Investigating Cultural Awareness among Algerian EFL Learners as a Step towards Familiarizing the Other: An Exploratory Study to Measure the Level of EFL Cultural Knowledge among Algerian Secondary School Students.

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Abstract:

We live in a world where the need to master English language is increasing in all aspects of life. Therefore, educators and policy makers must emphasize the quality of EFL learning. An important step towards this endeavor is to work on students' cultural competence. This will familiarize them with the target language; hence allow the learning process to become much easier. This exploratory study is an attempt to investigate the level of EFL cultural knowledge among Algerian secondary school students. It is conducted by distributing a test to 3rd year students in ABID MERROUCHE Secondary School, El Meghaier, Algeria. The results are reported and evaluated in hopes they would provide thorough information on the subject and form the basis for further actions towards the betterment of the EFL education in the Algerian context.

Keywords: Cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural competence, EFL learners, Algerian context.

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1. Introduction

Teaching culture in parallel with teaching a foreign language is a very important element that cannot be neglected; the reason is that language is the means by which culture is clearly expressed. Risager (2006, p. 9) states that "language teaching must inevitably be accompanied by teaching about cultural phenomena." In the same vein, Mitchell and Myles (2004, p. 235) argue that "language and culture are not separate, but are acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other." (Cited in Chudhury, 2013). If learners are well acquainted with the culture of the language under study, they will better understand and produce the language and will learn about the diversity of this world.

As young learners, they see every aspect of life from their own cultural perspective. In other words, they view the world through their mother culture. This results in many problems when coming in contact with other cultures or when dealing with people from a completely different cultural background. This explains Bennett et al.'s (2003, p. 237) argument that "the person who learns language without learning culture risks becoming a fluent fool." (Cited in Chudhury, 2013). Brown (2000, p. 171) points out the same issue when he asserts 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."(ibid). The importance of culture is also emphasized by Tomalin (2008) when he describes it as the fifth skill in addition to listening, speaking, reading and writing (ibid). This indicates teaching a language cannot and should not be separated from teaching its cultural phenomena.

Teaching the target language culture(s) opens students' minds to the cross-cultural nature of the world and makes them notice the pragmatic differences among cultures and respectively languages in communication. They learn that what can be normal or convenient to say in one speech community might be very uncomfortable or a taboo in another. In other words, they come to realize that what can be tolerated in a certain speech community, may cause discomfort or even rejection in another. Therefore, knowing the culture of a certain language is

very important since it guides the individual's linguistic behavior outside their own society.

Developing learners' cultural knowledge contributes to raising their cultural awareness. According to Byram (1997), culture learning is seen as a comparative process in the sense that learners start raising awareness of their own culture and compare and contrast it with the target culture. This concept refers to developing knowledge of one's own culture while exploring the target language culture. It involves developing an "inner sense of the equality of cultures, an increased understanding of one's own and other people's cultures, and a positive interest in how cultures both connect and differ" (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 5. Cited in Saniei, 2012).

Such well-developed cultural awareness will help learners overcome stereotypes and prejudices about their own as well as the target culture. According to Byram et al. (2002, p. 27):

> *Stereotyping involves labeling or categorizing particular groups of people, usually in a negative way, according to preconceived ideas or broad generalizations about them – and then assuming that all members of that group will think and behave identically*

Stereotypes are not based on scientific facts or logical reasoning, but rather a feeling or an opinion one develops or adopts mainly based on what they hear and see from the media or the people around them. Prejudices, on the other hand, are the judgments they make about these certain social groups and cultures based on these stereotypes. Byram et al. (2002) state that "prejudice occurs when someone pre-judges a particular group or individual based on their own stereotypical assumptions or ignorance." Teaching the cultural aspect along with teaching the language should offer an opportunity for both teachers and learners to face their own stereotypes and misjudgments concerning the target culture and to distinguish between what is right and wrong. It also encourages them to reflect upon what they think and what the reality tells them to think.

