Impact of the Target Culture on Foreign Language Learning:

A Case Study

L'IMPACT DE LA CULTURE CIBLE SUR L'APPRENTISSAGE DES LANGUES ÉTRANGÈRES:

UNE ÉTUDE DE CAS

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Abstract: This study provides the profile of college student of English in advanced levels of study in the English Department of a College of Languages & Translation, Saudi Arabia. Utilising qualitative data collection methods, the responses and scholastic history of the student provide insights into his personal qualities and aptitudes as a native-like speaker of English as proven by CEPA scores and direct communication with the case in English. The story of the student indicates a strong influence of the second language culture on the learning of this language. The case has been studied and presented against a rich research and literature backdrop that explored culture and language concepts and their interrelatedness from different perspectives, emphasising the significance of acculturation as part of second/foreign language acquisition/learning. The paper ends on notes and implications for pedagogy and further research in culture and language in EFL learning settings.
Key words: Culture; Language; Acculturation; EFL; Sapir Whorf Hypothesis; Socio-linguistic identity; Case study

Resumé: Cette étude fournit le profil d'étudiant universitaire d'anglais dans les niveaux avancés d'étude dans une université de langues et la traduction du département anglais,de l'Arabie Saoudite. En utilisant des méthodes de collecte de données qualitatives, les réponses et l'histoire scolastique de l'étudiant fournit des aperçus dans ses qualités personnelles et aptitudes comme un orateur semblable d'anglais comme prouvé par le grand nombre CEPA et dirige la communication avec le cas en anglais. L'histoire de l'étudiant indique une influence forte de la deuxième culture de langue en

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apprenant de cette langue. Le cas qui a été étudié et présenté contre une recherche riche et un fond de littérature qui a exploré la culture et des concepts de langue et leur été en corrélation de perspectives différentes, soulignant la signification d'acculturation comme la partie d'acquisition de seconde langue étrangère. Le journal finit sur des notes et des implications pour la pédagogie et la nouvelle recherche dans la culture et la langue dans l'installation de l'enseignement de EFL.

Mots-clés: Culture; Langue; Acculturation; EFL; Sapir Whorf Hypothèse; Identité sociolinguistique; Etude de cas

INTRODUCTION

It is axiomatic that the relationship between culture and language is quite entwined, the latter being an important feature of the former, and each affects the other (Ando, 1997; Humphrey, 1997; Harumi, 2002; Eoyang, 2003; Tanaka, 2006; Bahumaid, 2008; Jalilifar and Assi, 2008; Janzen, 2008; Tochon, 2009). Hall (1981), in token of that, suggests that language is "one of the dominant threads in all cultures" (p.36). However, culture also impacts language in one way or another. This study has been initiated on the assumption that culture not only affects the meanings of words and concepts in a language (Franklin, et al., 2008; Perlovsky, 2009), but it also affects the attitudes towards and learning of a language, as deduced from a case study reported here.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A popular theory – the Sapir Whorf Hypothesis (SWH) – has explained the interrelations between language and culture. According to this theory, conceptual contents of languages and cultures are significantly determined by words and their semiotic manifestations and semantic differences; and these 'cultural meanings' could be borrowed among languages and exchanged among cultures (Sapir, 1985; Whorf, 1956; Pinker, 2007; Perlovsky, 2009). The 'Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis' assumed that language influences and determines our thinking and cognition, and that the relative distinctions in one language may not be available in another language (Whorf, 1956; Sapir, 1985; Perlovsky, 2007; Franklin, et al., 2008). But this hypothesis has been criticised in terms of whether these relations between cultures and languages are causal or correlational. However, there is established research proving the existence of this language-culture relationship, indicating that culture colours semantic and semiotic manifestations of language (Perlovsky, 2007; 2009; Franklin, et al., 2008).

The recognition of the importance of culture as such has acquired a widely acknowledged position in second/foreign language acquisition theory, for culture has no longer been seen as "an 'add-on' but rather as an 'integral part' of second/foreign language learning" (Courchene, 1996, p. 1) in the second language classroom (Atkinson, 1999; Byram, 1989; Duff & Uchida, 1997; Kramsch, 1993; 1998; 2003; Kubota, 2003; Roberts, et al., 2001). Accordingly, second/foreign language learning must not be separated from acculturation, now that "learning new languages opens students' minds to the ways of other peoples and increases the opportunities for cross-cultural understanding" (Citron, 1995, p. 105).

