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The cultural effects on L2 learners (Iranian)

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ABSTRACT

The present research tries to express the effects of culture on the learners of English language and shows the differences between the learners who study special English books with cultural issues (Interchange) and those not yet treated the books. The results indicate that learning English language by text books, extensively modifies the perception of learners in cultural issues and they conceptualize the world as expressed in these books.

Key words: interculture- Interchange

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1. INTRODUCTION

The culture in each society is unique and it consists of language, norms, values, beliefs, religion, social gatherings, rules, methods, statements and subcultures (Manohar, 2008). The most important specification of culture is that it’s allocated to the society where it has been formed and has got its essence (Vidal, 1925). We can claim that all social institutions especially educational ones create culture and are products of such societies. Since learners are interested in learning a language intrinsically or extrinsically, then Cultural awareness, acceptance of cultural differences and interest in the specific culture of the language being taught, as well as intercultural topics in general, are the central and main goals of intercultural learning in EFL classroom. Teachers need to know the interactive nature of culture and transfer this idea to their students, because of this reason; the cultural learning about another country and culture has been emphasized. They can take their time to develop interaction skills within the safety of the classroom situation. In order to sharpen students’ awareness of different perspectives, the promotion of reflection about cultural perspectives is considerable.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

If languages are of any importance at all in the eyes of the Government, many scholars believe that it is ‘purely as a support for business and economic development (Worton, 2009:6), with possibly only a limited number of languages considered ‘strategically important’ (lane and worton, 2011:6). Such attitudes might explain the decline observed over the last two decades in the specialist study of languages to emphasis on the study of the associated cultures (e.g. through text book studies). Culture is usually viewed as an ingrained mode of behavior and perception inextricably bounded with language. It can satisfy biological and psychological needs formulated as conceptual networks or mental constructs of realities (Brown, 2007). As Halliday (1978) says, mental constructs or semantic networks are sociologically grounded and need to be realized externally through the medium of language. As such, language is asocial semantic used to symbolically encode and carry over the under pinning socio-cultural values. It must be noted that Halliday tends to transcend this limit by suggesting that ‘language neither drives culture nor is driven by it (p.296). He believes that the relation is not one of cause and effect but rather one of realization.

Learning a foreign language clearly not depends on the interplay of culture and language. Although some scholars (e.g. whorf, 1956; Lakoff, 2004) emphasize on inseparable entity of the two different cases such as, lexical, textual, ideational and etc. since learning a language without knowing it, s related culture will fail, learners can’t make a communicative competence. This opposite force even grows more intense some times in regard to the English language, portraying a totally negative picture of the language with lots of unpredictable consequences (chatterjee, 1993; Kin, 2002; Yarmohammadi, 2004). It is claimed that text books are always carriers of values and as Cortazzi and Jin (1999) maintain, text books and teachers, resources, maps, authorities constitute a major source of culture with different orientations. Then text books should have the knowledge of language and target culture simultaneously.

Culture learning is a process through which language learners experimentally come to perceive, interpret and feel the world around and create meaning between cultural representatives (Brown, 2007). It is noticeable that the young learners are
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ANALYSIS

more interested in cultural effects of the instructional materials. This finding is in line with Vygotsky's (1962) claim that thought reflects conceptualized actuality and in this case the learners have conceptualized the realities through the lessons of a foreign language. The development of Intercultural competence, teaching its topics and the effect of teachers' intercultural experience on the quality of their instruction in the context of English as a foreign language are so important. Teachers can practice intercultural topics by the use of precise external directives for particular lessons. Knowledge about other cultures, openness and empathy toward other cultures, critical involvement with intercultural topics, the readiness to put one's own convictions into perspective and the ability to deal with people from different cultures are to be promoted (Gobel & Hesse, 2004). According to Muller-Jacquier (2004), there are different approaches to learning about another culture. First of all, contact situation approach that students have direct contact with the other culture. Second, cognitive approach in which cognitive insights and behavioral implication about the other culture are taught in class. Third, virtual contrast approach in which a virtual interaction between own and target culture is presented in order to enable students to evaluate this (and the target culture itself) from different cultural perspectives and finally linguistic awareness approach in which cultural differences are taught by discussing linguistic differences in class. Trainers present a selection of case studies that allow different interpretations and solutions in terms of disparate cultural orientations (Bhagat and Prien, 1996).

