AN INVESTIGATION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS' PROBLEMS IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Abstract:

The present paper strives to highlight the relationship between language and culture in communication, in addition to the role religion may play in the activity for some nations, particularly Arab nations and Islam. It investigates specifically the strategies and problems of a sample of Algerian students of English at the University of Oum El Bouaghi while interacting with native speakers through social media.It focuses on the significance of cultural awareness in intercultural communication and attempts to shed light on the reasons behind students' communication breakdowns. The results show that despite the students' rather advanced level of English language proficiency, they still find problems in intercultural communication mainly due to cultural differences. Therefore, the integration of a course in cross-cultural communication in language teaching curricula is highly recommended where research in the area should in no way be estranged from the pedagogical practice.

Keywords: Language and culture, cross-cultural communication, social media and language learning.

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ملخص:

يهدف هذا المقال إلى تسليط بعض الضوء على العلاقة بين اللغة والثقافة في عملية التواصل. ويسعى كذلك إلى استكشاف ودراسة وعي طلبة اللغات الأجنبية بالاختلافات الثقافية بين المجتمعات، وتأثيرها في التواصل الثقافي والفهم المتبادل. تظهر النتائج أن العينة المدروسة من الطلبة (طلبة اللغة الانجليزية، جامعة أم البواقي – الجزائر) ورغم مستواهم اللغوي المتقدم، إلا أنهم مازالوا يجدون مشاكل في التواصل مع المتحدثين باللغة الانجليزية باعتبارها لغتهم الأم بسبب نقص الوعي الثقافي المتبادل وبسبب تأثير الثقافة في الاستعمالات اللغوية. لذلك فإننا نوصي بأن تولى أهمية أكبر للدور الذي تلعبه الثقافة في الاستعمال اللغوي في المناهج الدراسية لطلبة اللغات الأجنبية،كما يجب أن تربط البحوث المنجزة في الميدان المعني مباشرة بالممارسة البيداغوجية.

Introduction:

Differences across languages and speech communities with their expectations, cultural backgrounds and views of the world are likely to cause foreign language learners difficulties in the appropriate production of the target language and hence problems in communication. In this respect, learners may end up producing "linguistically" correct sentences but vague, misleading or even alien expressions to the target language conventions of use. The reason behind this can be attributed to the lack of awareness about the cultural context of target language production along with its speakers thought patterns and expectations.

The connection between language and culture is hardly ever raised for first language learners as they are completely immersed into their own culture. For foreign language learners, however, the issue of culture may be a real obstacle in achieving effective communication which necessitates more than grammatical and lexical competence. Successful communication in the target language requires some awareness of the target culture as well as its speakers' backgrounds and logic. Moreover, non-native language learners need to see the world from a native perspective and find themselves a part in the target speech community. Consequently, intercultural understanding is an essential component of foreign language learning not only for getting acquainted with others' lifestyles and traditions, but also for comprehending the context in which language is produced and eventually using the language effectively for communication.

The Language-Culture Connection

Many scholars stressed the inseparability of language and culture; a subject that is gaining an increased interest in the field of foreign language teaching (Kaplan, 1966; Jiang, 2000; Risager, 2005; Brown, 2000; Merrouche, 2010; Elmes, 2013). Applied linguists, along with everyone else concerned with the practice of teaching, are now seeking the best measures to teach culture and diminish cultural barriers in communication. In relation to the connection of language and culture, Jiang (2000), for instance, holds that the two "cannot exist without each other" (p. 328). Brown (2000) maintains that "a language is a part of a culture, and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture" (p. 177). In the same vein goes Merrouche (2010) stating that

> Language and culture are inextricably tied: they cannot be separated without losing their essence and significance. What is language if not a means of communication operating in a defined socio-cultural context? Without language, communication would be very restricted; without culture, there would be no communication at all. (p. 103)

To this end, any language is a part of a given culture and that language is what reflects culture to the world. Likewise, culture influences and shapes language by representing people's approaches to life and cultural backgrounds. In this regard, Qaddumi (1995) argues that "language is the vessel through which culture expresses itself" and that "language does not only express the way people communicate but also the way they think and behave" (p. 118).

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Language and culture are then interrelated, inseparable and cannot be dissociated. This relationship can nonetheless be viewed from another perspective, that of reciprocal influence. In other words, related literature has considered the ways in which culture influences language and the ways in which language influences culture.

