

Libyan teachers' experience in teaching English as a second language and inclusion of target culture: some reflections

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Abstract

Since the introduction of modern education systems in different parts of the world, the inclusion of foreign languages in the native education systems have attracted a lot of attention and controversy. The Post-colonial systems are largely reflective of the enduring legacy of the intercourse between languages, ethnic sensibilities, cultural values, often bordering on direct and ugly conflicts between the nations and their people. The journey of Teaching English language into the education systems of Arabian countries in the mid-east is replete with an equally troubling legacy, historicity and unique experimentation. Since its introduction as a language of global trade, commerce, which is often being bandied as a language of affluence, aspiration, and modernity, it has spurred a lot of conflicting issues due to its domination over the native language as well as its disruptive impact on the native culture. Hence, the teaching of English in schools and colleges in countries such as Libya that are deeply rooted in Arab cultural ethnicity has had its fair share of societal disruptions, cultural conflicts and political controversies. There has always been a raging debate between the *raison d'être* behind English language being taught alone and or, with proximity with the cultural mores and trends of the native culture. Any plausible answer to such perplexing issues can come only when a large body of relevant literature on the language-culture matrix is studied and analysed in minute detail. The researchers then stand a chance to draw precise correlations, trends or appositions, besides drawing invaluable conclusions. The present paper encapsulates the reflections of the researcher's rich experience as a teacher of English Language, which is primarily taught as a second language in Libyan schools at the secondary level. In essence, the researcher examines a host of peculiar cultural issues and complexities emerging from the use of English as a target EFL in Libyan schools where Arabic is the primary academic, social and cultural medium as mother tongue.

Key Words: *languaculture, EFL classrooms, target culture, Lingua Franca, Libyan EFL context.*

Introduction

Since time immemorial, in every human civilization, culture has been seen defining the very trajectory of life and molds the sensibilities and world view of people. Every person is brought into the world in a unique social setting that helps his/her to form opinions and viewpoints about various dimensions of life. In essence, culture could be illustrated as an assortment of social convictions, value system, religious beliefs, confidence, practices, propensities, ordinary errands and furthermore offers a broad spectrum of issues and diversities that define our lives. In the social arena, people give premium value and recognition to their history and heritage, racial identities, art and craft,

customs, language, and entertainment for a more fulfilling life experience.

These days, culture assumes a vital part in the teaching-learning process involving English language as it has become a critical language of opportunity and facilitation. Culture can assist learners in effective language learning and mastery in case of the fascination and attraction of the cultural facets and their original substances. Moreover, the learners identify the learning points better and reach English language learning targets faster in the event of their consonance with the native culture.

When English is taught in the schools and colleges across the Arab world with Libya as a specific case in point, language instructors and college professors are expected to pay extra

attention to the crucial function of cultural issues, while keeping in mind the great diversities and commonalities that the learners exhibit in their day-to-day life and culture. As the Lingua Franca of the present-day global stage, English has a prolific scope as the language taught to the highest number of learners in any country and culture and Libyan schools are no exceptions. English language is taught across cultures, races, geographies, age groups, either as the 2nd language or, language of specific purposes is encompassing all fields of modern education and business, besides the technological transformations sweeping across the world. In the words Medians (2001), 'English has now become a prerequisite for participating in any scientific event over the world. In an unprecedented step and as an acknowledgement of the basic role of English as an international vehicle of communication, through an executive order of the Libyan Ministry of Education in 2018, it was made mandatory to impart English language teaching to students of primary schools that reflected the rising aspiration level of the people to keep up with the rest of the world. As is well known, it was also believed in the Libyan education circles that English language proficiency will open windows of opportunities for young learners as a language of academics, science, and business and make them globally competitive. Hence, it all started as a dreamy project to teach English language right from the first-grade primary schools till the highest academic levels like the universities and higher institutes.