Teaching culture can be divided into two categories. According to Lee (2009) and Peterson (2004) culture is categorized into Big "C" culture and little "c" culture. Lee (2009, p. 78) states that Big "C" culture is "the culture which represents a set of facts and statistics relating to the arts, history, geography, business, education, festivals and customs of a target speech society." Peterson

(2004) describes it as the culture that relates to grand themes. Little "c" culture, on the other hand, includes the little details of one community's everyday life. For Lee (2009, p. 78), this type of culture is "the invisible and deeper sense of a target culture" including attitudes, beliefs and assumptions (Cited in Chudhury, 2013).

In conclusion, one goal of learning a foreign language is to be able to communicate in that language, therefore we need to bear in mind that the way people communicate differs. It is influenced by their norms, values, beliefs, attitudes, history, social status, geographical area and many other interrelated factors. In other words, it is influenced by their culture. It is now proved that understanding the social and cultural aspects of any language is a critical element to correctly comprehend and produce the language itself. And even though English language is nowadays considered as an international language with many cultures under its umbrella, we still believe that some knowledge about inner circle countries cultures should be known among students. Learners' curiosity had better be satisfied the right way instead of letting them take information from sources that foster stereotypes and misconceptions about the other.

1.1. Historical Background of Culture in Foreign Language Teaching

For a long time, linguistic-based language teaching approaches dominated the field of foreign language teaching. That gave birth to language learners with a wide range of vocabulary and grammar knowledge, yet low ability to hold a conversation and negotiate meaning. Despite the debate among scholars concerning the position and status of culture in foreign language teaching, it was not until the 1990's that culture was considered and accepted in language teaching programs thanks to the cultural studies carried out in the fields of anthropology and sociolinguistics.

In the 1960's and 1970's, investigations of the relationship between language and culture led to empirical works by Hymes (1964) on language and culture, Kaplan (1966) on rhetorical patterns accepted in different cultures and styles of writing, and Gumperz (1972) on interactional sociolinguistics (Cited in Liu, 2009, p. 5). In the 1980's, there was an urge to include culture in second and foreign language teaching and many scholars like Byram (1989) proposed their own models. According to them, exposure to culture is a fundamental part in language acquisition since the language acquisition process itself is nothing but an act of

socialization, i.e., an attempt from the child to be accepted as a member of the speech community in which they live. Damen (1987) analyzed the influence of culture on interaction which later led him to define cultural values and beliefs.

In the 1990's, the subject of culture has become more popular and widespread. Kramsch (1991) emphasized that language cannot be learned without an efficient understanding of the cultural context in which it is produced and that foreign language learners must also be learners of the foreign culture. What made it even more needed for Risager (2007) is the increasing number of students studying abroad especially through exchange programs and the evolutionary development that was witnessed in the field of information and communication technologies (ICT) which made it possible for people from different cultural backgrounds to have contact with each other.

In the 2000's, more emphasis was on content than on form. This is clearly explained in the statement "students cannot truly master the language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs" (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996, p. 27. Cited in Peterson and Coltrane, 2003, p. 6). In addition, thanks to Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communication, learners were encouraged to find relations between different cultures through the observation of similarities and differences among them. According to Larzén-Östermark (2008, p. 528), the main aim of this stage is to develop "the ability to see how different cultures relate to each other in terms of similarities and differences and to look at themselves (the learners) from an 'external' perspective when interacting with representatives of other cultures."

2. Aim of the Study

This exploratory study aims at investigating cultural knowledge among Algerian EFL learners in pre-tertiary levels. We aim at exploring the level of Algerian students' knowledge about factual as well as hypothetical information concerning inner circle countries. Moreover, we aim at revealing the source(s) from which such information are acquired.

3. Research Questions

- Do Algerian EFL learners have adequate cultural awareness and cultural knowledge about the target language?
- Where does such knowledge and information come from?

4. Methodology

In this part, we shall discuss and describe the participants of this study as well as the method used for data gathering and analysis.