One of the well-known theories that takes the matter of culture influence on language into consideration is "The Contrastive Rhetoric Hypothesis". First developed by Kaplan (1966), this hypothesis considers logic, rhetoric and communication as interdependent and culture specific. For Kaplan, people living in a particular cultural context view the world and organize their discourse according to that context. As a result, people will not only develop their oral discourse in a unique culture-specific fashion, but also write in a way which reflects that culture. Examples on the influence of Arabs' culture on their language are plenty, to cite one of them is Qaddumi's (1995) about how a guest's reply to a host offering a drink differs across Arabic and Western societies. According to Arabs' traditions, guests are not to be asked whether to have a drink or not; they are rather directly offered one, typically coffee or tea. Therefore, the guest's answer would be "thank you" as in "yes, thank you" because no matter how hard he/she tries to politely refuse, his/her refusal is not going to be taken into consideration and will be offered a drink anyway.

The most obvious influence of language on culture is that the latter is verbalized through the former; "culture shapes thought and thought is verbalized through language" (Qaddumi, 1995, p. 120). This means that when people speak, they give information related to a present communicative situation as well as cues about their cultural backgrounds. Yet, for "The Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis" things are interpreted differently. This hypothesis, also known as "The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis" and founded by Benjamin Lee Whorf based on his teacher's (Edward Sapir) linguistic approach, holds two versions: a stronger version and a weaker version. While the weak version maintains that language influences thought and perception, the strong version suggests that language controls thought and perception. In other words, every individual views the world by his/her own native language where the world is partly or entirely determined by the structure of the language (Whorf, 1956).

In conclusion, Jiang (2000) summarizes the language-culture relationship in a very expressive metaphor. He compares communication to a swimming pool where language is the swimming skill and culture is the water. Having both, swimming will be smooth; or in other words, communication will be successful. People being familiar with the water (native culture) will swim

confidently and easily; but when being unfamiliar (foreign culture), they will swim cautiously and with difficulty.

The Impact of Religion on Language and Culture

Generally speaking, there is always a relationship between languages and cultures. When it comes to Arab-Muslims, it is the language-culture-religion relationship. Islam has its impact on the Arabic language and on shaping Muslims thought patterns as it is for them the absolute truth and the guide for a better life and afterlife, especially when it comes to Qur'anic teachings and principles (Abu Rass, 2011).

In making appointments, for example, a Muslim would say "*In sha'Allah*" (God willing) because as the Islamic belief dictates, it is only God who knows the future and the only one who knows whether the transaction or appointment will take place at all. This might be frustrating for a Westerner who is expecting "yes" or "no" as an answer. Another example is the response to the formulaic question: "how are you?" with "*Alhamduli'Allah*" (praise to God) for Arab-Muslims as opposed to a number of totally different expressions expected from a Westerner without any religious implications, such as "I'm fine, thank you". The variety of responses to such questions may be confusing without some cultural background understanding, and may challenge the interlocutor's expectations as Yule's (1996) description of his experience shall demonstrate:

> When I first lived in Saudi Arabia, I tended to answer questions in Arabic about my health (the equivalent of 'How are you?') with the equivalent of my familiar routine responses of 'Okay' or 'Fine'. However, I eventually noticed that when I asked a similar question, people generally answered with a phrase that had the literal meaning of 'Praise to God'. I soon learned to use the new expression, wanting to be pragmatically appropriate in that context. My first type of answer wasn't 'wrong' (my vocabulary and pronunciation weren't inaccurate), but it did convey the meaning that I was a social outsider who answered in an unexpected way. (p. 5)

On the whole, language and culture are interconnected and play a role in shaping each other. For Arab-Muslims, religion seems to be a third variable that demonstrates even a stronger influence on both language and culture. This influence is primary for Arabic-speaking Muslims and secondary for speakers of other languages considering that Arabic is the official and original language

