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Cultural effects of L2 learning: a case study of Iranian learners learning English

Gholam Reza Zarei

Abstract

The present research aimed to seek if the learners of English taught special books (Interchange) would finally come to perceive the cultural issues differently from those not yet treated with the books. To perform the study, a researcher constructed a questionnaire of cultural components was administered to two groups of L2 learners, one group about to start and the other about to complete the 3 volume Interchange Series program in a language institute. The results indicated that learning English extensively modifies the language learners’ perceptions of cultural issues. The conclusion is that textbooks can make learners conceptualize the world as designated therein.

Keywords: Culture; English language; English textbooks; Iranian learners; Interchange series;

1. Introduction

Culture is usually viewed as an ingrained mode of behaviour and perception inextricably bonded 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 social semiotic used to symbolically encode and carry over the underpinning socio-cultural values. It must be noted that Halliday (ibid) 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, i.e., culture and language co-evolve in the same way as do meaning and expression. Of course, this conviction seems to take us too far in our consideration of language and culture bond. Removed from its main original cultural bed where possibly no causality can be speculated, language does have some directional bearing on the new language learners' perception of the world. Imagine a case of a minor who takes initiative in smoking cigarette simply because the neighboring smoker's friendly language provided a linguistic food for further conceptual digestion, to be only later transformed into a routine habit.

In a likewise manner as portrayed above, the scene of learning a foreign language cannot be clearly set up when it comes to the question of culture and language interplay. A good number of scholars (Whorf, 1956; Lakoff, 2004) stress the inalienable and consolidated entity of the two on different grounds, i.e., lexical, discoursed, ideational,

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textual, etc. This camp believes that a language to be learned cannot be dissociated from cultural elements (Pulverness, 2003; Kramsch, 1988, 2001). And language curriculum devoid of culture would fail in developing a communicative competence in the language learners (Bada, 2000; Genc and Bada, 2005). In the same vein, some have even pushed the limits further and postulated that learners of another language can achieve linguistic goals provided they desire assimilation, or to a lesser degree, acculturation (Schumann, 1976). This radical stance assumes that cognitive and affective gaps between the two languages need to be bridged by converting to the new language cultural norms. Also, Brown (1980) attributes the failure in mastering a second language to the learners' inability to bring the linguistic and cultural development into synchrony.

In contrast, some scholars refuse to approve of the need for cultural conversion as a pre-requisite to learning another language. Stevick (1976) talks about the fragility of students in the face of learning a culture different from their own, which may arouse some feeling of alienation and estrangement. In the same line of thinking, Zarei and Khalessi (2010) caution that incorporation of foreign language culture into the instructional materials could account for some students' failure in learning a foreign language as they may desire to get rid of the unsolicited cultural impositions therein. Also, Adasko, Britten, and Fahsi (1990) discovered nothing motivating in using Western culture, but rather breeding learners' dissatisfaction with their own culture. This opposite force even grows more intense sometimes in regard to the English language, portraying a totally negative picture of the language with lots of unpredictable consequences (Kim, 2002; Yarmohammadi, 2004; Chattergee, 1993).

A third trend which stands half way between the two above reviewed opposite camps does not accept either way absolutism in regard to culture and language. Rather, it emphasizes a culture fair curriculum where cultural awareness and intercultural competence find prominence (Alptekin 2002; Smith, 1976) and students are supplied with strategies to cope with the cultural differences (Hyde, 1998). Kramsche and Sullivan (1996) imply that foreign language pedagogy should help learners feel at home in both international and national cultures, avoiding those patterns which are alien, irrelevant, or sometimes adversarial. Likewise, Widdowson (1998) suggests that instructional materials should include native-nonnative and also nonnative-nonnative interactions as well and discourage the exclusive use of native norms as many language learners do not use them in authentic settings.

All in all, the issue, as it seems, cannot be driven home successfully, and there is always the danger of losing either sight of the trees for the forest or that of the forest for the trees. This is to indicate that the golden mean may call for the inseparability of the culture and language, though this combined entity can be manipulated in such a manner that more or less weight is given to one of the two components. As such it can be claimed that textbooks are always carriers of values and as Cortazzi and Jin (1999) maintain, textbooks are teachers, resources, maps, authorities which constitute a major source of culture with different orientations. Therefore, textbooks are expected to impart both knowledge of language and the target culture simultaneously. In that direction, the present study focuses on the English language book series of Interchange to unravel the scope of culture that they can convey to the learners.

