Language education in Iran: a dialogue between cultures or a clash of identities
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Abstract
Learning about another culture is an integral component of learning a foreign language. The mission of developing an effective intercultural communication, as a result, has become one of the paramount concerns of language courses in many countries including European nations (Savignon, 2002). This emerging calling envisages language learners as open-minded representatives of their L1 community who are engaged in a dialogue of cultures (ibid). Given the dialogic nature of language learning, the current article perceives language pedagogy in Iran as an instance of a pseudo dialogue resisting an extensive inclusion of target culture in the course of English language education. One reason proposed as an explanation to this opposition is a potential clash of identities between two cultures.

Keywords: language learning; dialogue of cultures; pseudo-dialogue; clash of identities;

1. Introduction

The burgeoning introduction of concepts such as Pragmatic Competence (e.g. Leech, 1983), Intercultural Competence (Byram and Feng, 2005), Cultural Capital and Cultural Investment (Peirce, 1995), Cultural Pluralism (Kjolseth, 1970), and Languaculture (Agar, 1994) among many others to the domain of language pedagogy pinpoint the link between language and culture in such a robust way that some scholars assert that the learning of language, cultural meanings, and social behavior is experienced by the language learner as a single continuous process (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1995).

One arena in which the increasing concern of Language pedagogy with socio-cultural knowledge, required to comprehensively learn and use language is manifestly reflected is the course of defining language competence from solely linguistic perspective of Chomsky (1965) to Canale and Swain’s communicative competence model (1980), Bachman’s (1990) model of language ability, and his subsequently updated communicative language ability model (Bachman and Palmer, 1996) among some other models during which pragmatic and socio-cultural knowledge has grown to be a vital component of language knowledge. The upshot of such a course of development has been the influential introduction of the approach of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) with its focus on implementing programs and methodologies that promote the development of functional language ability through learner participation in communicative events (Savignon, 2005). The core tenets of CLT in such; view is encapsulated as follows (Berns, 1990, cited in Savignon, 2005):

1. Language teaching is based on a view of language as communication. That is, language is seen as a social tool that speakers and writers use to make meaning; we communicate about something to someone for some purpose, either orally or in written.
2. Diversity is recognized and accepted as part of language development and use in second language learners and users as it is with first language users.
3. A learner’s competence is considered in relative, not, absolute, terms of correctness.
4. More than one variety of language is recognized as a model for learning and teaching.
5. Culture is seen to play an instrumental role in shaping speakers’ communicative competence, both in their first and subsequent languages.

CLT according to such principles is viewed by some scholars as “an approach or theory of intercultural communicative competence to be used in developing materials and methods appropriate to a given context of learning (Savignon, 2005, p. 645)” according to which communicative competence is not a matter of rules but creating conditions that make possible shared interpretation (Gumperz, 1984, cited in Watson-Gegeo and Nielsen, 2003).

This perception envisages language learners as open-minded representatives of their L1 community and subjects engaged in a dialogue of cultures (Savignon, 2002). Referring to this dialogic nature of cultures, Kagan (1988) introduces three types of communication between cultures: (a) a valuable and equal dialogue; (b) a utilitarian relation between cultures; and (c) a pseudo dialogue or a complete rejection of one culture by another. According to Kagan, a valuable and equal dialogue is anchored in bilateral respect of the cultures in contact, typified by equal representation of cultures and exchange of meanings for the purpose of mutual enrichment. A utilitarian relationship between cultures, on the other hand, crops up when one of the cultures in contact imposes its values and norms leading the other culture to unquestioned acceptance of the conventions of the first culture. Lastly, the pseudo dialogue is conceptualized as a conscious isolation when chauvinistic cultures do not seek interaction with other cultures which they consider as “uncultured” or of "low value”.