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of the Qur'an and most acts of worship. The language-culture relationship is then to some extent obvious; however, it is sometimes difficult to determine the connection of religion to them.
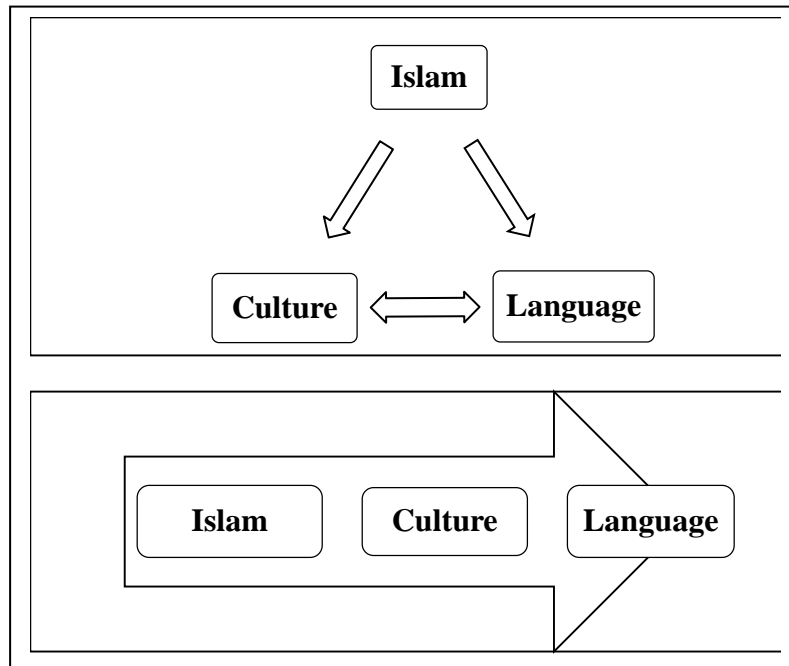
Figure 1 : Religion, culture and language relationship

The relation between Islam, the Arabic language and culture could be explained into two ways. The first is that Islam directly influences both language and culture and is not influenced by any of them when it comes to language use or communication. The second is that Islam influences culture which on its part influences language. There may be other potential explanations to this relationship that should not neglect the fact that religion, language and culture for Arab-Muslim societies are closely tied and immersed into each other that it becomes difficult to distinguish them or to trace the source of some linguistic usage and cultural tendencies.

Social Networking, Language Learning and Intercultural Communication

The emergence of Web 2.0[1]tools has provided academic institutions with a variety of innovative teaching instruments, and individual users with endless opportunities of learning through sharing and interaction. Social networking sites, discussion forums, personal blogs and wikis are particularly

important for language learners who canbenefit a lot from language exposure and language use in authentic and favourable learning environments (Mc Dermott, 2013; Lomicka& Lord, 2016).In this regard, Derakhshan and Hasanabbasi (2015) explain that "social networks are applied online technologies which make the second language learning more social, and enjoyable with minimal stress" (p. 1091).

Considerable research has recommended the integration of social media in higher education (Vie, 2007; An, Aworuwa, Ballard, & Williams, 2009; McBride, 2009; Mitchell, 2012; Mc Dermott, 2013; Lomicka& Lord, 2016; Malerba, 2016; Lin, Warschauer, & Blake, 2016). Social media sites allow foreign language learners, especially those referred to as "Digital Natives[2]", to interact more easily and get "engaged in more authentic social and communicative behavior than typically happens in the classroom" (McBride, 2009, p. 38). For these purposes, a number of "language learning communities" such as Busuu (www.busuu.com), iTalki (www.italki.com) and Livemocha (www.livemocha.com, now owned by Rosetta Stone) have been launched to introduce content/material in the target language and put learners in contact with native speakers (Malerba, 2016; Lin et al., 2016).

Social networks serve as tools for non-native speakers to socialize and learn the target language. Lin et al. (2016) maintain that the utmost advantage that social networks can bring for language learners is to provide them with opportunities to "deploy what they learn in authentic communication with native speakers around the world" (p. 124). Vie (2007) holds that such sites allow learners to be exposed to authentic language as used in the real world to achieve different purposes. Mitchell (2012) argues that Facebook, for instance, can help learners of English acclimate to college life, build friendships with native speakers and experiment with the target language. Similarly, Derakhshan and Hasanabbasi (2015) stress the importance of social media in aiding second language learners increase their abilities, self-knowledge, self-confidence, lifelong learning and skills.

Furthermore, social networks empower users to navigate not only across languages, but also across cultures and identities (Chen, 2013). They help language learners construct their target language identity and build a relationship with the target culture. The virtual world allows one to experiment with multiple identities without being at risk of leaving behind their first language context and sense of self that corresponds to that context (McBride, 2009). Vie (2007), for instance, found out that students' rhetorical awareness has improved though the use of MySpace and Facebook. Chen (2013) concluded that Facebook has had a positive impact on the acquisition of

pragmatic use in the English language, and acknowledged the role of emerging technologies in promoting intercultural understanding among users from different cultural or ethnic groups. According to Sawyer (2011), social media play an important role in intercultural adaptation. She argues that interaction through social networks helps individuals to meet the demands of a new cultural environment and become more integrated into the host culture.