4.1. Participants

The subject of this study were thirty-two (N=32) 3rd year secondary school students. The reason for choosing 3rd year students, is because they were at the end of their mandatory EFL learning. It can be said that they represent the final product of the EFL curricula that started with their first year of middle school. The participants were chosen randomly and they were from all streams; they also took the test anonymously. Concerning gender, there were twenty (N=20) females and twelve (N=12) males.

4.2. Method and Data Gathering Tools

A mixed approach to data analysis was adopted in which the data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. After data analysis was conducted, results were discussed and implications were formed.

4.2.1. Test Description

The test duration was one hour. Concerning the questions, they were mainly about big 'C' culture. We decided to primarily focus on this type and proceed to testing their small 'c' culture knowledge if the first test results are proved to be satisfactory. After all, lacking big 'C' culture knowledge is an indicator that small 'c' culture is also low if not non-existent.

Students were given freedom to answer either in Arabic or English since the focus is on the knowledge they possess rather than the medium through which they convey it. Many students have the information yet do not know how to deliver them. We did not want the linguistic constraints to hinder them. Following the same principle, questions were explained in Arabic too.

The test consisted of ten (10) questions:

1) In a multiple choice question, Students were asked to give the correct relation between England, Great Britain and United Kingdom.
2) Students were asked to name six (6) flags about inner circle countries.

3) Students were asked to name four (4) capital cities where English is spoken as a native language.
4) Students were asked to give the number of states in the United States of America and name four of them.
5) Students were asked to name the cities where the Statue of Liberty, Big Ben and Buckingham Palace are located.
6) Students were asked to share their thoughts about the differences in personalities between American and British people.
7) Students were asked to name UK's current 'president'.
8) Students were asked to name four days' inner circle countries celebrate.
9) Students were asked to name the currencies of Canada, UK, Australia and Ireland.
10) Students were asked to point out whether they got their information from inside or outside the classroom and to explain whatever choice they opted for. This question was a survey; hence it was not marked.

4.2.2. Test Analysis

The test was graded out of sixteen (16), so the average is eight (8). Out of thirty-two (N=32) students only three (N=03) students got the average (9.5, 10.5 and 9). Two (N=2) of them were males. One of them in addition to the female student were from the scientific stream whereas the third one did not mention his. Percentage was not used for the number of participants is not large.

The First Question: Twenty (N=20) out of thirty-two (N=32) students got the first question right. It had the largest number of correct answers.

The Second Question: only three (N=03) out of thirty-two (N=32) students got the full mark and were able to name all the flags:

- Ten (N=10) out of thirty-two (N=32) students recognized the flag of Australia.
- Twenty-three (N=23) out of thirty-two (N=32) students recognized the UK flag even though only six (N=06) students out of the twenty-three (N=23) wrote the right term which is UK or United Kingdom instead of England or Great Britain. The other seven (N=07) students labeled it as the American flag and one (N=01) student said it was the French flag.
- Twenty-one (N=21) out of the thirty-two (N=32) students recognized the Canadian flag. Others mentioned Australia, Indonesia, Britain and England.

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- Eight (N=08) out of thirty-two (N=32) students were able to recognize the Scottish flag.
- Seven (N=07) out of thirty-two (N=32) students were able to recognize the flag of Wales.
- Five (N=05) out of thirty-two (N=32) students recognized the Irish flag. Thirteen (N=13) mistook it for the Indian flag while ten (N=10) others labeled it as one of the African countries' flags such as Mali, Nigeria or Cameron.

The Third Question: No student was able to get the full mark on this question. Six (N=06) students were able to mention London and Washington while seven (N=07) mentioned either of them.

The Fourth Question: No one could fully answer this question. Only three (N=03) students gave the right number of states in the USA. Many could not tell the difference between states and cities, so they mentioned cities instead of states. Twelve (N=12) students could not name any of the states and only four (N=04) students were able to give all four examples. One (N=01) mentioned three states; ten (N=10) mentioned two examples and five (N=05) mentioned only one example.

