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Incorporation of L1 Culture into Second Language Materials Development: Benefits vs. Risks

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Abstract

One of the considerable issues in the field of materials development and syllabus design is culture. In recent years and toward the use of authentic materials in second language learning classrooms, there is a question that whether the students may best benefit from the target language culture implied in the authentic texts or amalgamation of both their first and the target language culture. In this study two homogeneous groups of learners were used. One served as control group and received materials containing only the target language cultural issues while the experimental group received culturally adopted materials containing both the first and the target language culture. After four sessions of teaching, an achievement test and a motivation questionnaire were used to gather data. The results revealed that while the culturally adopted materials have significantly improved the overall language learning of the learners, there was a slight difference between the mean score of the motivation tests of control (mean= 176) and experimental (mean= 154) groups.

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Keywords: materials development; second language learning; culture

1. Introduction

In the process of second language learning, many aspects are taken into consideration. Among them is the important role of materials development and syllabus design, two elements that are related and can directly affect the language learning process.

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1.1. Materials development

Language learning materials are the primary sources of information that help second language learners in the path of second/foreign language learning. The concept is defined as any type of information that the learners use to learn the language (Tomlinson, 1998). Preparing different types of materials that suit the real needs of language learners first requires identifying the learners’ needs and then to provide materials which suit the needs. Richards (2001) pointed out that since English is regarded as an international language which is widely used for communication around the world, and teachers try to provide learners with language courses which are relevant to their needs, communicative approaches toward language learning were developed. Communicative language teaching (CLT) focuses on communicative functions of language rather than language forms and therefore considers authentic materials and real use of language as the primary building blocks of language learning materials.

Nation and Macalister (2010), introduced environment analysis as another part of curriculum development, a part that focuses on the usability of the course. They distinguish the patterns of language use, political and national contexts and also the attitudes of groups and individuals of different environments. These differences are to some extent due to the different cultural settings of each environment.

1.2. Culture and materials development

As it was mentioned, the new CLT trend toward language teaching and learning focuses on using authentic materials, materials that represent the real world of the target language. Therefore, learning the second language culture is part of learning the second language itself. The culture is reflected in the materials prepared for the learners, is practiced in the language classes and is acquired by the learners. According to Mishan (2005), all linguistic products of a culture represent the culture within which they are produced. The relationship between language and culture is a bidirectional one, so no one can learn a language apart from the culture it represents. Mishan (2005) claimed that nature of the culture-language relationship does not allow for their isolated study and also continued that comparing and contrasting the cultures can serve as a useful exercise.

Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) pointed to the concept of cultural awareness and the fact that such awareness usually leads to reaching an important step of language learning. On the other hand, facing the target language culture is not always an easy task for the learners. Apart from the different personal characteristics of the learners themselves, there exists the native or the first language culture. Butjjes and Byram (1991) believed that the existence of the native culture and its role as serving as the reference point for the foreign culture can be effectively used in language classes.

Those who are developing materials for English classes in which English is the second or the foreign language of the learners, are accused of using only the western culture and ignore the culture within which English will be taught (Rinvoluc, 1999; Prodromou, 1988). This issue raises the question whether it is useful to consider the native culture in second language materials development.

1.3. Objectives of the study

Regarding the effects of both native and the second language cultures on language learning, and the fact that other researchers (McDonough & Shaw, 1993; Hedge, 2000) also pointed the importance of social and cultural setting of educational systems, in this study the researchers tried to answer the following research questions:

- Does the incorporation of L1 culture into L2 learning materials improve the L2 proficiency of EFL learners?
- Is there any significant relationship between the incorporation of L1 culture in second language learning materials and EFL learners’ motivation?

It was hoped that answers to these questions might provide material developers, teachers and learners with information about the effects of using both native and target language cultures on language teaching/learning.
2. Review of the literature

Toward the role of culture in language learning and teaching settings, a study was conducted by Genc and Bada (2005) in which they focused on the benefits of learning about the culture and suggested that having culture classes are significantly beneficial in terms of language skills and raising cultural awareness. In another study by Cheng et al. (2006), a multiple comparison of technology forecasting methods for new materials development prediction were used and most useful methods for forecasting were proposed.

Adopting the second language materials is a job that can be performed by teachers in the classrooms. Regarding the role of teachers and their abilities to change the class settings, Kennedy (1996) believed that developing of responsibilities for syllabus and materials design to teachers will only work if teachers have the required skills and are given the required time and support needed for evaluation of the thinking behind the new developments. In another study about the materials development, Bodegas (2007) found that some important factors such as people, physical setting, stakeholders and also times should be considered in all stages of materials development.