In short, social networks play an important role in creating new forms of multicultural relations as well as in serving as channels for socializing, interacting and learning. Numerous attempts have been made to integrate social networks within formal education and to create other networks specifically for language learning. However, they still have a great potential for individual users who wish to complement their traditional learning of languages and get familiar with other cultures.

Methodology

Rationale and Procedure

Research in the area of cross-cultural studies has shown through empirical evidence that students' first language rhetorical conventions and cultural traits play a role in their target language production. This impact usually results in communication breakdowns when there are major differences between the native and target speech communities. The present paper seeks to verify, based on students' description of their experiences, if this is the case when it comes to social networking where the nature of language used is completely different from any academic context.

In order to examine the students' difficulties in authentic communication with native speakers of English (henceforth NSE) and their perceptions about cultural variations in discourse, a questionnaire was administered to a sample of second-year Master students majoring in "Teaching English as a Foreign Language" at the English Department, Larbi Ben M'hidi University - Oum El Bouaghi. Initially, forty-five (45) questionnaires were administered, yet the final sample comprises only thirty-three (33). Twelve (12) respondents were excluded because their answers to a preliminary question reveal that they never communicate with NSE through social media. This fact makes them unable to answer most of the questions. Even if they do answer, their answers will be hypothetical and will not reflect a real-life experience.

A questionnaire about social media interaction has been opted for as a response to the nowadays explosion in "Information and Communication Technologies", and the diversity of social networks that have revolutionized the concept of "Internet". Traditionally, surfing on the internet was based on sending and receiving encoded data to and from servers. Nowadays, a great deal of that activity requires another party to react, interact, and create endless virtual communicative contexts. Furthermore, social networking is a free and easy way for foreign language learners to interact with native speakers of the language and a tool that provides them with input, output and real-life authentic situations

Main Findings

Question: As a language learner, please state the benefits of social networking in developing your English language proficiency.

According to the survey participants, the contributions of social networking to their English language proficiency could be summed up in the following points respectively:

- Vocabulary expansion.
- Authentic use of language in real-life communicative situations.
- An understanding of others' cultures and a boost of intercultural awareness.
- Improving accuracy and fluency.
- Offering linguistic exposure and production opportunities.
- Developing the language skills.

Question: How often do you interact through social media with NSE?

Options	N	%
very frequently	3	9.10
frequently	4	12.12
sometimes	16	48.48
occasionally	10	30.30
Total	**33**	**100**

Table 1. Frequency of interaction with NSE through social networks

Table 1 shows that only 9.10% of the respondents interact with NSE on a regular basis. This, in addition to the fact that 26.67% of the original participants never do, demonstrates that students are in a serious lack of authentic language exposure and production. Subsequently, even if they could

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reach a good mastery of the target language in terms of grammar, vocabulary, etc.; their cross-culture communicative skills would remain limited to some extent.

Question: Apart from social media, do you have any other real-life communication tools with NSE?

Options	N	%
yes	5	15.15
no	28	84.85
Total	**33**	**100**

Table 2. Students' other tools of communication with NSE

84.85% of the respondents maintain that apart from social media, they have no other means of communication with NSE. Therefore, they have to make the best of it and recognize its importance as a learning tool that can provide them with authentic use of language. The five students (15.15%) who claim to have other means of communication with NSE mention basically the phone and emphasize on its inadequacy in having lengthy and informative conversations.

Question: Do you interact with your friends/classmates in English through social media in the same way you do with NSE?

Options	N	%
yes	07	21.21
no	26	78.79
Total	**33**	**100**

Table 3. Students' strategies in social networking

This question seeks to uncover the students' employment of different interaction strategies and linguistic usages with different audiences. According to Table 3, 78.79% of the participants do not interact with Algerian friends/classmates in the same language they do with NSE. Though this question was directed to get an idea about students' use of the English language, the majority of them answered that they use a mixed code of Arabic and English to communicate with their classmates and friends which is not the case when interacting with NSE where they have to use English exclusively. Furthermore, they add that they feel more spontaneous with their peers, and this would have a direct influence on the nature of topics and language in terms of formality degree.

Question: Do you feel more comfortable communicating with Algerian friends and classmates or with NSE?