The Fifth Question: No one was able to get the full mark on this question. Fifteen (N=15) out of thirty-two (N=32) students did not answer the question or gave wrong answers. No one of the rest (N=17) was able to name the city where Buckingham Palace is located. Ten (N=10) were able to locate the other two monuments while seven (N=07) named only one city.

The Sixth Question: This question had no right or wrong answer. It was designed to encourage students to express their thoughts and opinions and reveal any stereotypes about the other. Twenty-three (N=23) students left the space empty or gave irrelevant answers such as pronunciation. These are examples the others gave; they were either written in English or translated from Arabic:

"American people are more civilized."

"British people are humble and American people are racist."

"British people respect the rules, but American people don't."

"America has more races and cultures which lead to more variety in personalities and more diversity in thinking."

"British people are organized; American people are free and not restricted (disorganized)"

"American people are open-minded, but British people are conservative."

"American people are open-minded and British people are such kind people."

"American people are number one for all people and British people are intelligent."

"American people are serious and their technology is better than British people."

"The United States is the mother country of the world."

The Seventh Question: This question was a trap. Students were supposed to state that UK has no president and give the name of either the queen or the prime minister. Only one (N=01) student out of thirty-two (N=32) provided the full correct answer. He stated: "UK doesn't have president. It has a queen. She's called Elizabeth." Three (N=03) students provided half of the answer mentioning 'Queen Elizabeth'. However, the rest (N=28) left the space empty or provided wrong answers, mostly saying 'Donald Trump' (N=14) or former US presidents such as Obama, Truman, Kennedy. This may indicate that they are confused between UK and USA. One (N=01) student mentioned 'Putin'.

The Eighth Question: Only two (N=02) out of thirty-two (N=32) students got the full mark to this question naming four celebrations: Halloween, Christmas, Valentine's Day, New Year and Thanksgiving. Eight (N=08) students could not name any celebrated days within inner circle countries. Seven (N=07) students named only two celebrations among the aforementioned ones and thirteen (N=13) were able to mention only one celebration.

The Ninth Question: No one was able to name the currencies of all listed countries. Two (N=02) students did mention all currencies, but they were not precise concerning Canada and Australia as they mentioned only 'Dollar' instead of 'Canadian Dollar' or 'Australian Dollar':

- Twenty-one (N=21) out of thirty-two (N=32) students were able to label the currency of Canada as 'Dollar', but only one (N=01) out of them was precise enough to label it as 'Canadian Dollar'.

- Five (N=05) out of thirty-two (N=32) students had an idea about the currency of the United Kingdom even though it was not clear and only two (N=02) students were able to provide the correct name of the currency in Arabic or English.
- Six (N=06) labeled Australian currency as 'Dollar', but only two (N=02) out of these six (N=06) were precise enough to label it as 'Australian Dollar'.
- Ten (N=10) out of thirty-two (N=32) students were able to name the Irish currency and mentioned 'Euro'.

The Tenth Question: Nine (N=09) students did not provide answers or provided unclear or irrelevant answers. Eight (N=08) students said it was both from outside and inside the classroom through lessons and school research. Some of them even mentioned middle school lessons and other subjects like social sciences. Fifteen (N=15) students said it was from outside the classroom only and mentioned TV (channels and shows in English, news, American movies and series), internet (YouTube, Google search, social media like Facebook and Instagram), books, magazines, football and video games. Students who said that their information come from outside the classroom declared that classroom lessons are about grammar and texts and do not explain such topics. One student stated: "In school we don't study culture of the language, but rules of the language." Another female student declared in the middle of the test: "I always get good marks in English, but I can't answer these questions."