Though English language holds a lot of value and significance for our lives in a fast-changing world, yet its influence upon various facets like its disruptive cultural agenda, lifestyle conflict, and loss of ethnic identity are a cause of concern. As most material production, including in textbooks happens in English and their design, content and styles are heavily biased in favour of the western societies, it directly causes a conflict with the native Islamic culture and heritage of the EFL learners who have Arabic as their mother tongue. While preparing such courseware in EFL for learners in Arabic nations, the western course designers and publication agencies pay scant respect towards the societal values and cultural, causing much discontentment and anguish over the perceived loss of ethnic identity among native learners. In these sensitive and delicate circumstances, the

role of experts and academic researchers gains more prominence while dealing with the subtleties of the cultural differences and ensuring sanctity to the language-culture equation. This paper seeks to bring out the subtleties of the language- culture relationship, in general and English Language Teaching and Arab culture, by examining the various works of linguists and researchers in this area. Furthermore, the various significant cultural issues and facets that crop up in the ELT textbooks also get ample focus in this paper. This paper concludes with some well-thought-out suggestions aimed at highlighting the typical the language-culture matrix propagated within the Libyan school education system, which may prove useful for the potential academic courseware designers.

In the culture-language matrix studies, bilingual education is acknowledged as capable of erasing the cultural walls between communities and the education system, especially schools, thereby making the communities commit themselves strongly to the educational projects of the schools¹³. Moreover, when the instructors have a clearer affinity for the peculiarities of the minority cultural groups, it enhances their cultural sensitivity and makes them responsive to the specific language needs of the learners. It is important to remember that in the global cultural space, there is a propensity towards respecting the wide diversity of cultures that require more sensitive attempts at crossing cultural barriers in terms of racial issues, religious beliefs, and nationalities. Only then, can we assume to have crossed the critical rubicon of the language learning process in EFL. When EFL teachers show greater understanding of the native Arabian traditions and their ethno-cultural diversities, it becomes possible to overcome the gaps between the teachers and the learners in terms of the process and perception as well. Moreover, it may lead us to obtain more productivity and outcomes by providing effective solutions to the learners' needs and problems well within the classrooms. However, such complex aspects require more studies and research initiatives as the teaching and learning classes come from widely different backgrounds and may hold opposing viewpoints or ideologies, thereby creating conflicting situations during their interactions. In such a context, the EFL teachers must base their understanding of the cultural aspects of one particular one upon the conjectures derived

from the analysis of other cultures, so that too many contradictions and opposing factors may be minimized.

Literature Review

Relationship between Language and Culture

In EFL teaching research domain, a lot of passion and energies have already been exhausted to clearly examine and decipher the complex equation between Language and culture. A broad spectrum of linguists, applied linguists, sociologists, anthropologists and historians have made sometimes independent efforts or multi-disciplinarian efforts to examine the peculiarities involved in the correlation between the language and culture. At times, many researchers have trained serious efforts and time in determining the commonalities and contradictions between EFL and Culture and postulated various theories and approaches in resolving the teething issues affecting them. On many occasions, experts have advocated quite dissimilar approaches, towards such issues. Some researchers have indicated an isolated approach towards EFL learning in isolation for the native culture of the learners, while in some other contexts, there has been attempts to integrate the EFL styles, contents into the cultural structures and expectations of the native culture of the learners, (Mishan 2005; Faris 2014; Kramsch,1998 ; Kramsch 1993; Kalish 2016; Agar 1994; Byram and Risager 1999; Stockton 2018; Bennett 1993; Silberstein 2001; Bada 2000; Zhao 2011; Byram 1991; Morgan et al, 1994). Some linguists have advocated for the assimilation of native cultural practices and symbols inside the classroom itself, while some researchers vehemently oppose any such application of cultural symbols in EFL teaching-learning.

The Role of Culture in the Foreign Language

In the domain of EFL teaching, the inclusion of cultural concerns were never favoured till the beginning of the 80s with scant respect shown towards the cultural sensitivities of the learners of English language whose primary language was Arabic. However, things started to change for the better in the 90s when several linguists began asserting the teaching of culture in language teaching as reflected in the works by Kramsch (1993, p. 8) for whom "culture had become the core aspect in language teaching." According to Breen (Kramsch, 1993, p. 182)the learner had the free will and flexibility to

redefine any text against his own priorities due to his own interest or proclivities.