In general, instruction in open education settings has to be engaging and personally relevant for students, nurturing a deeper understanding of contents (Sharan, 2009). To increase intercultural learning in the foreign language classroom, considering learners' intercultural sensitivity is suggested by Bennett et al. (2003). It means choosing the content of lessons based on students' intercultural preconditions. For more advanced learners, challenging topics and for less advanced learners, topics on similarities between cultures and differences in cultural products should be suggested. Empirical analyses of the intercultural EFL class shows that learners with higher cognitive skills rather than those with lower cognitive skills are more benefited from intercultural instruction. It is claimed that the quality of instruction has the greatest effect on students' learning and spending time is an important factor of learning effectiveness, especially in intercultural instruction in EFL classroom. The other important factors based on (Hattie, 2009; Mujis & Reynolds, 2007) are classroom management, a good classroom climate and clear and comprehensive instructions. Also, it is mentioned that the importance of the intercultural experience of teachers like teachers' contacts to English speaking countries has influence on intercultural learning outcomes. It should to be considered that students' intercultural attitudes, as well as their cognitive learning preconditions, influence their intercultural learning development (Bennett et al, 2003; Gardner and Lambert, 1972 Gobel, 2007).

3. PARTICIPANTS AND SETTING
For the purpose of the study two groups of English language learners (38 students) in 5 English language institutes in Yasuj were chosen as the population of the current study. The first group consisted of 22 male learners, with the age range of 8-13, who varied in their school grades from primary school 3rd year to junior high school 3rd year. The first group was supposed to start the 1st volume of interchange series. The second group involved 16 male and ranged in their age from 11-15. The second group comprised students from 2nd year of junior high school to the 2nd year of senior high school. The second group had started learning English through interchange series about two years before and were about to finish the 3rd volume.

4. INSTRUMENTS
In this study a questionnaire consisted of 5 questions was used. In each of which a general topic was introduced. The questionnaire was supposed to unfold the participant's explanations and was administered on two different days, first to the 1st group and then to the 2nd group. Before starting the job, learners were briefed on how to do the task. They were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of information received in order to help with the responsibility to be fully discharged and also to increase the response validity of the inquiry.

5. DATA COLLECTION
The data was collected primarily using interviews, supported by questionnaire in English. The interviews were conducted at a time and location and lasted approximately 30 minutes. The questionnaire consisted of 5 open ended questions (Table 1) which were linked to the students' interview questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Questionnaire questions:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-</td>
<td>What does culture mean to you?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2-</td>
<td>What does language mean to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-</td>
<td>What is the relationship between culture and language?</td>
</tr>
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<td>4-</td>
<td>List all the factors that you believe effect on learning language?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5-</td>
<td>What are their ideas about some cultural issues such as music and clothes?</td>
</tr>
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</table>

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS
This study tends to show the culture-language interface. To that end, two groups of English language learners were asked to express their perceptions of 5 mentioned questions in the questionnaire. The findings indicate that the textbooks have an important role in learners' cultural perception of the world. We observed that two groups stand in stark contrast with each other. Surprisingly enough, both groups displayed much conformity before and after the instruction in a distinct yet homogenized manner.

7. CONCLUSION
The results of this study suggest that learning a foreign language is to a large extent a way of socially constructing certain identities. Though it is not a magic carpet ride to another culture (Robins, 1996), culture learning is a process through which language learners experientially come to perceive, interpret and feel the world around and create meaning between cultural representatives (Brown, 2007). This finding is in line with Vygotsky's (1962) claims that thought reflects conceptualized actuality and in this case the learners have conceptualized the realities through the lenses of a foreign language. Based on the results, we may also refuse to accept an ecumenical approach to culture (Atkinson, 1999), which is to emphasize the global uniformity of cultural spectrum. Despite the mentioned interpretation, it is necessary to remember that there are lots of factors such as age, gender, family background, and etc. which may affect the results.
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