

Teachers' Perceptions of the Significance of Local Culture in Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract-Learning takes place in an environment, and environment includes the local culture which is extremely important while learning in general. The question remains critical if the local or foreign culture is crucial in the learning process of a foreign language. There isn't much difference of opinion on the relevance of British culture in an English class, however the usefulness of the local culture (the Saudi culture in this context) is questioned. The present study is a modest attempt towards answering some such questions formulating the basis and the hypotheses for this research.

Keywords- Learning, Environment; Foreign Culture; Foreign Language Learning; Local Culture

1. INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing enthusiasm to investigate into the constructive use of culture in a foreign language classroom. Researchers, pedagogues linguists and teachers have long felt that cultural phenomena can't be ignored while teaching a language as both language and cultures can't be separated for many socio-linguistic reasons. The issue of the inclusion of culture in foreign language teaching arguably began with the writings of Malinowski in 1923. In addition, an anthropologist-linguist, declared that "...language does not exist apart from culture." (Sapir, 1921, p. 206). Samovar, Porter, and Jain (1981) emphasized, 'Culture and communication are inseparable because culture is not only concerned with who talks to whom, about what, but also 'how the communication' proceeds. He further says, culture is the foundation of communication (p. 24). Peck (1998) contended that "Without the study of culture, foreign language instruction is inaccurate and incomplete" (p. 1).

2. CULTURE DEFINED

The definition of culture is subjective. There are various contexts which attribute to the making of a culture. However, it incorporated the life style, dress, food habit, customs, values, traditions and even civilization. Trifonovitch's (as cited in Croft, 1980) survey reveals over 450 different definitions of the word or concept of culture can be found in related literature (p. 550). Taylor (cited in Croft, 1980) regards culture as: ... that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, custom, and other habits acquired by man as a member of society" (p. 531) Condon (cited in Brown, 1994) also defines culture as "a system of integrated patterns, yet all of which govern human behavior just as surely as the manipulated strings of a puppet control its motions" (p. 123). Thompson (1990) views culture as "... the pattern of meanings in symbolic

forms such as deeds, actions, expressions, utterances etc by virtue of which individuals communicate with each other and among them." (p. 132).

3. TEACHING OF CULTURE: THE EFL PEDAGOGIC CONTEXT

Culture is an integral part of language learning, and learning language is essentially a socially oriented process which is linked with the wider cultural scenario. (Foley & Thompson, 2003, p.62). Students cannot be proficient in the target language until they are aware of cultural contexts. (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996, cited in Peterson & Coltrane, 2003, p.1).

In order to fill in the cultural gap, the target language teachers should diagnose important linguistic issue, and incorporate key cultural items in a well developed lesson plan to facilitate the target students who can perform effectively not only in the particular language but also in related culture.

3.1 What to teach

What type and aspects of culture a teacher or course designer should select to implement with the teaching material is a crucial pedagogic issue. The major cultural contents to include in a language classroom should be what Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) state that culturally influenced beliefs and perceptions, especially as expressed through language, but also through cultural behaviors of the users of the language of that cultural group. (p. 6).

3.2 What not to teach

There are certain things which are culturally restricted to teach in KSA especially to the younger generation because it may adversely affect the behavior of the learners. The following images are some of those which can't be justified to be incorporated in the school of college curriculum in KSA.



Fig 1: an evening in a night club



Fig 2: a scene at beach

Dress and life style are crucially important in Saudi culture. Freedom beyond the boundaries is not permissible in Islam, and a Muslim has to abide by at least in a country like Saudi Arabia.



Fig 3: a famous actor-singer



Fig 4: a culturally different scene

Similarly, historical or art related phenomena should not mislead the learner from their mainstream of the religion that they practice. It is believed that such things distract the young brain, consequently they start following without even giving a second thought.