2. Research Purpose

As language symbolically represents a microcosm of culture and social values (Halliday, 1978), language learning textbooks necessarily embody cultural values and thus learning the language via such books is believed to leave its culturally inclined mark on the learners. To illuminate the issue further, this study aimed at discovering if English language learners who were taught a special series of books (Interchange) would finally come to prioritize the cultural issues differently from those who have not started those books.
3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study comprised two groups of English Language learners in 2009. 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. They had all just enrolled in an English Language Institute in Isfahan, Iran. 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.

3.2. Materials

To collect the data, a researcher-constructed questionnaire was used. The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions, in each of which a general topic (e.g., entertainment) was introduced, followed by 4 relevant choices (e.g., A. Dance (Western) B. Harakate Mozun (for dance in Iran) C. Violin (Western) D. Santour (an Iranian musical instrument), for the same general topic 'entertainment'). The topics and two of choices were supposed to represent ‘Western cultural issues’ already used in and thus extracted from Interchange Series by Zarei and Khalessi (2010). The other two choices were Iranian counterparts for the Western choices. The participants were required to rank the four choices (from 1 to 4) in the order they found them most preferred to the least one. The questionnaire was supposed to unfold the participants’ cultural priorities. Upon the construction of questionnaire, the researcher asked two colleagues to read and improve the quality, and also piloted it with 7 sample students to get rid of ambiguities. The order of choices, appropriacy of choices especially the Iranian ones, and transparency of instructions were all considered and improved.

Then the following rating scale (Table 1) was designed for the evaluation of results. Based on the four choices used, it was realized that the learners would rank each item in one of the six possible orders of preference, indicating different degrees of cultural effect. The first three orders started with a ‘Western’ choice and received the scales of ‘very strong’, ‘strong’, ‘moderate’, collectively representing the so-called ‘Western Inclination’ and the second three orders initiated with an ‘Iranian’ choice’, which were thus assigned ‘weak’, ‘very weak’, and ‘no effect’, collectively representing the so-called ‘Iranian Inclination’. The last ‘no effect’ scale indicates that no Western word was given the first or the second place in the order; in other words, the priority was given to the two Iranian counterparts (e.g. for ‘entertainment’, the choices Harakate Mozun (for dance) and Santour (an Iranian musical instrument) both of which considered Iranian may be used first, thus showing 'no effect'). The opposite extreme rate is 'very strong' where the first two places are given to the Western choices, indicating the strongest case of ‘Western Inclination’. for 'entertainment', the choices Harakate Mozun (for dance) and Santour (an Iranian musical instrument) both of which considered Iranian may be used first, thus showing 'no effect'). The opposite extreme rate is 'very strong' where the first two places are given to the Western choices, indicating the strongest case of ‘Western Inclination’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inclination</th>
<th>Possible Orders of Preference</th>
<th>Rating Scale</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. a. Western b. Iranian c. Western d. Iranian</td>
<td>2. Strong</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. a. Western b. Iranian c. Iranian d. Western</td>
<td>3. Moderate</td>
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<td>2. Iranian</td>
<td>1. a. Iranian b. Western c. Western d. Iranian</td>
<td>1. Weak</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. a. Iranian b. Western c. Iranian d. Western</td>
<td>2. Very Weak</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. a. Iranian b. Iranian c. Western d. Western</td>
<td>3. No Effect</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
3.3. Data Collection

The questionnaire 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. They were asked to rank the four choices of each item in actual order of preference (1 for the most preferred and 4 for the least preferred) depending on their own priority for the words. The first group finished the task in almost 15 minutes and the second group in 10 minutes.

4. Results and Discussions

This study was intended to illuminate the culture-language interface as it unfolds within foreign language learning milieu. To that end, two groups of English language learners, one coming to end and the other wishing to start the Interchange Series were asked to prioritize their perceptions of some cultural issues. The results, as shown in the following table (Table 2), clearly confirm that these language learners display a skewed cultural orientation as regards both groups. However, the difference is that one group (1) is domestically inclined while the other group is sharply oriented towards Western side. This finding indicates that the textbooks used exert a strong force in shaping the learners’ cultural perception of the world. Of course, one’s need to exercise caution in interpreting the results as there are many other intervening factors at work within a two year long program of learning English. Regardless of extraneous variables playing a part in the results, we observe that the two groups stand in stark contrast with each other. As can be seen, the frequencies and the ensuing percentages reveal that figures are inversely proportional to each other (in the two general categories of ‘Western Inclination’ vs. Iranian Inclination’), with the first group showing a percentage of 14.8 vs. 85.2, and second group a percentage of 83.1 vs. 16.9, for the two categories of inclination, respectively.

