

## **Second language learning and the cultural knowledge, the inseparable process: A case study of studying English at Jordanian universities**

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### **Abstract**

This study intends to prove the importance of having knowledge of the culture as a background that can play a direct role in learning the foreign language. The study takes English language as an example. Because there is an interactive role between cultural teaching and foreign language teaching, the study attempts to prove that teaching English language should not be limited to linguistic knowledge, but also to the cultural knowledge. Finally, the study concludes that having knowledge of the foreign culture can help students acquire English language better. The study recommends that universities should be provided with an appropriate environment to encourage the learning of foreign language.

**Keywords:** Cultural education, Jordanian Universities, Socio Linguistics, Teaching of English as a foreign language, multiculturalism.

### **I-Introduction**

This study aims at discussing the importance of understanding the cultural background and the culture of the "other" as a basic background to enable the students' competence of the foreign language. Because there is an inseparable interaction between the language and its cultural environment, the study focuses on the relationship between language learning and the knowledge of its cultural habitat. The study takes learning English as a foreign language as case study. The researchers believe that having knowledge of the cultural background facilitates the learning process by making learning faster and easier especially learning new idioms and vocabulary.

### **II-Foreign language Learning and cultural acquaintance**

Much attention nowadays is paid to learning foreign language in its cultural environment. Teaching language is not only concerned with the grammatical rules and linguistic patterns. On the contrary, the student has to be acquainted with its culture to learn a language effectively.

Accordingly, the study attempts to prove that learning about English culture can be very helpful in English language learning for students who learn it as a second language.

Going back to the classic methods of teaching, the linguistic teaching method which depends on the grammatical competence was believed to be the first step in language teaching. But language is not only grammar; it is a system of communication between people. Language, like any other system, consists of many elements the linguistic aspect is only one aspect of the language. Therefore, the socio-linguistic elements are inseparable from each other, and here the cultural background is necessary in teaching English. politzer emphasizes this fact because as he states ,"[i]f we teach language without teaching at the same time the culture in which it operates, we are teaching meaningless symbols or symbols to which the student attaches the wrong meaning." (1959, Pp.100-01)

Above all, Byram et. al insist that there are many specific meanings that could not be taught without understanding the culture because the "knowledge of the grammatical system of a language has to be complemented by the understanding of culture specific meanings" (Byram, Morgan et at, 1994, 4).

To sum up, learning a foreign language dose not focus on having the students master its pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, on the contrary, all the former aspects couldn't be learnt if we ignore the culture of the target language.

### **III-Review of related literature**

There are many studies that emphasize the importance of linking language learning with its cultural context. For example, Tomlinson defines cultural education as the increasing inner recognition of other cultures; it happens when the student realize that both his culture and other cultures have many points of similarities and differences. (Tomlinson: 2001, p.5)

On the other hand, Allen traces the beginning of cultural education, he states: "...prior to the 1960s, the lines between language and culture were carefully drawn. The primary reason for second language study in the earlier part of this century was access to the great literary masterpieces of civilization" (1985, p. 138).

Moreover, Travales & Cavalcanti stress the importance of the cultural awareness for any learner; the effective foreign language must be accompanied by the cultural teaching. They argue that if the students learn the language without the culture in which it is rooted, their learning will be passive because they will learn signs that are linked with the wrong signifier. (1959, Pp.100-101)

Besides, McLeod states that instructors who teach English cannot achieve their goals unless they teach culture first because "by teaching a language...one is inevitably already teaching culture implicitly".(1976, p. 212)" In other words, this means that the linguistic, social, and socio linguistic elements are inseparable from the remaining linguistic elements, and thus the cultural education is an urgent necessity for foreign language learning.

Also, Flewelling notes, "it was through reading that students learned of the civilization associated with the

target language"(1993, p. 339).

Kitishat et.al high light the importance of social interaction as a positive role in helping students acquire language easily and more efficiently. In "The Role of the Social Relations in successful Social Interaction and language Acquisition", the researchers point out to the importance of social interaction in learning new languages, in this light ; the involvement of the students in active social interaction proved to be of positive results .This form of "functional social interaction" helps in "evaluating the self-estimation" of the student; and therefore, increase the students' abilities to learn and adopt from every situation they face. (Kitishat Et.al:2015, p.197)

#### **IV- Importance of the study**

In light of the studies conducted on language teaching, the major purpose of teaching languages is to increase the practical learners' abilities in successful communication. Accordingly, a question poses itself that is how curriculum can make the interaction of knowledge possible with regard to the integration of culture and education in the form of cultural education. One possible answer for this question is constructivism which is a theory that stresses the role played by the instructor in facilitating the teaching of the foreign language. According to this theory, the students can acquire language from the practical experiences they faced. To sum up, there is a need of finding an identical teaching environment similar to the real environment. In such environment, the students may have the chance to interact at the highest levels and this will help them acquire language actively.

#### **V- Statement of the problem**

Since learning of both language and culture are equally important, the study aims at proving that learning the culture of the "other" helps in making the acquisition of the foreign language especially the new vocabulary and skills faster and more coherent. The study aims at answering the following questions:

- 1- Dose the knowledge of the foreign language culture help in improving the students' skills?
- 2- Does the knowledge of the foreign culture facilitate the acquisition of foreign language?

Referring back to the traditional teaching techniques, which heavily focus on the linguistic competence of grammar and syntax in the first place, the study aims to prove the fact that learning a foreign language is not mere cognitive rules; on the contrary, it is a communication system among people. Like any other system, language consists of many aspects, the syntactic aspect is only a field of it and all the other aspects are inter linked with each other. From this point, the study aims at proving that language learning depends on language as a way of communication which mostly depends on live interaction between the learner and the language he aims to learn in its environment. This fact cannot be done without having been exposed to the culture of the target language.