Given these three types of dialogue between cultures, the current article perceives language pedagogy in Iran as an instance of a pseudo dialogue resisting a wide-ranging inclusion of target culture in the course of English language education, adhering to justifications such as protecting the local culture from cultural invasion of the West. Driven by concepts such as Fundamentalism, Linguistic Imperialism, and Cultural Invasion, this country strives to exclude the target culture from the content of foreign language courses in mainstream education with the motivation of preserving and promoting local culture. This article, therefore, aims at getting to the bottom of the spirit of such a dialogue by investigating the reasons for which the Iranian educational system opposes the widespread integration of the target culture in the domain of English Language Education.

2. Why refusal to integrate English culture in ELT in Iran?

While there exist such extensive compelling evidence on close interface between language and culture in L2 pedagogy, some countries including Iran yet defy the verdict in practice. Taking a close look at the English education at mainstream schooling of the country, one may easily discern that the system is basically inspired by a Structural approach to language pedagogy in which the major concern is the inculcation of an extended list of grammatical structures, a huge repertoire of de-contextualized vocabularies and also academic reading skills. The English tests at entrance exams at all levels of undergraduate, graduate, and even postgraduate in the country are all undeniable testimonies to this observation. Samples of such exams on the market and also preparatory materials for them, as well as the course materials of general English courses at the level of both pre-university and higher education clearly reflect the predominant structural nature of English pedagogy in mainstream education in Iran. Although, in parallel with these operations, country-wide private English institutes attempt to reconcile most recent publications and teaching methodologies of the world with this persistent attitude pursuing a communicative approach, numerous English learners yet find these courses not responsive to their needs, more specifically in recent years when the rate of brain drain and emigration has increased dramatically due to variety of ever-increasing political and social turmoil.

One question that rises here is that why English education in Iran does not incorporate the recent findings of language pedagogy counting theories of intercultural competence and pragmatic competence in resources and
methodologies utilized in English courses. Browsing English materials used in the country, one may simply notice that those nationally devised are essentially devoid of rich target culture content, deliberately evading wide-ranging inclusion of different aspects of target culture. Furthermore, in case of employing internationally published materials, some modifications in terms of cultural contents are carried out to eliminate perceived cultural incongruities. These adjustments in that are made by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance include putting Islamic head cover or modest clothing on women in pictures of the books and replacing expressions incompatible with Islamic culture, such as alcoholic drinks, boy/girl friends, dance, pork, fashion, some music styles, among some others with more “neutral” terms. At higher education, most general English courses are based on Grammar-Translation or Reading methods, seeking to improve structural competence and reading skills of the learners, ignoring other equally important components of language competence. For instance, listening and speaking skills are principally ignored in almost all general English courses at higher education where cultural teaching is essentially overlooked.

