

STUDENTS' RESPONSIVENESS TO CULTURALLY MEDIATED INSTRUCTION IN EFL CLASSES: CASE OF THIRD YEAR LMD STUDENTS AT DJILLALI LIABES UNIVERSITY, SIDI BEL ABBES

استجابة الطلبة مع تعليم الثقافة في أقسام اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية : حالة طلبة السنة الثالثة

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ABSTRACT:

The present study attempts to investigate the effect of culture on the learning process and measure the levels of students' responsiveness to such contents. Furthermore, the study attempts to look for the suitable didactical techniques that may facilitate the integration of culture into the EFL courses, and highlight the apparent connection between culture and language and how they can reflect successful language learning built on an emphasis on cultural awareness as one of the core elements that widen students' knowledge on all that is related to the foreign language. While gathering data for this research work, quantitative means were of great importance in extending the researcher's knowledge on the chosen topic. For instance, a questionnaire has been administered to third year students for the purpose of examining their awareness towards the significance of culture. The findings revealed that some of the difficulties encountered by the selected participants when attempting to learn the target language are mostly related to their lack of cultural awareness that leads to a failure to learn the foreign language.

Keywords:

Culture; cultural awareness; intercultural communication; responsiveness; culture-based courses

ملخص:

يهدف هذا البحث إلى معالجة الإشكالية المتعلقة بتأثير الثقافة على تعلم اللغة الانجليزية وذلك من خلال تحديد مدى استجابة الطلبة للمحتوى الثقافي كما يهدف إلى تحديد كيفية التطرق إلى المواضيع المتعلقة بالثقافة عن طريق الاستراتيجيات التي تصبو بطريقة أو بأخرى إلى تنمية الكفاءات التي تمكن من دمج المواضيع ذات المحتويات الثقافية في الأقسام التي تدرس فيها اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية وذلك من خلال البحث في مدى العلاقة بين اللغة والثقافة و نجاعة المنهجيات التي تهدف إلى خلق الكفاءات التي من شأنها تنمية الوعي ما بين الثقافات كعنصر فعال في إثراء رصيد الطلبة حول كل ما يتعلق باللغة الأجنبية. تم جمع المعلومات اللازمة عن طريق استبيان يرصد درجة اهتمام ووعي الطلبة بمدى أهمية الثقافة. أظهرت النتائج أن أغلب الصعوبات التي يواجهها الطلبة خلال تعلم اللغة الانجليزية متعلقة بقلة الوعي الثقافي التي تؤدي إلى صعوبات في تعلم اللغة الأجنبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

1. INTRODUCTION

Technological advances have increasingly introduced changes among communities and have brought people into contact; this creates a growing interest to widen one's skills of responding to intercultural situations. As far as learning foreign languages is concerned, the lack of familiarity with the cultures related to the target language may negatively impede the process of accumulating the knowledge needed to reach successful communication built upon understanding of otherness and tolerance. In recent decades, researchers are attempting to best satisfy students' needs regarding the language system as a whole believing that teaching a foreign language is inaccurate and incomplete without the integration of the related culture. In the light of what has been mentioned, the study attempts to provide standards that can be adopted in the university curriculum. It identifies a number of techniques that contribute to an effective English language instruction grounded on the development of cultural understanding and awareness.

2. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

It is obviously seen that culture is the mirror through which one can reflect social practices and behavioral norms. Accordingly, syllabus designers should create a multitude of opportunities for their learners to be in contact with the target culture i.e. the one that is related to the English-speaking countries. This can be realized through reinforcing the intercultural activities and dimensions that make them intercultural ethnographers who seek to discover otherness in a number of ways. In fact, the emergence of the communicative approach has stressed the importance of cultural knowledge in the foreign language classroom by creating real-life contexts and exposing learners to different communicative situations that make them compare and contrast the similarities and differences between their own and foreign cultures. For instance, to be able to reflect upon the characteristics of others, learners need first to be familiar with what is part of their own culture. Thus, the content of instruction should be designed in a way which develops learners' cross-cultural awareness.