The EFL teachers and researchers are expected to inextricably link language teaching models to the intricacies of cultural standards and symbols as one's culture is powerful enough to set in motion a roadmap for his or her growth as a learner and professional in society. Addressing the cultural concerns must come on the top of the agenda due its proximity with the social mobility and acceptability. So, the learner of any foreign language as is the case for a Libyan student who is learning English must also learn the cultural knowledge and skills so that he achieves his optimum potential. Moreover, it is usually the primary reason why a L2/FL speaker seeks to overcome the complexity of culture while pursuing language learning in any foreign language like English and tries to be an effective communicator in the future. The next powerful rationale is to integrate cultural content into the courseware of EFL as that the stereotypes can be prevented, and language learners can maintain their originality of expression and aesthetic appeal (Nemni,1992).As another significant reason to include culture into the foreign language courseware and delivery is make learners gain control over their own learning style, speed and convenience. This allowed learners to become autonomous in evaluating and questioning the wider context within which the EFL learning was integrated. In the domain of EFL teaching-learning, Tomalin & Stempleski (1993) have suggested a few goals that teaching of culture must fulfil:

- One goal must be able to help the learner to empathise with others with an awareness of their culturally affected behaviour. Also, the learners are expected to grasp the influence of social variables like age, sex, social class, and space on the people's speaking style and behavioural approaches, apart from the typical behavioural patterns followed in commonplace scenarios in the target culture.
- The learners must be supported to be increasingly aware of the cultural ramifications of terminology, diction and jargons usually in application in the target languages. The learners are expected to create effective mechanisms of evaluation, refinement of generalizations commonly seen in the target culture with rational and credible evidence.
- The learners must inculcate the requisite skills for identifying and organizing information in

specific situations and approaches. It will help learners in enhancing their intellectual curiosity about the target culture while encouraging empathy for other learners.

While teaching cultural studies, the learners must develop awareness of the cultural practices while maintaining curiosity towards the native culture so that there is a comparative analysis of the cultures' (Tavares & Cavalcanti, 1996:19). Such comparative studies may be enriching the learner's experience and for sensitising them to cultural diversity and not undervalue foreign cultures. 'This diversity should then be understood and respected, and never...over (sic) or underestimated' (ibid.: 20).

Teaching English with its Culture

The advocates of the close relationships between EFL and its culture strongly believe that such learners may not achieve the target language in separation from its own culture. Agar (1994) emphasized the anthropological viewpoint and referred to the clear correlation between a language and cultural aspects, suggesting coining a composite term like "*languaculture*" in place of using them separately.

Agar believed that Language had the capacity to fill the spaces between learners with sound, while culture provided a solid basis for human relation. Culture is intrinsic to language, while language has an inherent presence of culture within its ambit. Whenever you hear the word language or the word culture, you might wonder about the missing half. "*languaculture*" is a reminder, I hope, of the necessary connection between its two parts'.(28)Mishan (2005) advocated for a strong relationship between language and culture that must make language instructors obligingly include culture in their teaching styles as all linguistic offerings manifest the intrinsic culture within them. Sowden (2007) felt that cultural context had a critical role in the language teaching process as it helps in learning more than teaching. In such contexts, culture assumes a lot of significance in the scheme of things happening inside classrooms. Further, according to Byram and Flemming (1998), EFL learning should happen alongside the native languages. They believed that it suited a learner who knew a foreign language well, without being aware of the philosophical and social roles ordained by such a language. Bada (2000) took this purported bond between language and culture a little further by asserting that it is unfathomable to

visualize language without its culture. Moreover, learning a new unfamiliar language can really pose a challenge to be familiar with the day-to-day culture of its native learners.

When we seek to fathom syntactic rules and other linguistic features like writing good sentences, accent, pronunciation of native speakers of the target languages, it necessarily does not provide effective communication. Therefore, learning another language involves knowing its culture for better and valuable communication. The strength of such a relationship between language and its culture is difficult to be taught or fathomed in isolation as asserted by Byram (1991) who further adds that languages fail to just reflect an objective cultural reality. It is an integral part of this reality through which other parts are modeled and interpreted. It is perceived as a symbol of the whole as well as a subsumed part within the whole that constantly keeps shaping and is in turn getting modified by actions, beliefs and socio-cultural values. While remaining engaged in language, the learners just seem to enact a socio-cultural reality, which is reflected in learning a language and acquisition of culture. From a theoretical perspective, this view does not endorse teaching of culture without language and is seen as basically flawed, whereas, separating language from culture teaching implies that a foreign language may be dealt in a rather isolated way from the socio-cultural phenomena, but only within the early learning phase (p.18).