In this mode, culture was brought to the foreground as it became a significant element of the English language teaching (ELT) curriculum. The inclusion of culture as a significant component of language presentation to its learners has been overtly stated in many TEFL materials as one of the major goals of foreign language instruction. For example, several authors (Santos & Suleiman, 1993; Cortazzi and Jin, 1999; Bahumaid, 2008; Bao-he, 2010) have analysed specimens of language learning materials, eventually urging for the development of an intra-curricular cultural awareness constituent element reflecting the foreign language culture in order to induce positive attitudes towards the foreign language and its native speakers as one of the general goals of foreign language teaching.

Therefore, some language theorists have maintained that teaching language without teaching its culture is quite impossible (Valdes 1995; Byram, 1997; Byram & Fleming 1998). As Duff and Uchida (1997) write,

> "Whether they are aware of it or not, language teachers are very much involved in the transmission of culture, and each selection of videos, newspaper clippings, seating plans, activities and so on has social, cultural, and educational significance" (p.476).

By the same token, language educators have now, for more than five decades, been concerned with acculturation as a process concomitant to language learning (e.g., Damen, 1987; Seelye, 1984; Ilieva, 2005; Shardakova & Pavlenko, 2004; Deters, 2009; Cronjé, 2011).

However, research tapping into the relationship between second/foreign language culture and language education indicates that language learning materials and foreign language teachers are influential bearers of the target culture in the second/foreign language classroom (Damen, 1987), as they sincerely seek to convey many of the features of the target culture and socio-linguistic aspects of the target language into the classroom (Byram, 1989; Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Shardakova & Pavlenko, 2004).

PROBLEM OF THE STUDY

Against this backdrop of prior research, the current study addresses the case of a Saudi EFL college student, who has been reported as a successful language user from a communicative perspective (the case study participant was administered the Communicative English Proficiency Assessment - CEPA at the inception of the study). The student was born in a mid-western American state when his parents were doing their PhDs some 22 years ago. The case study participant lived with his parents for six years there. Then he came to Saudi Arabia to settle here and joined a British school for a couple of years, but moved to a public governmental school later.

The study explores the effects of being exposed to the target culture of the foreign language and how it affects foreign language learning. It further explores the reminiscences of the case participant as how the beliefs and cultural awareness and identity earlier developed towards English in a native country of English changed and developed the attitudes of the participant as well as his inclinations and abilities to use the language communicatively with some higher level of cultural awareness.

METHOD OF RESEARCH

Method

This research will follow a descriptive research design by utilizing an in-depth interview to investigate the socio-cultural encounters of the Saudi EFL learner in the college of Languages and Translation retrospectively in his old socio-cultural environment of an English speaking community, and how this environment assisted him to gain access to better learning English for communicative purposes.

Descriptive research entails "observation of phenomena and analysis of data with as little restructuring of the situation or environment under scrutiny as possible" (Lauer and Asher, 1988). Richard Beach (1992) claims that a descriptive research design must be used if the research questions account for close examination and analysis of variables. Methodologically, there has been a more holistic approach towards the detection of ideas from case study interview and transcripts and questionnaire findings with regard to the perceptions of the participant as to the effects of culture on language learning.

Design

The research design follow interpretive traditions. This will have two implications for my research. 1) My orientation will be exploratory – one that tries to tell what is going on in particular situations to understand the individual orientation of the people concerned. The data has, thus, been structured as little as possible by the researcher's own prior assumptions. In this vein, Ellis (2001) suggests that interpretive research

endeavours to understand how the social context works through participants' perspectives in terms of their natural surroundings. Ellis considers this tradition to be 'practical in nature' and valid "when it passes the test of participant confirmation" (ibid.)

Unlike experimental studies, no control groups or experimental treatments have been manipulated in this study. In fact, this study has utilised a case study design with combination of data collection strategies such as observations, questionnaire, interviews to extend theory and research by investigating the role of the target language culture in the development of non-native English speakers' communicative competence and overall language development.