2.1. CULTURE: DEFINITIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS

Throughout history, many scholars have tried to conceptualize definitions that cover any dimension related to culture. For instance, Trivonovich presents more than 450 different definitions of "culture" as a concept (as cited in Croft, 1980:550). Culture may be perceived as an integrated model of characteristics including language, traditions, values, relationships and classifications of social groups. Similarly, Moran (2001:24) proposed a definition that reflects five facets: products, practices, perspectives, communities, and persons. He announces that "culture is the evolving way of life of a group of persons, consisting of a shared set of practices associated with a shared set of products, based upon a shared set of perspectives on the world, and set within specific social contexts". It is a complex dimension encompassing knowledge, perceptions, beliefs, arts, laws, morals, customs, traditions, and any other skill acquired by social groups for the purpose of maintaining stability and creating a social identity. Lochman and Kappel (2008) perceive it as anything mixed up with related and different aspects such as religion, traditions, social norms, history, linguistic features, etc.

According to Moran (2001:4), "culture is the great achievement of people as reflected in their history, social institutions, works of art, architecture, music and literature". Similarly, Brown defines it as "a system of integrated patterns, most of which remain below the threshold of

consciousness, yet all of which govern human behavior just as surely as the manipulated strings of a puppet control its motions". (1994:123). In an attempt to enlarge the aforementioned definitions, Brislin (1990) announces that populations' cultural features shape their social identities and sense of membership. Those widely shared values and goal-directed activities help people identify themselves as members of the same cultural group.

2.2. DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE

Culture has been the subject of concern for many scholars. Robinson's study (1985) provides four definitions as an attempt to clearly and concisely define the concept: behaviorist, functionalist, cognitive and symbolic definitions. The behaviorist one is related to social behaviors (traditions and customs), the functionalist is concerned with the social functions of those behaviors in a given society (the rules and reasons for behaving), the cognitive reflects any process of interpreting data, ideas and concepts, whereas the symbolic definition considers culture as anything inherited consisting of meanings transmitted through history and represented through systematized symbols. Therefore, culture is represented in the form of traits that characterize social groups.

Adaskou et al (1990) distinguish four dimensions: the aesthetic one which includes cinema, music, literature and media, the sociological one which refers to family relationships, social rules, norms and customs, the semantic one which is related to the personal ideas and judgments that a specific group of inhabitants have towards different aspects and the pragmatic or sociolinguistic aspect which reflects knowledge, linguistic features and all that build successful social interactions. Another classification has been developed by Doyé (1999) who divides the term into two distinct dimensions: the first is concrete in its nature like tools, and architecture while the second is symbolized through abstract norms like ideas, beliefs, attitudes, values, etc. Thus, one may define culture in terms of thoughts, values and ideas that characterize a specific population and social products that design the way in which meaning is expressed and transmitted via communication.

2.3 LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Language is the medium through which one can convey meaning, human sentiments, considerations, requests and wishes using a set of combined letters, signs and signals. That verbal and non-verbal means of transforming ideas into sounds that express the intended meaning can be learned easily when correlated with other facets counting cultural characteristics. Thus, learning a non-native language without being in a frequent contact with its culture is deficient. As everybody knows, English is the most broadly spoken language throughout the world. Consequently, it starts to be used for different targets including trade, tourism, scientific researches and worldwide relationships. The question which arises is whether it is a necessity to teach culture by the side of English as a foreign language or there is no need to implement it. This raises great controversial negotiations among scholars on how to define culture for learners through linking it with language courses and focusing on paralinguistic features, and intercultural competencies along with linguistic or grammatical skills.

Kramsch (2001) stresses the idea that language is bound up with culture in different manners. In fact, it is inevitable to learn a language in isolation from its culture; thus, it is essential to raise teachers' appreciation of culture in educational contexts through supporting culture-based approaches and any instructional methodologies that emphasize grammatical structures along with social or cultural dimensions.

2.4 HISTORY OF CULTURE TEACHING

Foreign language learning requires the acquisition of different components including

grammatical rules, communication patterns, accuracy, fluency, vocabulary items as well as other dimensions. Recently, there has been a growing interest in developing the cultural knowledge of foreign language learners, which makes them aware of the customs, beliefs, social norms and all that concern other countries specifically the English-speaking ones. The importance of culture has been the concern of many teachers and researchers. In fact, two main viewpoints have influenced the teaching of culture. One pertains the implementation of the aspects of civilization, literature, arts, customs, habits, and social practices by emphasizing facts rather than meanings. On the other hand, other pedagogies concentrate on cross-cultural learning which entails comparison between one's own and the foreign country in terms of cultural characteristics.