However, Jiang (2000) opined that sans culture, language may cease to exist, may even be dead, while without language, culture may lose its structural foundation. The above arguments firmly put emphasis on the consideration of culture within the framework of language teaching, while some other linguists persist in their vehement opposition to any role of culture within the realm of language teaching described in the subsequent sections.

Teaching English without its Culture

The counter offensive against the inclusion of culture in the EFL teaching arena seems to be largely focused on highlighting the ethnic cultures within EFL teaching framework. In their discourses, researchers (Rathet 1996) have put the spotlight on the native culture rather than the target language culture while dealing with EFL teaching. Some others have advocated a higher level of awareness to be exhibited on the part of EFL instructors and learners as far as

the native cultural aspects are concerned (Lado (1997). In fact, Wei (2005) goes a step further to suggest language learners to develop close affinity with their own culture before trying to align with the cultures associated with EFL, which is British or the American cultures. Others have advocated language teachers to start sustained and engaging conversations around the finer aspects of the native language so that the learners stay conscious of the own cultural symbols and manage to assert their unique cultural identity (Hinkel, 1999).

In Kenyan author Ngugi waThiong'o (1991) views, the implications of teaching literature may be seen with specific imperialistic views, wherein teaching only European literature, and mostly British imperialist literature to school children may expose them to the European culture in their own image. In such a unseemly scenario, the young learners will be forced to view, analyze and evaluate the world as created and visualized by the other cultures and nations like the Europeans, the English or the Americans. It will distort the self-image of the young minds as well as their assessment of their own cultural heritage in the confusion created by the overbearing imperialist literature. Literally, young children will end up visualizing the character of Prospero through the lens of Caliban and vice versa, will create a distorted image of the discovery of Crusoe and his image of Man Friday, conveniently neglecting the rightful claims of Man Friday and his valiant battle against centuries of Crusoe's exploitation and oppression.

Teaching both Cultures

In view of the strong current of influence sweeping for a confluence between Language teaching and cultural inclusion, EFL teaching-learning process in Arabian schools cannot be neglected. In fact, a better option appears to focus on the salient features of both the cultures through the pedagogy, instructional styles inside EFL classrooms. Here, a better focus on cross cultural communication is the only way forward as of EFL teaching learning process can be enriched by synthesizing the best in both cultures. In order to get the best language learning, the teachers must support learners to develop familiarity with body movements, gestures, intonation patterns, taboo topics, and syntax, besides making efforts at analyzing both the ethnic culture and the target culture (Dunnett et al., 1986). When both the cultures are compared and contrasted, there evolves 'a

modification of mono-cultural awareness'. (Byram, 1991). Furthermore, Moran (2001) called for a learning process that could evolve organically out of an interaction between both cultures, holding quite apt significance for language learners and make them dynamic language practitioners. In fact, any target culture may always remain quite critical a factor in making learners develop effective language communication mechanism and styles within the target language. In the same vein, it may also be said that lack of familiarity with the target culture may not allow learners to avoid making socially irrelevant follies. An enlightened and competent learner having understood the nuances of the target culture may have the social grace and intelligence to understand the gravity of the situations and know how and when to ignore, accept, reject or excuse, interrupt, comfort or even to make every conversation more respectable for all. However, when a learner takes care to understand the nuances of the target language culture, it does not give him the freedom to totally devalue or ignore the local culture and the value system. In fact, when someone takes care in mastering his/her own culture, then his orientation towards the target culture becomes even more mature and refined, thereby empowering him to appreciate the delicate aspects and sensibilities. Further, there are some genres like poetry that can be found in every culture as 'trans-cultural' or universal. In fact, poetry has a universal appeal that is achieved through its representational use of language. In essence, it may be clearly understood that the combined use of language and culture comes across as an effective instrument of language with which the learners can handle the demands of their target language effectively as a part of their social and academic communication, thereby reflecting their own culture and the target also.