Table 2. Frequency and percentage of the two groups’ performance on questionnaire

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<td>W</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group 1 Frequency</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>87.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>83.1</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>85.2</td>
<td>83.1</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>85.2</td>
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<td>Group 2 Frequency</td>
<td>375</td>
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<td>54</td>
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<td>Group 1 Percentage</td>
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<td>Group 2 Percentage</td>
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</table>

W= Western; Ir. = Iranian Inclinations

Table 3 substantiates the difference further. The mean frequencies obtained show that the relationship between Western and Iranian inclinations for group 1 is analogous to that between Iranian and Western inclinations for group 2. Also, dispersions of the inclinations follow the same pattern. For group 1, Western standard deviation is 16.74
and Iranian one is 16.74, too; for group 2 this is 12.55 for Western and 12.57 for Iranian inclinations. As regards dispersion, it can be concluded that learners in group 2 have grown less dispersed (SD=12.57) after instruction of materials in comparison with group 1 which has functioned across both categories differently (SD=16.74).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G1 Western</td>
<td>14.76</td>
<td>16.74</td>
<td>3.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G2 Western</td>
<td>83.78</td>
<td>12.55</td>
<td>2.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G1 Iranian</td>
<td>85.23</td>
<td>16.74</td>
<td>3.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G2 Iranian</td>
<td>16.28</td>
<td>12.57</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be observed (Table 4), the inferential analysis shows both inter and intra group relationships significantly different.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>t-test</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G1: W vs. Ir.</td>
<td>-9.411</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G2: W VS. Ir.</td>
<td>12.012</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G1: W vs. G2 W</td>
<td>-15.22</td>
<td>.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>G1: Ir. Vs, G2 Ir.</td>
<td>15.21</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

G=Group; W=Western; Ir= Iranian

Overall, the results reached in this study are to be taken as suggestive rather than definitive as a multitude of issues might work for or against any attempts made for illumination of the culture-language relationship.

5. 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’ (Robinson-Stuart & Nocon, 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). As shown in this study, it may be claimed that culture as inseparable part of language can penetrate into the language learner's modes of thinking and feeling, and consequently release as behavioural norms. Of course, it must be noted that these remarks are not supposed to testify the strong version of language-culture interface which stresses the interdependence of the two for learning the language (acculturation). This point seems to require a different research design to come up with reliable results.

Another important point to remember in regard to our results is that this study focused on language learners within age range of 8 to 15, the period best viewed as formative. The formative years constitute the learners' cognitive, affective, and cultural filters and thus arm them with these mechanisms to perceive and interpret the world accordingly. This is to say that young learners are more prone to the 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 lenses of a foreign language.

Drawing on the results obtained, we may also refuse to accept an ecumenical approach to culture (Atkinson, 1999), which is to emphasize the global uniformity of cultural spectrum. This is obviously shown through the sharp distinctions observed between the two groups of learners in our study. However, it must be borne in mind that they might have been affected by some other factors during the 2 year long instruction program.

Also, the special cultural context, Iran, where our subjects have been placed triggers us not to read too much into the results. Though not approved by every scholar, the idea of oriental culture considered as collectivist, uncritical, obedient, etc. (Kumaravodivelu, 2003) may also account for our subjects' overall convergent behaviours. Surprisingly enough, both groups displayed much conformity before and after the instruction in a distinct yet
homogenized manner. This helps us remind that the oriental culture holds written materials in high regards with some sort of sanctity associated. The idea can be evidenced further by referring to a Persian proverb, which roughly reads, 'speech is air and wind', implying that say what you wish to but avoid leaving a record, say, written record.

Despite the interpretations made above, the reader needs to remember that there lots of other factors which may affect the results. They can range from specificity of instrument, subjects, cultural contexts, to subject's age, gender, and number, sociocultural and family backgrounds. Therefore, the results of the study have to be cautiously interpreted or generalized.

References