In the 1960s, scholars made an attempt to encourage culture teaching through focusing on learners' perceptions and attitudes. Brooks (1960) has introduced a number of culture-based topics or 'hors d' oeuvres' including a set of aspects (greetings, taboos, contrasts in town and country life, forms of politeness, etc). This suggestion contributed to a shift of focus from teaching geography and history to the cross-cultural approach. In the 1970s, scholars started to concentrate on sociolinguistic patterns as a key component in developing students' cultural knowledge about otherness. Consequently, the role of culture in the classroom was reinforced and the audio-lingual method was replaced by CLT that creates more integration of language and culture through communicative situations. In the 1990s, scholars began to explore the way culture should be taught in the foreign language classroom and its vital importance to successfully achieve the teaching objectives. "It is obvious that language does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives". Sapir (1970: 207).

Culture and language are indivisible since culture describes who talks to whom, about what, and how language can be used to reflect social identities; it also portrays the different circumstances that lead to various behaviours. Duranti's (1997: 24) defines it as "something learned, transmitted, passed down from one generation to the next, through human actions, often in the form of face-to-face interaction, and, of course, through linguistic communication".

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Instructors are supposed to be as familiar as possible with their learners' process of learning and the difficulties they encounter for the purpose of meeting their needs and introducing new techniques to better cope with emerging situations. In fact, learning a foreign language is not an easy task, for it demands the acquisition of a set of linguistic features, large lists of vocabulary items, a number of grammatical rules, a strange pronunciation and new cultural norms. This leads to different learning problems related to the exposure to a new culture with its different patterns and characteristics. Consequently, learners conceptualize some stereotypes and form comparisons between the native and the foreign cultures. For instance, the contact learners have with the new culture through the foreign language has a direct influence on their views; this drives them to stereotype ideas that can influence their attitudes, cause confusion and sometimes refusal; therefore, the suggested work attempts to discuss the attitudes that some learners have towards the cultures related to the English language especially university students. It also examines their degree of exposure to culture-based contents as a key to enhance effective communication. In other words, this investigative study attempts to shed light on the opinions and attitudes of learners regarding the English-speaking countries and cultures, and determine how and to what extent these attitudes are reflected in the classroom applications.

4. EXPERIMENTAL

4.1. TARGET POPULATION

The population under investigation helps in the applicability of the study to a particular situation. The total number of participants is 40 (from Djillali Liabes University at Sidi-Bel-Abbes); it consists of third year students, aged from 18 to 22. The participants were provided with clear information regarding the aims of study, the research tools and rules of confidentiality. They were informed that participation in this study is voluntary and for academic purposes only.

4.2. INSTRUMENTATION

While gathering data for this research work, quantitative means were of great importance to achieve the researcher's targets. The quantification of data was done through the use of a questionnaire that includes close and open-ended questions for the sake of providing answers to the suggested research questions and testing the possible answers. The questions were organized in the form of rubrics for the sake of facilitating the gathering and interpretation of the obtained results. It is worth noting that the questionnaire has been given to 40 students; yet, some copies included irrelevant responses.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The introductory question attempted to test whether respondents know something about the people whose mother tongue is English, especially the British and the American people. For instance, a great number of participants confirmed that they have a considerable amount of knowledge on the British and American cultures. However, when being asked to give comments and mention the aspects they are familiar with, the provided definitions were inadequate and incomplete in the way they could not cover all the aspects related to culture.

Another question, which attempted to determine whether students encounter difficulties when it comes to activities about culture, resulted in a great percentage (74.28%) that reflects the response "yes", whereas only few respondents affirmed that they face no difficulties when dealing with activities based on cultural contents (See figure 1. below).