On the other hand, although in private English institutes one major concern is developing communicative competence of learners, employing course books such as Headway and Interchange and many others, the concept of culture is addressed in a very limited manner, taking a fact-oriented approach focusing on stereotypical knowledge of cultures and civilizations with a little attention to the pragmatic component of language knowledge/ability with its both aspects of socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistics facets. These practices reflect that developing pragmatic and intercultural competence is not an important concern of the profession in the country taking a very limited look of this goal. One root of such an inadequate approach to ELT in Iran and resistance to incorporating English culture to English pedagogy can be traced to the contemporary culture of Iran. While “eclectic cultural elasticity has been viewed as one of the key defining characteristics of the Persian spirit and a clue to its historic longevity” (Milani, 2004, p.15), recent culture of the country has been immensely tinged with the doctrine of Fundamentalism viewing religious principles as a way of life and salvation in all venues of life including education. Followers of this doctrine believe in Jihad (struggle) against the Western culture that suppresses the God-given (Shari’ah) way of life (Wikipedia, 2010). From this perspective, introducing Western culture in English courses is regarded as a forum for “clash of consciousness” (Clarke, 1976, p.380) in which “social encounters become inherently threatening, and defence mechanisms are employed to reduce the trauma”. Although it appears that Clarke taps this issue from the point of view of individual learners, I view this clash of identities on a larger scale occurring among nations and cultures in the sphere of language pedagogy. Some Eastern countries like Iran seem to take a static, structural point of view of social identity which is characterized by Siegel (2003) as a stance regarding power, prestige and identity as given, governed by the structure of the society and by the historical forces that formed this structure. According to this stance, a person’s social identity is the consequence of the membership to a particular social group he belongs to. In contrast, recent theories on social identity adopt an interactional approach to identity in a social milieu based on which “social context is not seen as given, but as created in each specific situation by the interplay of several
social factors” (Siegel, 2003, 183). Based on this view, “a person has multiple social identities, and the one that emerges in a particular situation is determined not only by the person’s group membership but by the social interaction” (p.183). Drawing on the interactional definition of social identity, Peirce (1995) introduces the concept of “investment,” based on Bourdieu’s (1977) idea of language as “cultural capital” viewing language learning as investing endeavour in using and acquiring the L2 because of the returns they receive in terms of friendship, education, as well as material gains. Peirce argues that the nature of this investment will always be changing since learners have complex social identities and a variety of desires vis-à-vis the target language. In this process, learners are continually “organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world; therefore, the investment in the target language is also an investment in a learners’ own identity” (Passrson, 1977, cited in Norton, 2000, p.11). Countries like Iran who take a static, structural view of identity with the view of national identity as an ideological group membership, may see English education as a cultural “invasion” rather than “investment” taking a defensive stance against integrating target culture into L2 education. Claiming to protect and promote the local culture, authorities modify the cultural content of course books and take a restricted view of language pedagogy in line with their ideological concerns preventing a due development of pragmatic and intercultural competence of the learners, ignoring the fact that L2 pedagogy is a venue for a dialogue between varying cultures and worldviews, not a battle field of egos.

The mission of preserving and promoting local culture, following a structural view of social identity, yet can be undertaken through some other avenues such as establishing or increasing Persian language courses both nationally and internationally. Furthermore, industries such as tourism can offer ample opportunities for introducing local Persian or Islamic culture worldwide. In addition, technologies such the Internet and Satellite channels bear the potential to introduce and advance the local culture, language, and ideologies in a much more positive manner rather than hindering the dialogue and interaction between cultures by eliminating or minimizing any possible contact and negotiation in different contexts including English pedagogy.

Countries that take a dynamic interactional approach to social identity in language education conversely cherish the diversity of cultures and standpoints with the quest of enabling learners to take new perspectives, reflect on their own, and focus on universal meanings (Byram and Feng, 2005). Corbett (2003) perceives this as a “neo-humanist” approach, assuming respect for individuals at the core of the endeavour. Accordingly, he defines intercultural learning as an empowering process during which the home culture is never refuted nor degraded, yet the intercultural learner sees his/her beliefs challenged by contact with others in a course of constant negotiation. The result of such a process is a kind of enriching personal growth characterized by progressive’ curricula (ibid). Similar critical dialogic approach is adopted by other scholars such as Bakhtin (1981) and Bibler (1991) who view culture as a special link of interaction between civilizations. They believe that dialogue is a basic nature of cultures and one cannot fully understand one culture in the absence of contact with other cultures.

In conclusion, it seems that the reasons countries like Iran oppose to assimilate target culture in English education stems from the defensive position they take against target cultures with the justification of protecting and endorsing local language, culture and ideology, missing the fact that L2 pedagogy is a place for dialogue between cultures and conciliation between diverse worldviews and identities. Taking a static, structural view of national and social identity, the country strives to eliminate the influence of Western culture from its educational system with the purpose of shielding Islamic and Persian culture at any cost including a distorted language education. Fundamentalist views the authorities and stakeholders hold about local ideologies and culture prevent the country from establishing a dialogical approach with the culture of other countries which in turn leads to an educational system that lags behind the most recent trends of the field.

References