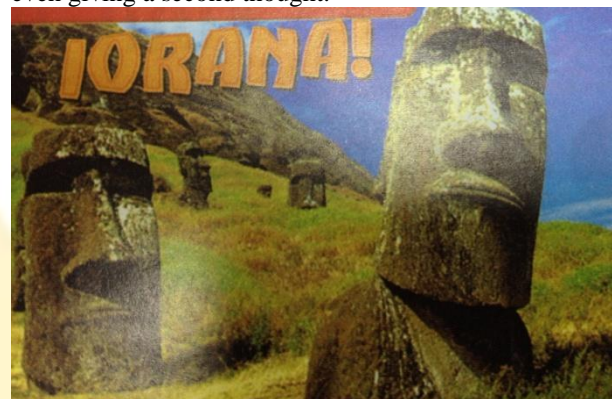


Fig 5: statues showing culture in the past

3.3 What cultural aspects to be incorporated

It is imperative to incorporate good cultural aspects into the curriculum of the target EFL learning program. However, it should be kept in mind that simultaneously with the impart of knowledge, the teaching of culture is always an integral part of a hidden curriculum. With the innovations in the area of critical pedagogy and bilingual education, the traditional methods of teaching culture in the foreign language classroom have been found a little outdated and monotonous. Therefore, there is no scope for a focus on formal culture and passive learning. Instead, the integration of local culture and active/involved learning is the prime focus.

In order to ensure effective communication with a focus in the area of the target language pedagogy, foreign language students should be facilitated to be part of the teaching-learning process. It can be achieved by including the local culture so that the target learners can feel, touch and smell the contents taught to them.

3.4. Relevant and effective Materials

It is indeed important to select and implement those features of the culture/literature/society that don't contradict with the local culture. The following food presences and shopping can be included to teach how to purchase, how to ask for something or mannerism etc.



Fig 6: Ladies at McDonald



Fig 7: Al-Baik family section

Al-Baik broast is a fascination for mot Saudis and expatriates living in those regions where the Al-Baik chain exists. And, if it is not available, Mc Donald has taken the lead. We can teach the learners about eating mannerism etc, however, we can warn them to avoid excess intake as it can lead to higher level of cholesterol.



Fig 8: favourite fast food

3.4.1. Literature integration

Literary works can be an effective means to develop the understanding of other cultures because they provide the readers with insights of other cultures without having to visit the real place.



Fig 9: Local literature/information

Carter (1995) points out: Literature is the surest means of understanding a culture and language, therefore, the students should read novels, read and watch plays, read short stories, poems from other cultures. However, one

should not forget the linguistic fact that we can't ignore the local literature if available in the target language. Comparative literature approach and bilingual/translation strategies can be equally effective if managed efficiently by the teacher/educator.

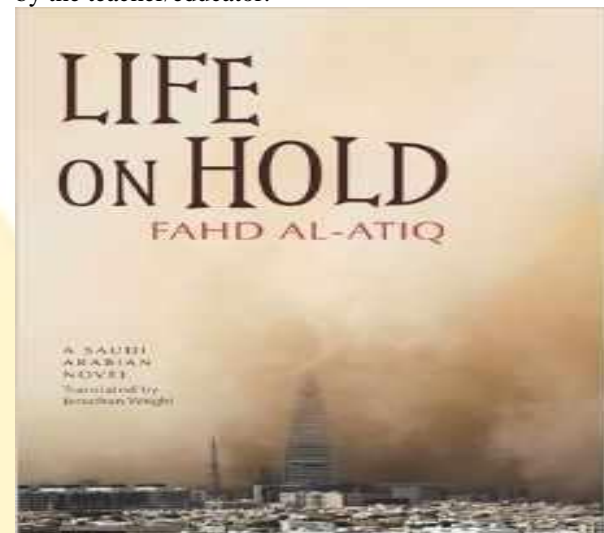


Fig 10: culture based story

3.4.2. Culture and history based Film

Films and television facilitate the learners to perceive learning behaviors that are not obvious in the prescribed books. And, even if these are integrated, no one can deny the fact that Films and TV programs are more impressive ways of affecting the learners behavior in general and learning in particular. Herron et al (1999) studied that students achieved significant gains in overall cultural knowledge after watching videos and other learning sources.

3.4.3. Culture based Moral stories

It is felt that if we incorporate the culture based moral stories, the learning may not be tough for the students. It is because of the fact that the learners are aware of the stories, however learn in the target language (English).

4. THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

Literature on the integration of culture is available, however the connection of local(L1) culture and foreign language teaching is a major focus of the present study. It is still a new area in the arena of language research in general.

A literature review shows that cultural elements have practically been included even from the early phase of SL/FL teaching. Sysoyev & Donelson (2002) explain that during the first decades of the 20th century researchers discussed the importance and possibilities of including cultural components into SL/FL curriculum.

Research studies and contributions such as those of Byram (1989, 2002) and Kramsch (1993; 2001) supported the relationship of ESL/EFL teaching and culture based teaching. Growth of English as an international language requires integration of culture in general in the EFL teaching-learning environment.

4.1. Culture in the Context of Language Teaching

There are many factors that prove the existing bond between the language and literature. Culture and language are inseparable. Politzer (as cited in Brooks, 1960) points out: 'we must be interested in the study of culture not because we necessarily want to teach the culture of the other country', but because we have to teach it. If we teach language without the local context in which it is likely to operate, the teaching may prove to be quite boring, irrelevant and un-contextual which may not yield any results.

In this regard, Brown (1994) emphasizes "... a language is a part of culture and a culture is a part of a language. The two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture" (p. 164). Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication takes place among the target group members. (p. 3).

It has been found that cultural learning can be effective in increasing the learners' motivation, and can be greatly useful in the entire learning process. Culture can positively reinforce the teaching-learning as felt by Hammerly (1982) that the target culture when teaching the target language piques the interest of students and acts as a motivator.

The issue of the inclusion of culture in foreign language teaching arguably began with the writings of Malinowski in 1923 after Sapir, an anthropologist-linguist, declared that "...language does not exist apart from culture." (Sapir, 1921, p. 206). However, this had little impact in language education until the 1970s, with a principle of the „communicative revolution“ that "...language teaching should take greater account of the way that language worked in the real world and try to be more responsive to the needs of learners in their efforts to acquire it." (Howatt. 2004, p. 326).

While talking about the effect of the communicative approach to language teaching, it was recommended to address the learner's need not only for learning grammar but for being able to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate manner. (Byram et al., 2002, p. 4). This would require making culture an integral part of language education.(p. 18). Such perceptions focus on the current communicative methods of second language teaching generally view language as a means of bridging an information gap. (Corbett, 2003, p. 1)

It has been noticed that an intercultural approach to language teaching has brought progress with a more thorough integration of culture with the understanding that culture is the core of language learning/acquisition. (Lange et al., 1998, p. ii, original emphasis).

5. METHODOLOGY

This exploratory study involved 15 teachers of KAU Community college, Jeddah (KSA) and 25 teachers teaching English in different parts of the world especially the middle east and India. The selection of the EFL/ESL

teachers across the world was done on the basis of the social and professional networking sites such as *Linkedin*, *researchgate* and *facebook*.

5.1 Data Collection and Analysis

A self developed questionnaire was administered on two sample: the KAU-Community college, Jeddah (KSA), and teachers of EFL/ESL having connections with the investigator on personal basis as well via professional/ social networking.

5.2. Teachers' Perceptions of the Significance of Culture in Language Learning

The data elicited from the questionnaire (Appendix-A) showed that the KAU teachers were pretty positive about the integration of the local culture/context in the target language (English) classroom. Almost each aspect of the questionnaire reflected that the integration of local culture leads to better teaching-learning experience. It leads to an interpretation that the learning of the target language should be well connected to the local culture in the form of literature.

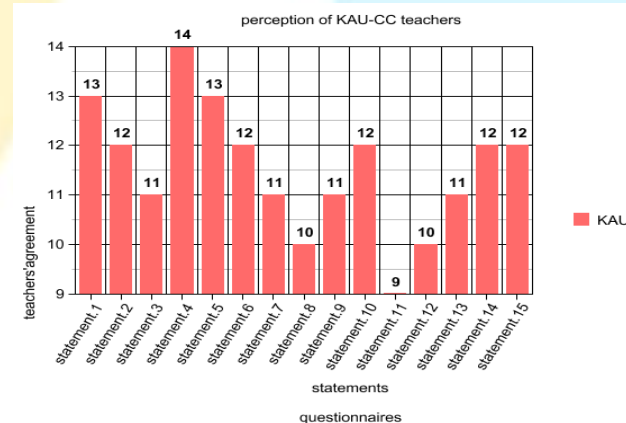


Fig 11: teachers' perception(Appendix-A)

The analysis of data gathered from the teachers of EFL/ESL(other than the KAU teachers) showed similar trend that the teachers are in favour of integrating the local culture. The reasons may be of varied types which follow in the discussions below.