Instruments

Background data was gathered through a recorded interview using a semi-structured interview guide and a Background Information Questionnaire. The interview guide consisted of biographical questions and other items tapping into self-esteem, motivation, adjustment to the target culture, and attitudes, all conducted in English. The CEPA was used to measure communicative language use and overall language comprehension.

Procedure

Before the interview was conducted, a CEPA was administered to Ahmed, the participant in the case study. Instructions for the interview were given in English and the right to respond or eschew any question on the interview was given to the interviewee. All interview questions were answered in English fully in a very good English accent. Decoding analysis included third person singular verbs, long vowel sounds, and blends. These findings were referenced to the participant's behaviours observed or shared during my teaching him in class for two consecutive semesters in the College of languages and Translation.

RESULTS

CEPA Test data revealed full comprehension in the literal, inferential and critical levels of the studied case, also indicating a high communicative competence in English. Ahmed obtained 98 percent in the overall score on the CEPA. Furthermore, during my classroom observations of his academic performance in writing and reading, the courses I taught him, he revealed a higher performance level as well as a rigid grammatical competence showed in his good reading and writing skills that far excel his peers in so many distinctive aspects. Phonologically, his speaking skills are maturely developed, and his speech is clear and intelligible. It was a surprise that Ahmed's reading comprehension was high given that English input only comes from attending classes before I knew he was born and schooled for seven years in native-speaker milieus.

The case of Ahmed: Background

Ahmed (a pseudonym chosen for our case at his request) has grown up for the first six years in a Mid-western state in America and started learning English as early as his tender years. When he came back to Abha, he joined a British school. But after two academic years, he abandoned it, joining the mainstream public education of Saudi Arabia. After he graduated from the secondary school, he joined university, majoring in English language and translation studies.

His academic life

Ahmed and was a typical A-plus student right from Grade 1. He was distinguished in English and won several awards in writing contests and other activities during school days of the elementary, middle and secondary school stages. He excelled academically in these stages, nearly doing well above his peers especially in English. He contributed his excellence to his family background and his father's plan to set him on a major of English linguistics and translation:

Because my dad and mom were sent to the USA on a scholarship, I was sent to a kindergarten to be taken care of – actually in a day-care centre when my parents were in the university. …When, I came back to Abha, I went to the elementary school at which I received my early education. It was a British school, mainly populated by British teachers and foreigners coming from the US, Australia, Britain, India, Pakistan, and some were Arabs. Even then, being in that elementary school in a small town in the suburbia of a nearby industrial and military township, the school still carries respectability and status. It was then that I sensed how important and highly regarded the school was in this small town. I think that was when the seed was sown in me to be a proficient user of English someday. But, my parents decided to send me to a governmental Saudi public school to receive rigorous training in Arabic and Qur'an.

Socio-linguistic Identity as an EFL learner

Ahmed regarded his early years in the USA, and the two years in a British school in Khamis Mushait as a turning point in his linguistic identity and his consequent English language learning. He had developed a knack for English learning, and a native-like accent probably developed in his early years of study.

His good English at that age inspired in him self-confidence and a burning desire to continue learning English even at college level.

One day in English class, the teacher, Ms. Mary, asked me to stand up in front of the class. She wanted the class to clap for me because I was the most improved student in the monthly test, even though I did not even get the highest grade in class. In the previous test, I had got only 100 points, but I got 95 points this time. I was so touched and inspired by the recognition, and this "standing-up" served as a motivation for my learning attitude in the following days. I thought I would study for Ms. Marie and let her know that her expectation of me was totally justified. So, you see how important and what a great influence a teacher can be.

From that day, Ahmed started to develop his identity as an English language learner; serious learning was worth a try and would be valued. That is the belief he held for teaching; his teachers wanted him and other students to like her and understand that she valued their improvement even just a little bit.

Following this incident, which was indelible in his memory, he built the foundation of his characteristic attributes; he said,

I have developed since then a sense of academic responsibility; i learned values in my own culture as well as values of the English speaking peoples; indeed, I developed an international vision, and language ability.

In this township, he recalled that his peers were Saudis as well as students from other Arab countries, especially Egyptians and Sudanis.