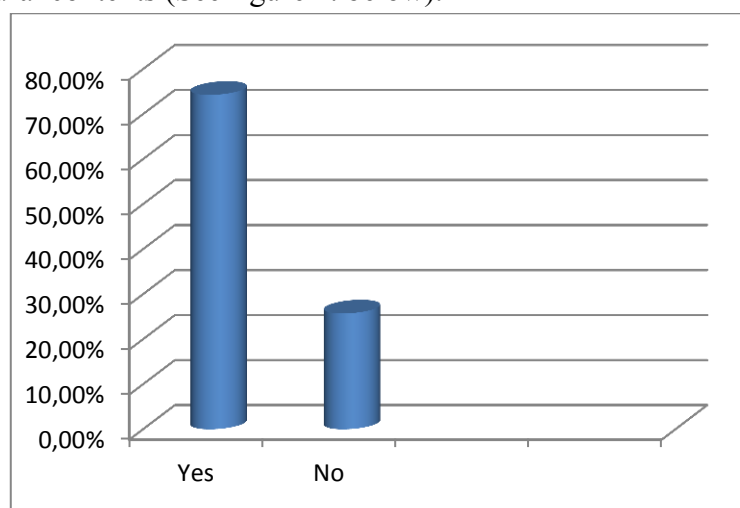


Fig.1. Difficulties when Dealing with Cultural Activities

Another question was added to determine whether students are interested in research projects that are based on cultural contents. Certainly, preparing research projects gives many opportunities to foreign language learners to discover different cultural aspects and enlarge their cultural backgrounds. Respondents' responses to that question revealed that a considerable number of

students prepared projects and research papers on different topics; yet, cultural ones were somehow neglected. Thus, being uninterested in knowing about other cultural identities leads to a failure in terms of the acquisition of cultural awareness towards otherness.

As far as open-ended questions are concerned, the responses were rich in terms of explanations; the overall purpose of these questions was to determine the aspects in which learners show some of their ethnocentric attitudes. Through reading all the comments, the researcher realized that some stereotyping attitudes are generated in terms of ethnicity, civilization, daily life practices, traditions and other related aspects.

As a final question, the investigator attempted to ask whether they refuse to learn a foreign language in case they do not like the culture and civilization associated with the native speakers of that language. The results revealed that 62.85% expressed their refusal to learn the foreign language in case they do not like the related culture meaning that they engaged their personal opinions and stereotypes in their process of learning. This in turn affects the way they perceived otherness in terms of differentiation among cultures. Thus, communication may occur in an inappropriate and ethnocentric manner (See figure 2)

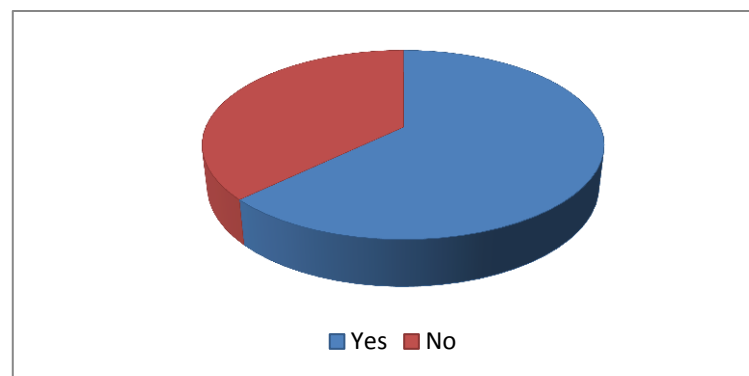


Figure2 Students' Perceptions

The last question of the questionnaire aimed to shed light on participants' learning objectives. The results obtained revealed that most participants showed an interest in the productive and receptive skills while only few of them planned to develop the fifth skill. This may lead one to affirm that the concern of most learners is still restricted to the development of fluency and writing abilities. As a result, other skills are neglected including what we refer to as the fifth skill. See the figure 3 below:

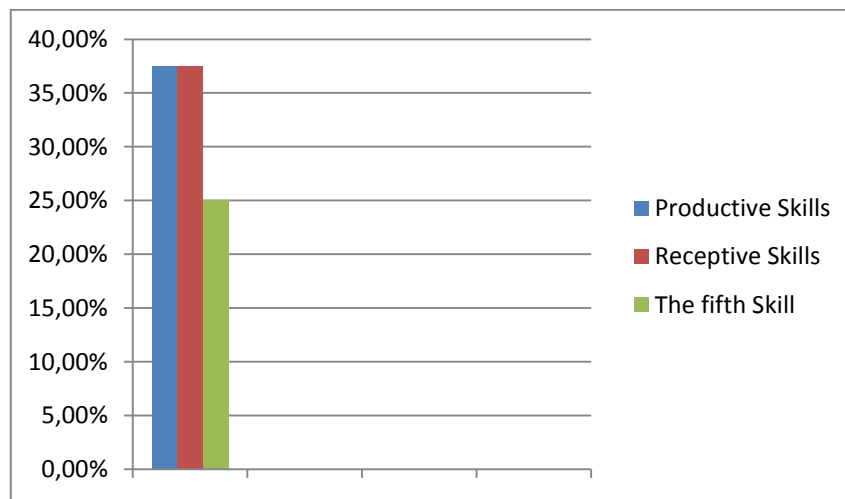


Figure3. Students' Learning Objectives

The questionnaire administered to the selected group of participants was constructed for the purpose of reflecting their attitudes towards the cultures associated with the target language; it encompasses questions that highlighted the participants' familiarity with and exposure to culture in educational settings. Based on above-mentioned difficulties and on evidence generated from the research procedures, one can find answers to the formulated questions suggested in the early stages of the research work. In fact, making attempts towards the acquisition of cultural knowledge is one of the most important steps towards cultural awareness regarding the necessity of cultural contents. In the line of what was mentioned previously, the present paper provided a systematized analysis of the data collected through the suggested quantitative means of data collection and showed that it is of permanent importance to implement a number of techniques that may in one way or another increase students' appreciation of other cultures, mainly the English-speaking countries. It has been concluded that some students are not familiar enough with the target culture as they possess ethnocentric judgments and stereotypes. Hence, the intercultural dimension of foreign language instruction can reduce the problem by enabling learners to positively act in the context of diversity and respect those who have different cultural backgrounds.

Being exposed to a new culture with its different patterns and characteristics makes the learner conceptualize certain stereotypes, generalize negative ideas and form comparisons between the native and the foreign cultures. Therefore, it is recommended to raise awareness among students through introducing a variety of techniques to make them competent in terms of acquiring the ability to respond to multiple cross-cultural situations that necessitate tolerance, understanding, acceptance and appreciation of differences.

6. PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Enlarging the amount of culture in classes can be done through games, discussions and any effective activities that promote culture learning. For instance, a variety of cultural topics should be taught to encourage learners to become actively involved in experiences of cultural understanding and positive comparisons. Such experiences promote the development and the discovery of what is familiar and what is unfamiliar i.e. similarities and differences.

6.1. CULTURE TEST

That kind of activities enables learners to determine the correct responses in relation to the target culture by giving a list of possible answers to some examples. This can make them test their

personal data regarding those behaviours. Thus, they start to be engaged in individual and group discussions as well as critical comparisons to discover the correct answers.

6.2. ETHNOGRAPHIC ACTIVITIES

An effective technique to learn about the cultures of others is to make the foreign language learner in contact with real-life contexts. The ethnographic approach can be followed by inviting students to visit an English-speaking country to find out details on real-life encounters by using interviews with foreigners and taking notes on cultural features and behaviours. This task engages the learner in authentic situations that facilitate the direct access to cultural knowledge.

6.3. HIGH CULTURE

This approach considers literature as a way to promote language as well as culture acquisition since literary texts are rich in terms of details that reflect the social life and values of another community. Literature is the key for teachers to portray the behaviours, thoughts, attitudes, traditions, and linguistic rules related to the target language. It is the mirror which provides an opportunity for learners to discover what is strange and what generally defines otherness.

6.4. CULTURE CAPSULES

This task refers to the brief descriptions of the cultural aspects in relation to the target language and culture. Those descriptions push learners to compare and contrast different items for the purpose of promoting cultural awareness and understanding. Figuring out similarities as well as differences can be done through organizing oral discussions or written expression tasks in the classroom with the help and guidance of teachers.

6.5. CULTURE CLUSTORS

This activity is one of the techniques that increase one's readiness and openness to discover and know about other cultures. A culture cluster is a group of culture capsules or descriptive interpretations about specific aspects related to the native speakers of the target language. These analytical descriptions help in shaping students' openness to be culturally involved in the process of accumulating knowledge about other people.

6.6. CULTURE ASSIMILATORS

The assimilator consists of brief descriptions of a situation which leads to positive interaction between native speakers from the target culture and others. The discussions are followed by explanations of the meaning of what happens in the interaction and therefore choosing the appropriate interpretation is required.

7. CONCLUSION

In addition to teaching the linguistic knowledge, teachers should familiarize themselves and their students with the non-verbal communication and characteristics related to the target culture for the purpose of promoting successful intercultural communication. The content of instruction may implicitly or explicitly reduce learners' cultural ambiguity; thus, courses should be based on culture-oriented topics that make the foreign language learner acquire knowledge about how other people are different, and how to compare and contrast distinct cultures without constructing negative perceptions.

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