Considering the role of motivation in second language learning, Bernard (2010) explored the relationship between classroom activities, motivation and the outcomes. The findings of this study revealed that it may be possible for teachers to affect their students’ motivation thorough curricular design.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were a group of 48 female students with the average age of 17. They were all pre-university students of a pre-university in Shiraz, Iran. To select the students who were supposed to participate in the study, the researchers obtained the midterm scores of all 48 students, then the mean and standard deviation of the scores were calculated (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scores</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Variance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid N (Listwise)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>20.00</td>
<td>15.60</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>6.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Those students who scored within ±1 standard deviation from the mean were selected (N=33) and were randomly divided into two groups (Table 2): (control group (N = 17) and experimental group (N = 16).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15.39</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15.62</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An independent samples T-test was also run to check for any possible differences between the groups and to make sure that the groups were homogeneous (Table 3).
### Table 3. Independent samples T-test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances</th>
<th>T-test for Equality of Means</th>
<th>95% Confidence of Interval of the Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
<td>t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal Variances Assumed</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.984</td>
<td>-.441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal Variances not Assumed</td>
<td>-.440</td>
<td>.307</td>
<td>.663</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.2. Materials

Materials used in this study were:
- The motivation section of the MSLQ questionnaire developed by Pintrich et al. (1990).
- Monthly midterm exam of the school (an achievement test) and
- A full chapter of the pre-university level English course book (both the original chapter used for the control group and the culturally adopted one, used for the experimental group).

### 3.3. Procedure

After dividing the students into the control and experimental groups, first a pre-test was taken from both groups and then within four weeks a chapter of the pre-university English book was taught to students by the same teacher. While the control group received the original chapter, the experimental group was presented with the culturally adopted version of that chapter. Students were asked not to participate in any other English classes outside the school during the study. The adaptation was done by the researchers and was based on the adaptation framework proposed by McDonough and Shaw (1993) and was further modified by two other teachers. At the end of week four, both groups took the same achievement test (the post test). The tests were corrected by the teacher and also were re-corrected by the researchers. The students of both groups were also asked to answer a motivation questionnaire to find out the effects of incorporation of L1 culture on students’ motivation towards second language learning. The results of the tests and of the questionnaire are presented in the following section.

### 4. Results and discussion

The results of the pre-test taken in the beginning of the study and also the post test taken after week four are presented in Table 4.

### Table 4. Paired samples T-test of the scores of control and experimental groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>95% Confidence of Interval of the Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>Pretest-Posttest</td>
<td>-1.68750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Pretest-Posttest</td>
<td>-.29412</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Based on the obtained results, the sig. value of the experimental group’s paired samples t-test was smaller than the p value of .05 and therefore the treatment was significantly effective while for the control group the sig. value was .47 and not significant. To find out whether the treatment was positively significant or negatively, the mean scores of the pre- and post- tests of both the experimental and the control group were observed (Table 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pretest</td>
<td>15.6250</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1.50000</td>
<td>.37500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>posttest</td>
<td>17.3125</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1.76895</td>
<td>.44224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>pretest</td>
<td>15.3971</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1.47123</td>
<td>.35683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>posttest</td>
<td>15.6912</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1.91933</td>
<td>.46551</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The post-test mean scores of both groups was higher than the pre-test mean scores, which means the treatment positively affected the L2 learning process. As it is shown in table (5), the post-test mean score of the experimental group is higher than the post-test mean score of the control group (17.3125 vs. 15.6912), which in turn account for the effect of incorporation of L1 culture into the educational system of the experimental group.

Regarding learners’ motivation, the results of the answers provided by the MSLQ questionnaire revealed that there was a slight difference between the mean score of the motivation tests of control and experimental group (Table 6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results showed that the total mean score of the students in the control group who received materials with the target language culture was slightly higher than total mean score of the experimental group’s students who received adopted materials in which both L1 and L2 cultures were used. Therefore, the incorporation of L1 culture in second language materials was not considered as a motivating factor in ELT classrooms.

5. Conclusion

Considering the obtained results it was concluded that compared to materials containing only the second language culture, the culturally adopted materials were more useful for learners and were able to improve the overall learning of the EFL learners in a more effective way. So, to answer the first research question of the study, it can be claimed that incorporation of L1 culture can improve the language proficiency of EFL learners. Regarding the second research question of the study, it was concluded that incorporation of L1 culture into L2 learning materials did not significantly motivate EFL learners.

Considering the findings of the study, it is suggested that materials developers incorporate L1 culture into L2 learning materials to facilitate the learning process and at the same time familiarize learners with the necessary and interesting aspects of the L2 culture to increase their motivation.

The participants used in this study were female students of a pre-university school in Shiraz, it is suggested that other studies focus on both male and female students. In this study language proficiency and students motivation were studied therefore it is also recommended that in the future researchers would focus on other aspects of language learning as well.
References