Culture in ELT textbooks

The different materials and resources used for language learning in EFL contexts have been analyzed by various linguists and researchers to understand their efficacy. For instance, in his paper on materials development for language learning and teaching, Tomlinson (2012) specifies that materials might be anything that support language acquisition that includes Games, online and mobile phone interactions,

movies, flash cards, and course books. Materials may come as varied ways as experiential, informative, instructional, and exploratory. Tomlinson strongly believed in their capacity in providing language learners with more realistic experiences of language usage. They are informative as providing language learners with novel and original content on the target language. It is instructional for being direct in terms of providing them guidance to practice language and expression well. They are exploratory for assisting the learner who is able to discover novel aspects in language learning, or eliciting in that they encourage learners to apply language.

While interacting with two disparate cultures simultaneously as happens in ELT texts could offer some startling inferences. The Libyan course designers and linguists must include typical cultural properties of the target society with a clear distinction between the acceptable and the unacceptable aspects. Noted linguists and scholars have to take due care of the cultural sensitivities of the ethnic people while preparing the materials and other courseware for EFL classrooms (Tomlinson 1998; Mishan 2005). In the absence of such diligence, the experience in nations such as Libya could be one of chaos and confusion affecting young learners and their fragile psyche. Gray (2010) devoted a lot of energy and time in examining the publishers' documents that seem to be disallowing authors from exploiting sensitive subjects like religion, politics, alcohol and sex and passing on the same scholastic propriety to the EFL teachers so that the sanctity of the ethnic culture could be properly maintained. Tomlinson (2001) emphasized that the publishers must maintain fair play and integrity and produce secular and unbiased material that will mean no offence to any side. Furthermore, he believed that provocative texts are seen stimulating an effective response and most probably promote better learning outcomes as compared to neutral texts" (p.68). Tomlinson developed many standard courseware and resources in the global arena that corrected the perceptions of the linguists and EFL teachers in making their materials and instructions acceptable to the native cultures. Such materials do create the necessary motivation to for affective engagement in EFL contexts. While discussing in the context of taboo materials and content within the Finnish English language

books, Keturi and Lehmonen (2011) opined that the same may be applied to all examined different literatures. After examining four locally designed English language books and the taboo materials used within them, they discovered one more acronym other than the known one (SVACS which stands for Smoking; Violence; Abortion; Cursing; and Suicide) that were profusely used in Finnish language books. In his doctoral dissertation, Belaid (2015) investigated the acceptance and use of culturally sensitive materials in Libyan universities by language professors and fourth-year students. The researcher attempted to determine both language professors' and students' attitudes and familiarity with the PARSNIP model (namely: Politics, Alcohol, Religion, Sex, Narcotics, Isms, and Pork). Language teachers were mostly reluctant to use such culturally sensitive materials in their classrooms. Furthermore, students showed some partial reluctance toward certain materials as potential EFL materials. Teachers have cited the purpose behind using such materials inside the classroom, which is a clear indication of how little they are paying attention to the ties between the language and its culture.

Problems of Target Culture Material

Primarily, target culture should be included in the EFL teaching process as it can promote international understanding and facilitate learners' visits to foreign countries, and motivate learners (Adaskou, Britten & Fahsi, 1990). The EFL textbooks focus on the elements of the target culture is due to the fact that publishing materials in the learner community is generally not cost effective for publishers. Society will not use the material because such choices are different from other learners. It is a problem because it has nothing to do with their own culture (Alptekin, 1993). It is also important to note that native textbook authors, who usually live in their Anglo-American culture, find it difficult to create data that goes beyond their "fitness" (Alptekin, 1993). Thus, although it is often not realized by English teachers, EFL materials are by no means 'neutral' or 'value-free' education aids. Cunningsworth (1995: 90) states that 'Text books will directly or indirectly communicate sets of social and cultural values which are inherent in their makeup'

However, such culturally relevant ELT materials can cause serious dilemmas in the foreign language classroom. Images and

concepts that seem natural or innocuous to the average Western reader may be viewed as intrusive for people from other walks of life. Argungu (1996) states that “Muslim students face many culture shocks in many ELT texts such as mentions of alcoholism and drunkenness tobacco and smoking, previous relationships marriage and Christian images and values even as the author may never have meant such evil”. “The examples may seem trivial” says argunguut”while the cumulative impact on young Muslims is easily visible.” To prevent such problems from recurring he asked Muslim educators to design customized resources for students learning EFL.

