complicated than the pre-test, and it needed an active working out and manipulation of what has been learned. In addition, it had more space devoted to writing to explain answers, unlike the pre-test.

3. Analysis and Interpretation of the Results

Through the process of this experiment, many new issues were revealed and many questions were adequately answered. Through the students' overall results in the pre-test as well as their behaviours and performances during the introduced lessons, we can say that our students,

in general, do not have any sufficient cultural background about English language which is being studied for many years. Most of them do not have the cultural background they are supposed to have at their level. Moreover, the few of them who, to some degree, managed to answer some of the pre-test questions, stated that the source of their cultural knowledge does not come from English language lessons that are introduced in the classroom, but from media, internet and other sources which are known for being invalid since they encourage stereotypes and misconceptions. This answer indicates that culture of English language is also absent in Algerian English language teaching curricula because if it was even to some extent present, most of students would have been able to answer the pre-test questions which we stated before that anyone with basic knowledge about English language speaking countries can answer.

Students who were subject to the experiment have made an enormous leap. They have been acquainted with another side of English language and new perspectives to understand, perceive and interpret it in addition to new techniques to produce it using information and knowledge that was not available for them before. The ultimate aim to learn any language is to be able to communicate using that language by the very end successfully. Therefore, this is one of most important aspects that should be borne in mind when teaching the language because it is not just a matter of linking words to each other using certain rules and their exceptions. What should be considered is how to use these linguistic items in the right way by manipulating and produce them in a manner that is authentic or close from authentic, how to use them in a way that produces the desired response from one's interlocutor and does not result in misunderstanding or breakdown in conversation. Moreover, how to gain the necessary knowledge and competence that enable the learner to get the right interpretation to what their interlocutor is saying considering the context, the tone of the voice, the body language, the references they are using and other circumstances which all, in one way or the other, are strongly influenced by one's culture and social norms. It is all about learning about the target language culture and society along with learning the language itself.

Proceeding with integrating lessons of culture in the curriculum will have endless benefits. We have seen the eagerness among students and their thirstiness to learn more; their eyes were sparkling each time they knew something about the other world which they did not know before or each time they understood something which was confusing and mysterious for them before. Regardless of improving their sociocultural competence and consequently their communicative competence, these lessons will provide a motivating atmosphere for learning; they will provide them with fun that is one very important aspect to keep motivation, concentration and ability to accommodate and absorb more, yet unfortunately is the most neglected aspect and the most lacking element in our English language classes.

The fact that our students did not have any cultural knowledge whatsoever that they could not even differentiate between male and female names of people is really alerting. English language teaching cannot be separated from culture teaching and, for Algerian English language

curricula, introducing culture to EFL learners has become an obligation rather than an option. It is a fact that the foreign language teacher is a culture teacher and the foreign language learner is a culture learner or they should be. Therefore, teaching English language culture must be incorporated in the English language curricula for Algerian secondary schools not for the sake of only the better perception and production of the language itself, but also to awake students' senses and open their minds, from an early age, for the cross cultural and pragmatic differences around the world. This process of culture teaching should be graded in a way that smoothly moves from the very simple, general and obvious input to the very specific, detailed and complicated input.

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This teaching of culture should not be done in the traditional manner or the way other subjects are usually taught with the mere use of textbooks and the complete reliance on oral explanation. The use of aids such as videos, images, ICT tools, concrete objects and any other items where authentic language is produced is a must when teaching the target language culture for they are the only window through which students can see what the culture and social conventions really look like and how the language is really exchanged in its natural context. These aids will shorten the process of language learning with keeping the same benefits including skills and competencies that students would possess by the end of it. In fact, they will save a lot of time and efforts that may be spent with no guaranteed efficiency.

Most of English language used in our classroom is invented, so strict using minimum vocabulary to deliver information it is a prescribed language. We should allow more authentic and native like English language to have larger access to our classes and lessons instead of this prescribed language that blocks students' minds instead of opening them. We should perform that kind of language that opens the doors to new ways of manipulation and using the language that is very much close to the way used in its native context.

Concerning teachers, in addition to the professional information that they should go through in order to learn about how such complicated subject is be taught, another kind of formation needs to be incorporated which is summer trips to the target language society or societies. These summer trips that have touristic goals which aim at getting teachers in touch with the culture of English language, in the first place, should also include programs of intensive training and workshops. The reason is because there are many aspects of culture that cannot be fully understood unless the

teacher personally experiences them and explores them in their natural setting. It seems also to be advisable for the teacher to explicitly point out to the learner that politeness markers are an integral part of the foreign cultural system, and should neither be used nor interpreted by reference to the learner's native system. More effective teaching of the behavioral component may minimize native cultural interference and prevent impolite, ineffective, or otherwise inappropriate behavior on the part of the learner.

There has been a debate of whether to include culture before or after students have mastered the linguistic aspect of the language. We believe that no matter how long students study the language they will not fully reach the ultimate level of linguistic competence, at least not by the time devoted for them to learn the language (Algerian school students spend 7 academic years learning English), which mean that we should not count the possibility of waiting the learners until they master the linguistic aspect of the language. However, this does not mean to start teaching them the culture right from the beginning, not even right after they reach the basic level. What we should bear in mind is the students' sense of evaluation. In my viewpoint, culture integration should not start until our student finish their first four years of English studying. It is because, until this stage is finished, students' sense of evaluation is still low and their social and cultural identity is still not fully built. In this case, teaching culture will be more of a problem than of a mean towards a better understanding of the language. Teaching culture at this level may lead students to reject their own culture and social norms and values and may lead them to be blind followers and imitators of everything that the other culture produces or contains. Another solution is to teach them aspects of big "C" culture during the first years of leaning English and live the aspects of small "c" culture to more advanced and mature learners who have the ability to learn about the other, but not necessarily to be the other.

Students who did not do well in the post test prove that culture cannot be taught outside the classroom or without a teacher given the fact that they were able to obtain the lessons they have missed from their classmates with their explanations. It shows that culture being taught in the classroom with the supervision and the guidance of a trained teacher is a crucial element in both the simplification of the input and monitoring of the content of the input that reaches the student mind.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the role of the foreign language culture in enhancing learners' socio-cultural competence. The study was conducted through the quasi-experimental design using a pre-test and a post-test where we started from the more obvious and general knowledge to be acquired to the more specific and detailed information. Using a comparative study, the data gathered from both tests were compared to each other followed by certain procedures to analyze them to test the hypothesis. Hypothesis testing was done by calculating the t-ratio which result established a reliable proof for accepting the hypothesis which assumes that teaching culture to EFL learners will increase their sociocultural competence. This experiment reached its objective.

Students who were subject to this experiment have made a huge leap. They have moved to a whole next level and explored new things they would never have the chance to discover through their English language curriculum. The ultimate aim to learn any language is to be able to successfully communicate using that language by the very end. Therefore, this is one of most important aspects that should be borne in mind when starting to teach the language. What should be considered is how to use these linguistic items the right way; how to manipulate and produce them in a manner that is authentic or, at least, close to authentic and which does not result in confusion, misunderstanding, breakdown in conversation or worse, rejection. Moreover, it is important to introduce how to gain the necessary knowledge and competence that enable the learner to get the right interpretation to what their interlocutor is saying considering the context, the tone of the voice, the body language, the references they are using and other circumstances which all, in one way or the other, are strongly influenced by one's culture and social norms. It is all about learning about the target language culture and society along with learning the language itself.

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