Options	N	%
Algerian friends/classmates	23	69.70
NSE	09	27.27
Both	01	03.03
Total	**33**	**100**

Table 4. Students' preferences in social networking

In relation to the previous question, this one attempts to find out whether the participants feel more at ease with their Algerian friends/classmates from the same background or with native speakers of the target language. Results demonstrate that the majority of respondents (69.70%) feel more comfortable interacting with their classmates/friends, who are speakers of Arabic. In explaining the reasons behind this, they maintain that their status as foreign language learners makes them tolerate mistakes. Furthermore, sharing the same social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds intelligibly eliminates any chance of misunderstanding. Finally, when interacting with NSE, students fear coming across difficult words and expressions to understand or guess their meaning.

The students claiming that it is more comfortable for them to interact with NSE (27.27%) feel it effective to learn English from its source i.e., as used by native speakers. According to them, this allows for dependable feedback by proficient language users, gives an idea about cultural and pragmatic usages, and makes them pay more attention to the accuracy of their language. For one student (03.03%), it is equally comfortable to interact with friends/classmates having a shared context and a variety of topics to discuss, and with NSE which makes a good opportunity for language learning and practice.

Question: Please, feel free to mention any communication problems you have ever had with NSE.

Answers to this question could be divided into two categories: problems in "understanding" and problems in "making oneself understood". The students admitting that they sometimes fail to understand relate this to the use of unfamiliar words and idiomatic expressions by NSE. Another problem that leads to communication breakdowns is coming across expressions with cultural/religious connotations. Students also complain that sometimes they

have nothing to say when their interlocutors start discussing life aspects and certain practices which are unique to their cultures and societies.

With regard to students' problems in conveying a message, their main difficulty lies in explaining some of their orientations in life, cultural tendencies, and most importantly, religious beliefs and practices. For instance, in speaking about traditional food or mythical beliefs, students encounter difficulty in finding the equivalents of some Arabic words in English because they exist neither in the English language nor the western culture. They also report a frequent failure in explaining less common religious celebrations, acts of worship and religion-specific expressions.

Discussion of the Results

Social networking is essentially considered in the present study as the only medium for having an authentic-real-life interaction for foreign language learners. However, students do not seem to make the best of this means in developing their interactive skills and target language proficiency. They rather have a tendency to interact more often with individuals who come from the same background as theirs and have comparable language proficiency. Besides, they feel more comfortable with their peers because in addition to psychological distance, their common level of proficiency in the target language makes producing mistakes or switching to Arabic two very natural aspects of interaction and communication.

Participants have also reported that they occasionally encounter communication problems, both in understanding NSE and in making themselves understood. The main reason behind this, according to them, lies in cultural differences between their community and the target language community. This could be related to the mutual unawareness of each other's lifestyles, nature of relationships, habits, traditions, religious beliefs, and culture-specific language usages.

Conclusion

Cultural differences influence communication and make very important elements to be considered when communicating across cultures. Social networks are operational tools for gaining knowledge about the target culture that could compensate for the lack of face-to-face communication. An effective use of them is likely to help foreign language learners overcome cultural barriers and build authenticity in language production. The main reason behind

the present study participants' difficulties in intercultural communication is that they keep operating within the same cultural groups online as they do offline.

Eventually, despite the fact that using social media for language learning may have its inconveniences, it remains by far the only means of interaction with the outer world for a great majority of language learners. Teachers, educators and researchers should look for the best ways to integrate new technologies in the process of language teachingand to make students benefit from them. Finally, whether through modern technologies or traditional practices, foreign language learners should be made aware of the target culture and helped to accept it. Simultaneously, they should learn to appreciate their own. Without the target culture, they cannot communicate or be open to the world; and without cherishing the native culture, they would surrender their identity

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Note:

 (1)-Unlike Web 1.0 which was "read-only", i.e., users accessed the Internet to find information, exactly like going to the library to find books; Web 2.0 is "read/write" and allows users to become active participants and content-creators. Web 2.0 technologies (for instance blogs, wikis, podcasting, social bookmarking, and social networking sites) have major benefits in education such as developing interaction, communication and collaboration; enhancing critical thinking skills; raising motivation and flexibility; improving writing and technology skills and many other benefits (An et al., 2009).

(2)-According to the "Oxford Living Dictionaries", a digital native is a person born or brought up during the age of digital technology and so familiar with computers and the Internet from an early age.