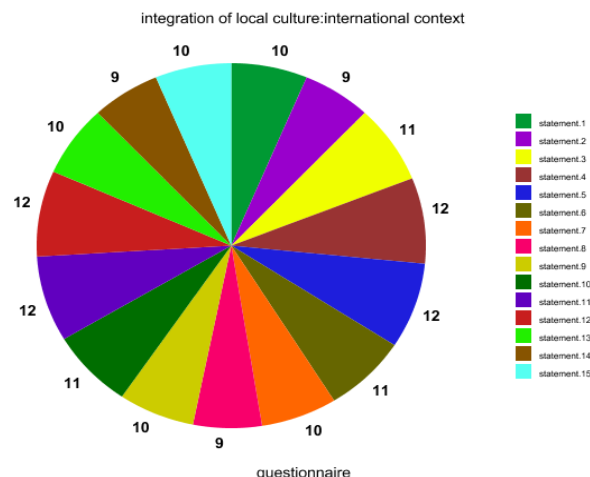


Fig 12: EFL teachers' consensus on culture integration

6. DISCUSSIONS

Culture is Significant in Foreign Language Study- The participants' responses lead to the idea that teaching-learning through the local culture in the foreign language classroom play a crucial role. In addition to the fact that the culture integration is important, it was also found (through existing literature) that target language culture integration is essentially helpful, however, not in the context of EFL and in those places that are characterized by the term 'restricted society' that follow certain religious-moral norms. There are many contexts and levels of culture integration such as teaching about target language culture, teaching language through culture and teaching through cross-cultural perspectives. (Meyer 1990, 157) contends that teaching about culture, and doing so explicitly when working with adults, is imperative because intercultural competence is not a „natural“ or „automatic“ result of foreign language teaching.

The integration of local culture is supposed to facilitate the learners through and in the following aspects: contextual learning, learners' emotional concern, less learning burden and active/participative Learning scenario.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The findings in this study illustrated that the teachers have positive attitude towards integration of local culture. The findings also implied that culture oriented teaching can be more effective than a teaching without a localized context. In this study, it was analysed that the teachers' perception indicated and directed the researcher to support the hunch (based on real teaching experience) that culture based teaching leads to greater involvement of the target culture. By doing so, the learners focus on understanding the language aspects rather than the contents derived from the foreign culture.

8. IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the present study indicated that culture integration is quite essential for meaningful learning. This implied that through local culture integration, we can ensure better and easier learning experience. The students will be able to feel integrated with the teaching in the class as they will feel comfortable from the perspective of local/home context.

8. SCOPE OF FUTURE RESEARCH

As it is an exploratory study, it should be borne in mind that there are always some gaps between the present research and the expected one. The gap can well be filled in by further studies which would be worthwhile to investigate deeper into the similar issues.

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Appendix-A

Teachers' Perception on Culture Integration

Name: (optional)

S. No.	Statements	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
1	I have you been teaching English for more than 5 years.			
2	I use learners' first language in my EFL/ESL class.			
3	I use British culture for teaching English.			
4	The learners don't understand many things as they are not aware of the EFL context.			
5	Teaching English should be supported by the local culture.			
6	Contextual teaching is more effective.			
7	Real life situations are more useful.			
8	I integrate local culture to explain the learning scenario.			
9	Religious issues should be considered important while integrating these in English learning material.			
10	We should not teach those things which affect the religious/moral practice of the learners.			
11	The teacher is accountable for imparting value based education as a part of hidden curriculum.			
12	I try to resolve if there is an issue of cultural clash.			
13	The purpose of teaching language is not based on teaching of the cultural background of that language.			
14	Foreign culture is usually distractive for young learners.			
15	There is a need to follow integrated curriculum.			