Alptekin (1984) also identifies the problem of cultural domination: ‘indeed, being at the receiving end of a virtually one-way flow of information from Anglo-American centres, the host country runs the risk of having its own culture totally submerged’. Although many experts’ people support the integrating of culture in language teaching on the grounds that it motivating, others dispute the value of cultural content in this regard. Prodromou (1988) maintains that one reason students are not motivated by culture learning is the way culture is presented in many ELT textbooks. He maintains that when students enter the language classroom, why students find little to motivate them in the foreign language class. He argues that when ‘both the material we use and the way we use it are culturally alienating then, inevitably, the students switch off, retreat into their inner world, to defend their own integrity’ (ibid.: 80).

In fact, nowadays, there is an urgent need to learn English in the Arab world, particularly Libya, since it is an international vehicle of communication between people or as it is the Language of the modern age, and the language of knowledge. The significance of the target language and its culture does not mean to completely ignore the local culture. Inserting local culture should be seriously considered by authors, course designers and materials writers for better learning opportunities in Libyan education system.

According to my experience as a teacher of English language for more than fifteen years, and according to the point of view of my colleges who have been teaching English for more than ten years, I could conclude the following :

The 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). On the other side, there are certain things which are culturally restricted to teach in Libya and Arabic countries especially to the younger generation because it may adversely affect the behavior of the learners. For instance, some images which can't be justified to be incorporated in the school of college curriculum in Libya. Such as semi-naked pictures, pictures that contain kisses, and pictures of statues that represent worship other than Islam. Also, some obscene words, including some names of people in conversations that have an offensive meaning in the Arabic language, such as Tina, Unique, Nike and Yankee. These words are very problematic for Libyan teachers, because teachers cannot say all of these words in front of the students because their meaning is very sensitive, they refer to meanings related to sex in Libyan society. Also, the word zipper in English, which means the penis in Arabic. Similarly, historical or art related phenomena which may 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.

Conclusion

In the end, this research paper poses a pertinent and thought-provoking issue i.e. Can EFL be taught by excluding the own cultural ethos of the learner or, should it be integrated into the cultural ambits? Is it also pertinent to teach both EFL with proper representation of the cultural practices and symbols of the target culture and the culture of the learner? Here, the researcher quotes Agar (1994) who advocated for combining two concepts to create a single phrase called "languaculture.". The learners' communicative competence should be enhanced through the appreciation of the cross-cultural awareness. Being familiar with the target culture will indeed increase and open-up EFL learners' minds on new uses of the target language. Arousing learners' cross- cultural awareness will be positively reflected on their

future uses of English language. Up to the moment of writing this research, there is a dearth of research on the use of cultural aspects within the Libyan EFL locally or internationally textbook designing.

Finally, rather than debating whether or not to add cultural themes in EFL courses, it's better we consider that it is more important to determine which is more advantageous: including or excluding such information from EFL books targeted for Libyan EFL students. Furthermore, how can we, as language instructors, academics, and researchers, envision the target English language being divorced from its Anglo-American culture? The researcher purposefully closed this work with such a significant topic, which will necessitate a deeper search in the upcoming publication, as well as by other researchers, in which this and many other questions will be thoroughly examined. There will always be certain gaps between the current findings and what is expected. There will always be certain gaps between the current findings and what is expected that can be overcome by gaining deeper insights through the works of future researchers.

Recommendations

- Textbooks and curriculum designers may be specific about cultural aspects like fathoming the entire spectrum of differences and similarities affecting the local or ethnic and the target culture while developing EFL resources for Libyan learners.
- The culture issues may be minutely dealt with that may enhance cross-cultural understanding among learners.
- EFL teaching must receive great level of engagement and support in alignment with preserving the cultural symbols and ethos of the native culture, wherein effective levels of cross-cultural understanding may reflect on the learners' communicative competence in the target language, besides assisting learners to maintain their cultural and ethnic identity.

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