5. Evaluation of the Results and Implications

Based on the overall marks we can say that students have very little background of the target language culture. The proof is that only three (3) students out of thirty-two (32) were able to get marks above the average. These results also tell us that even those students who scored highest, lack a great deal of cultural awareness for their marks were not that high. In addition, their struggle with a test based on basic big 'C' culture knowledge shows that their small 'c' culture knowledge is low if not absent. After all, one can never know the very detailed information about a certain speech community if they have no idea what that speech community is or what its most obvious characteristics are.

Based on their answers, it should also be mentioned that students do not seem to distinguish between inner circle, outer circle and expanding circle countries. When they were asked to mention cities where English language is spoken as a native language, many students mentioned India, Mumbai, New Delhi, Singapore and even China and Portugal. Such answers also show that they cannot make the distinction between terms like 'city' and 'country' since many mentioned countries when they were supposed to mention cities. More importantly, it seems that they have many misconceptions about the other concerning their behavior, ideologies and personal characteristics. Some of the students' thoughts can even be rendered dangerous since they put themselves in an inferior position to the other.

Concerning the source of their knowledge, more than half (65%) of those who answered the last question stated that TV and social media are the source of their information. It goes without saying that such sources are known to encourage stereotypes and misconceptions about the other. It is important to point out that teenagers and kids will always be absorbing information one way or the other. Therefore, it is better to give them the right education in the right time and setting using the most appropriate techniques. If such knowledge is not provided for them in the classroom by teachers, they will seek to get it elsewhere which can be very risky.

6. Recommendations

The impact of teaching culture along with teaching the foreign language is undeniable. And throughout this study, we were able to see how students' low level of cultural awareness is affecting their linguistic competence itself. Obliviousness to the target culture causes ignorance concerning the appropriate linguistic behavior that should be adopted according to different communicative situations. There is a difference between knowing a language and knowing how to use it correctly according to different interactive situations. What can help enhance the latter is the understanding of how the culture and society operate and how the language functions within those intertwined systems.

It is the role of not only teachers, but also policy makers and curriculum developers to pay more attention to the inclusion of the cultural aspect throughout the learners' academic journey. This inclusion should be systematic, smooth, practical and appropriate to the students' age and level. A call to design a curriculum that takes into account the cultural aspect of the language and puts the

concept of interculturality into practice is now more necessary than ever. On the level of teachers and trainers, Meetings and study days held periodically by inspectors and teacher educators should encourage teachers to learn more about this topic and research on their own in order to increase their cultural competence. They can also learn the necessary methods to successfully deliver it to the learner. To make it more fun and fruitful, teachers can share the culture learning process with their students by holding real-life or virtual classes or workshops using authentic content and interactive materials. Including learners and making them an active part in this process can help both teachers and learners advance quickly and develop both their cultural competence and communicative skills.

In terms of research and academia, more in-depth studies need to be done on this matter. Such studies need to have not only learners, but also teachers as the subject of their focus as we know very little on Algerian EFL teachers' cultural awareness and sociocultural competence. Also, studies that are conducted with the goal of producing more accurate and culture-suited EFL educational programs are more than needed now since the latest trends in education are putting more emphasis on interculturality and inclusion. Neglecting the cultural aspect especially in the context of foreign language learning can be seen as a form of alienating and disregarding the other.

7. Conclusion

In this study we attempted to investigate the level of cultural knowledge among Algerian EFL learners. Learning about the culture and social norms of English language speaking countries in parallel with learning the linguistic aspect of the language itself is very important for improving students' overall competence of the language. It helps them better produce the language and move from constructing sentences that are barely expressive and grammatically incorrect to a language that is alive and authentic. However, based on their performance, we can say that our students, in general, do not have a sufficient cultural background about the language they spend many years learning. Most of them do not have the cultural background they are supposed to have at their level. Moreover, their thoughts are full of misconceptions and prejudices. Concerning the source of their information, the majority claimed that their answers do not come from English language classes, but from media, internet and other sources that are famous for being biased and misleading. This puts an urge to take serious

actions towards rising and improving the level of our students' cultural awareness and cultural competence using the right methods.

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