Other than the British school, pre-university education was strongly grounded in Islamic teachings and Arabic language and traditions; the principal and most of the teachers were graduates of Sharia and Islamic education.

In this religious atmosphere, teachers were students' role models on learning and daily life. Ahmed believes the good parts of his character were shaped during that time. His first language is Arabic, and his major in college was English, but to him, both languages stood almost equally important.

Actually, I used English more than Arabic; Arabic is my native tongue, but at home, I am used to talking to especially my dad in English. However, Arabic was our instructional language till the college level when I majored then in English ... I still had a vivid impression of a American lady, Ms. Marie, who taught us English reading. There were two tasks every day: get the main idea and explain the vocabulary in English. She called on each one of us and took turns asking questions. If you did not know the answer when she called on you, you kept standing; then, second time round, another question. If you failed again, you had to stand in front of the class. Most of my classmates tried hard to call sick and escape her class. We hated her, though I had to admit she built us the most concrete foundation in English reading. I previewed her reading

seriously and have had the habit of previewing classes since then. It was not a happy memory but it was a precious and valuable experience.

At this point I reflect on my experiences that I have had in Ahmed's classes during my teaching him Reading and Comprehension II and Writing III. His learning behaviours significantly differed from his peers in my classes. He was a prodigy, compared to other students.

However, in both classes, he stood out exuding a quiet confidence, relating to staff and classmates extremely well, and especially helping resolve difficult interpersonal issues among his classmates in an open-minded inclination quite different from his Arabian peers to whom he belongs racially, but perhaps not culturally as I could see. This also appeared in his interview.

> I believe my early experience with English in a native-speaker environment empowered me, so to speak. I feel proud of the period in my life when I grew up for some years in America. When my teachers in college allow me to speak about my cultural experience with English, I think I do motivate my peers to study English and to think of further studying it in the UK or the US or even in countries as far and exotic as Australia or New Zealand. I also feel proud of studying in the British school in my city. I wish my parents had let me continue my pre-university education in this school.

It also appeared from interviews that he reminisces good old days which serve as motivators for learning English. His awareness of the English culture – how people live and communicate, how they learn and work all helped him to form a positive attitude towards learning English.

> People speaking the English language are different from us here ... For them, work is work .. Leisure is fun time. This taught me a lesson, that when I learn not only English but any other subject, I must do that seriously and devotedly. English is not like Arabic; for example, when you have a message to convey to others, you don't have to 'circumlocute'. You give out your message as directly and explicitly as you may like. I think Arabic is more bombastic, and the style is turgid and embellished.

Ahmed related that he wanted to get exposed to the culture of the English language. His learning experience was in accordance with Schumann's (1978) "Acculturation model," which states that learners will acquire the target language to the degree that they acculturate to the target language group; clearly, success in acculturation affects students' ability to succeed academically. By listening to the BBC radio and the Voice of America, he developed a close contact with the target culture and the people he listened to on the radio which led to his successful learning experience in an EFL setting.

> I prefer to listen to the BBC radio and the VoA rather than to watch TV because listening is better than viewing and listening. I think listening to the radio is more informative, more acculturating ... I need to concentrate in order to comprehend because there no additional visual cues available on the radio. The radio is also very informative than TV channels. It also introduces more of the English cultures to me as never available on TV.

Ahmed believes the most important factor in learning the culture of English is to be exposed to continual culture-rich content and rich sources of acculturation; as he said, the radio was very much effective in his case.

> It is to my opinion that I have slowly, but surely adapted myself and virtually settled myself into the English cultural environment by listening to the BBC and the VoA, and all cultural elements that come with these two rich sources - one that gives you all what you wanna know about America and all the same about English as spoken in England. Sort of "Buy 2 Get 1 Free kind of thing! hahaha.

