

The Effect of L2 Learning on Learners' Perception of Culture

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Abstract

This study was undertaken to cast light over EFL learners' perception of culture. To that end, a group of English language learners was taught English through Interchange Series and their perception of culture was assessed using a researcher constructed questionnaire. The same questionnaire was also administered to the parents of the same learners to detect any probable differences. The results revealed that the EFL learners are largely distinct from their parents in perceptions of the designated cultural issues. While EFL learners were oriented towards Western Culture, their parents were lopsided towards domestic issues.

Keywords: Interchange series, EFL, Culture, English language, Iranian learners

Introduction

Though considered multifarious, culture is viewed as inextricably integrated into language. Brown (2007) is of the opinion that culture can cater for the biological and psychological needs which are usually formulated as conceptual networks or mental constructs of realities. In this vein, Halliday (1978) also contends that mental constructs or semantic networks are sociologically grounded and need to be realized externally through the medium of language. That is, 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 coevolve in the same way as do meaning and expression. Of course, this conviction seems to hold valid in relation to the first language. Removed from its main original cultural bed where possibly no causality can be speculated, a foreign language seems to have some directional bearing on the new language learners' perception of the world.

Admittedly, 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 stress the inalienable and consolidated nature of the two on different grounds, i.e., lexical, discursual, ideational, textual, etc, indicating that a foreign language to be learned cannot be dissociated from cultural elements and that a language curriculum devoid of culture would fail in developing communicative competence in the language learners (e.g., 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 other 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. Also, Adasko, Britten, and Fahsi (1990) discovered nothing motivating in using Western culture, but rather breeding learners' dissatisfaction with their own culture. Sometimes this opposite force even grows more intense in regard to the English language, portraying a totally negative picture of the language with lots of unpredictable consequences (Chatterjee 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) and students are supplied with strategies to cope with the cultural differences. This position implies 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 with different orientations. Therefore, textbooks are expected to impart both knowledge of language and the target culture simultaneously. In that direction, the present study intends to compare and contrast the effects L2 books can have on young learners learning English through Interchange Series. Drawing on Vygotsky's (1962) sociocultural constructivist theory, we may argue that young learners of L2 are more likely to undergo a process of constructing realities through a new channel of communication. In order to illuminate the issue further, this study also compares young learners with their parents to see if they go different ways when exposed to new cultural issues.

Research Purpose

As language symbolically represents a microcosm of culture and social values, 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 cast light over the issue further, this study aimed at discovering if English language learners who were taught a special series of books (Interchange) come to prioritize the cultural issues differently from their parents who have not studied the books and are thus expected to be culturally most influential in the family.

Method

Participants

The participants of the study comprised two groups. The first group involved 16 male students from the 2nd year of junior high school to the 2nd year of senior high school and ranged in their age from 11 to 15. This group had started learning English in an Isfahan based institute, Iran, through Interchange Series about two years before and were about to finish the 3rd volume. The second group consisted of the same number of parents as the learners in the first group, ranging in their age from 42 to 55. They were different in their education from high school diplomas (6 people) to the majority of bachelors (8 of them) and two masters. As revealed in their questionnaires, the parents knew little English, few grammar rules, greetings, and general English conversational

statements. It must be noted that the learners were asked to require their mothers and fathers to jointly complete the questionnaire so that the result would represent the family's perception more coherently.

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 for each general topic, 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 choice 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'.

Table1

Questionnaire rating scale

Inclination	Possible Orders of Preference	Rating Scale
1. Western	1. a. Western b. Western c. Iranian d. Iranian 2. a. Western b. Iranian c. Western d. Iranian 3. a. Western b. Iranian c. Iranian d. Western	1. Very Strong 2. Strong 3. Moderate
2. Iranian	1. a. Iranian b. Western c. Western d. Iranian 2. a. Iranian b. Western c. Iranian d. Western 3. a. Iranian b. Iranian c. Western d. Western	1. Weak 2. Very Weak 3. No Effect

Data Collection

The questionnaire was administered first to the 1st group in their institute class and then taken home by the same learners to be filled by the 2nd group, i.e., their parents. The parents (mothers and fathers) were asked to do the task jointly so that we would get a better representative family perspective. Before starting the job, learners were briefed on how to do the task and were also trained to guide their parents through. Parents were additionally asked for their knowledge of the English language. All the participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of information received in order to help with the responsibility to be fully discharged, thus increasing 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's questionnaires were returned a week later.