## VI-Sample of the study

The sample of the study consists of 20 students enrolled in the first year at department of English language and literature at Al –Balqa' Applied university in Jordan.

## VII-Methodology

The researchers conducted a survey to find out the students' attitude toward the issue of studying the foreign language with its cultural background a questionnaire was distributed on the student who study English language in their first year at the university. The survey focuses on the linking between language and culture. The questionnaire includes the following questions:

Question	Topic
1	Why are you interested to study English?
2	Are you interested in learning English culture?
3	Do you think understanding English culture help you understand English better?
4	Are you interested in participating in cultural activities, why?
5	Are there other means that enhance cultural teaching?

The former questionnaire was designed in an open- ending form to have different ideas from the students. The sample study was selected from 20 students. All controlled in their first year at Al- Balqa' Applied University.

Most of the students attributed the difficulty of learning English as a language communication to either linguistic or cultural aspects.

## VIII- Factors of Cultural Education

No doubt that there is a close relationship between language and culture, and thus it is important to include courses about culture and civilization of the language that the students look forward to learn in the study plan of the department of English language and literature. The study reveals three main factors enforcing the application of the cultural education for learners of foreign languages; they are summarized in the following points:

A-Having knowledge of English culture helps the instructors in the first place in explaining new vocabulary that could not be explained without having knowledge of the cultural background, especially religious terms and

historic expressions.

B- Learning a foreign language requires learning new experiences as well as behavioral dimensions, a fact which makes exposing the students to the foreign language cultural environment of great gains which are not limited to the linguistic educational dimension. An example of such behavior is learning the skills of asking a request, offer and apologizing...etc.

C-Having a cultural knowledge is of a great benefit for the students because they can find learning easier and understand situations better and therefore act more actively in acquiring new words and having a faster feedback in a short period of time if compared with students who were not exposed to the foreign culture and environment

### **IX- Results.**

Regarding the first question: "Why are you interested to study English?"

(11) of (20) students express the reason for their interest to learn English simply because they need it in their communication, ( 5) students of the sample point out to the cultural aspect saying that they learn English because they like the American culture and way of life. This fact motivated them to study English. ( 2 )students state that they study English course because they need it in their application for high education programs i.e. (Master & Doctorate).Succeeding at English language exam was one major condition for acceptance in the program (2) students said that they study English because they need it in job application in which mastering a second language is required to have a job.

Regarding the second question:" Are you interested in learning English culture? "

(14 ) students answered( yes) in reference to learning the foreign language culture. (5) Students said that they need courses that teach English and American culture because they lack enough knowledge about the culture itself. Only one student didn't give a reason for learning the foreign culture.

With regard to the third question: "Do you think understanding English culture help you understand English better?"

(11) Students gave "yes" while (7) gave "no" and (2) students said that they don't know!

The fourth question" Are you interested in participating in cultural activities, why?" (6) Students express their lack of interest to participate in cultural activities because they do not know much language that can help them communicate, (5) students mentioned that it depended on the nature of the activity itself. (9) Students mentioned that they are interested in participating in these activities.

Finally, with regard to the last question: "Are there other means that enhance cultural teaching?" (11) Students

mentioned that watching films, or listening to radio that are presented in the English language is very helpful.

(5) Students mention that chatting with English /American people can be very helpful. (4) Students mentioned travelling abroad can enhance the cultural learning.

The findings of the study present the general reaction of the (20) participants regarding the issue of the cultural knowledge. The study displays the Jordanian students' need for having more cultural courses in the Jordanian universities that teach English. Besides, more cultural education tools are needed to give an efficient output of the teaching process.

## **X- Recommendations**

The study recommends the following:

Cultural openness:

The need to open the doors for cultural interaction is a necessity so that the teaching process of the foreign language can be more useful and viable. The successful active learning of foreign language requires openness on foreign cultures .This will result a cultural awareness not only of the foreign culture, but also of the learners' own culture. This fact is due to the awareness of the students to the differences as well as the similarities between their mother culture and foreign culture, a fact which helps them to adjust their position and attitude toward the culture and the language of the "other".

Stimulating students' attention:

The cultural learning entails that the students have a certain degree of responsiveness to the values, beliefs and cultural ideologies. Thus, in this light, the educational experts must focus on the cultural dimension of foreign language especially when they put plans for curriculum of English language teaching .The formal traditional class regulations of teaching are less informative and not practical if compared with the cultural teaching methods. If teaching is accompanied by an educate information about the cultural environment of the language, this will decrease the degree of sensitivity the students show for the foreign language. This can be achieved by enlarging the scopes and dimensions of the teaching material on the one hand, and up-dating the methods of teaching on the other hand. If the teacher succeeds in applying these dimensions, the opportunity of applying the cultural teaching of the foreign language will be possible. Examples of the ways which the instructors may adopt in cultural teaching are the following:

1-Visual aids

a. Pictorial materials

b. Maps

## 2- Auditory aids

- a. Video clips
- b. Films & plays

Teaching courses about foreign language culture and civilization:

The study recommends including courses about culture and civilization in the teaching plan of the department of English language and literature or any foreign language the students want to study.

To sum up, the learning of a foreign language necessitates the acquaintance of the cultural background to increase the students' interest in the foreign language and making learning more useful and interesting. The knowledge of the "self" and the "other" are considered major tools to reach cultural successful interaction and a better output for the foreign language learning in general and for English in particular.

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