It looks from the interview that Ahmed did not only acquire the target culture associated with English which helped him more with speaking the language fluently and creatively, but it also instilled him with very favourable and positive attitudes towards the native speakers of the language and an innate impetus to learn English.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to show the target culture's impact on an EFL college senior during his learning EFL. A perusal of the responses of Ahmed and his development history corresponds to the significant role that the target culture played in his language development on two levels: sharing an understanding about and building on his past experience in the US and the British school in his town. Ahmed's heightened cultural awareness of the English language as it is spoken in its indigenous milieus and his mature communicative responses in difficult situations relate to the influence of his early identity/subculture which he earlier developed as well as to the family atmosphere and parenting style which provided a nurturing milieu for his subsequent linguistic development.

Any EFL classroom in a non-native EFL learning institution, where the target cultural features of English often lack, demands a level of acculturation and building cultural competency on the part of the teachers. The notion that language allows culture to exist, that is, if culture is allowed to play a role at all, is central to the argument. Sociologists describe how culture and language significantly crisscross with each other through cumulative human experience, shared past, shared understanding of the past and future, inducing to effective participatory interactions in interlocutory situations (Henslin 2005). Therefore, when language is used so that it allows culture to flourish in the student's classroom environment, it provides opportunities for learners to move beyond their immediate experiences (Brooks, 1969; Citron, 1995; Abu-Rabia, 1996; 2003; Eoyang, 2003; Ilieva, 2005; Al-Dosari, 2010). In a culturally sensitive classroom, when EFL teachers allow past experiences to be talked about and when it adopts that atmosphere, it leads students to develop a shared understanding about the significance of those experiences to relating culture learning to language learning as it is in the case of Ahmed who have been very motivating for his peers and colleagues to study English in a native-speakerist milieu. This is also commensurate with related literature (Bessmertnyi, 1994; Kramsch, 1983; 1998; 2003; Kubota, 2003; Bennett, 1993; Bennett, et al., 2003; Peterson & Coltrane, 2003; Santos & Suleiman, 1993; Harumi, 2002; Hendson, 2005; Göbel & Helmke, 2010; Zaid, 2011) When teachers, being culturally-sensitive, facilitate sharing of ideas about the past and future, that interaction leads to shared understandings of experiences in highly motivating, culturally-sensitive fashions (Bennett, 1993). Finally when teachers provide opportunities for language that allows discussion and participation, the shared experience facilitates exponential learning. First, the focus on target culture acquisition (TCA) might be premature because of the imperceptibility of the effects of the native culture (C_1) impact. Second, the circumstances under which many EFL learners come to contact with the English language are entwined and varied, circumstantially conducive to strong emotions including common fears expressed by some EFL students that learning English will take away the value from or is perceived as an abandonment of their L_1, Arabic, in this context, especially in cases when students are not exposed to the culture of English as they are presented with the language *per se*. Prior research confirmed the existence of such fears and anxieties which function as impediments to culture learning (Zaid, 2008; 2011; Mekheimer & Al-dosari, 2011 forthcoming). Third, the inclusion of the target culture in an L_2 classroom both in learning materials and instructional strategies may just provide the right platform to connect with the students in a real communicative way (Humphrey, 1997). Therefore, there needs to be more curricular options for inducing rich and insidious cultural content to be presented side by side with the language to the L_2 students both in classroom curricular materials and in extracurricular materials intended for ELT.

CONCLUSION

Based on a rich theoretical framework done in my college on the effects of culture learning (See for example, Zaid, 2008; 20111; Al-dosari, 2010; Göbel & Helmke, 2010; Mekheimer & al-dosari, 2011), it is possible to overstate the findings in such a small sample of an individual case study. Nevertheless, it seems possible to me that these insights and arguments put forth might be brought to bear on broader considerations of giving legitimacy to using the target language culture as a learning platform for EFL learning. If this warrants further research, later studies might take into consideration feelings of identity threats and subjectivity. Since the current state of EFL learning practices promote the subjective resistance to the target language culture (C1) in Saudi Arabia by refusing to teach many of the interconnected

socio-cultural features of English via literature teaching, for example, this ignorance of the target culture will continue to serve as a great impediment to language learning in Saudi Arabia (Zaid, 2008; 2011; Mekheimer & Al-dosari, 2011). Providing simulated opportunities for EFL students to develop their powers of culture acquisition side by side with foreign language learning in ways that that promote self-esteem, positive attitudes towards the target culture, and motivation can be greatly achieved through recognition and validation of the target culture.

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