Results

This study sought to cast light over the culture and language relationship as it unfolds within foreign language learning milieu. The focus was on the effects that particular books can produce on the learners. To that end, two groups of participants, namely, English language learners and their parents participated in the research. Both groups were asked to prioritize their perceptions of some

cultural issues, which have been extracted from Interchange Series. 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 (young learners of English in Group 1) is sharply oriented towards Western side while their parents are domestically inclined. As can be seen, Group 1 goes for the western choices of cultural issues (with 83.1 percent) all derived from the books they have been taught, versus 16.9 percent of preferences given to the Iranian cultural equivalents. In contrast, their parents show a maximum percentage of 34.37 for such Western choices and 65.62 for domestic ones. Further details also reveal that while young learners give maximum preference to 'Food' and minimum to 'Names' of Western inclination their parents prefer 'Music' most and 'Names' least on the Western list. The findings of the present study may indicate that the language textbooks used exert a strong force in shaping the learners' cultural perception of the world. Of course, one needs 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 almost inversely proportional to each other (in the two general categories of 'Western Inclination' vs. Iranian Inclination').

Table 2

Frequency and percentage of the two groups' performance on questionnaire

Cultural Topics	Frequency				Percentage			
	Group 1 (N=16)		Group 2 (N=16)		Group 1 (N=16)		Group 2 (N=16)	
	W	Ir.	W	Ir.	W	Ir.	W	Ir.
1. Entertainment 1	14	2	6	10	87.5	12.5	37.5	62.5
2. Social relations	14	2	5	11	87.5	12.5	31.25	68.75
3. Clothes	11	5	8	8	68.8	31.3	50	50
4. Place 1	11	5	7	9	68.8	31.3	43.75	56.25
5. Music	15	1	10**	6*	93.8	6.3	62.6	37.5
6. Market/Exchange	11	5	5	11	68.8	31.3	31.25	68.75
7. Food	16**	0*	4	12	100	0.0	25	75
8. Holidays	15	1	5	11	93.8	6.3	31.25	68.75
9. Names	9*	7**	2*	14**	56.3	43.8	12.5	87.5
10. Celebrities	12	4	4	12	75	25	25	75
11. Sport	15	1	7	9	93.8	6.3	43.75	56.25
12. Films	13	3	8	8	81.3	18.8	50	50
13. Animals	11	5	5	11	68.8	31.3	31.25	68.75
14. TV/Radio	15	1	3	13	93.8	6.3	18.75	81.25
15. Entertainment 2	15	1	4	12	93.8	6.3	25	75
16. Education	12	4	6	10	75	25	37.5	62.5
17. Place 2	14	2	4	12	87.5	12.5	25	75
18. Cinema	14	2	6	10	87.5	12.5	37.5	62.5
19. Miscellaneous 1	15	1	7	9	93.8	6.3	43.75	56.25
20. Miscellaneous 2	16**	0*	4	12	100	0.0	25	75
Total	266	54	110	210	83.1	16.9	34.37	65.62

Note. W= Western; Ir.= Iranian Inclinations

**=Max; *=Min

Discussions and Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that young learners of language tend to diverge from the way their parents come to perceive the world around them and 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 and Nocon 1996), culture learning is a process through which language learners come to experience, perceive, interpret and feel the world around (Brown 2007). As shown in this study, it may be claimed that culture as

inseparable part of language can penetrate into the language learners' modes of thinking and feeling, and consequently release as behavioural outputs. Of course, it must be noted that these remarks are not supposed to verify the strong version of language and 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 the results is that this study focused on language learners within age range of 11-15, 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 lens of a foreign language. Compared with their parents, these young children build up their world within what is presented to them through the extracurricular activities of learning a foreign language, thus moving beyond the predetermined limits of their family.

Also, the special cultural context, Iran, where our participants 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' rather convergent behaviors. This helps us remember 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. So, books are highly valued for the messages they deliver to the learners.

On the whole, 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. Also, though young learners of English are brought up by their parents and the parental care provided is believed to be sometimes stringent and meticulous we need to remember that the mass media, society in general, school as an important nurturing milieu, and the overall structure of the new generation life style fostered by the peer pressure may all variably account for the cultural changes the youth experience. The English language books may be considered one crucial factor among many others. Also, the reader needs to remember that there are lots of other factors which may have affected the results in this study,

ranging from specificity of instrument, subjects, cultural contexts, to subjects' age, gender, number, sociocultural and family backgrounds. Therefore, the results of the study have to be cautiously interpreted or generalized.

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