



Using mother tongue in Saudi EFL classrooms at university level (Special Reference to Undergraduates at Taibah University)

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ABSTRACT

In the field of EFL, the undeniable relationship between language and culture has always been a focus of attention from a variety of perspectives. Sociologists, anthropologists and naturally applied linguists have tried to understand whether cultural aspects of FL interfere in much the way where other types of contrasting linguistic systems do. This paper examined the attitudes of Saudi teachers and students towards employing Arabic as a facilitating tool in English classes, a topic that has gained wide attention recently. The present study was a case study, which investigated teachers and students' attitudes towards this issue in Taibah University. The data were collected through questionnaire in which Taibah University teachers and students of English at Primary, secondary and college level were asked questions to respond with the purpose of finding the importance of cultural aspects in learning the target language. The analyzed results show encouraging signs for changing the perception of cultural teaching by some sound evidence provided by the participants of the study.

Keywords: Culture/intercultural teaching; teacher/learner attitude; intercultural communicative competence; cultural awareness; foreign language education

Introduction

Language teachers programs all over the world and in Saudi Arabian universities(specially in Taibah university) aim to train and develop prospective language teachers to become well-equipped teachers in all aspects of language teaching. Many researches has been made in the past to establish quality and dynamics of teaching/learning at university level. However, if such programs have been analysed in depth, the linguistic part of language teaching over shades of EFL teaching. That is, teachers training programs do not give much emphasize to include culture or culture teaching programs and because of this lack, language teachers mostly struggle to identify cultural resources for their learners although each staff of such education program assert the inevitability of the separation of culture and language. However, we as educators teach and our students learn about the culture of the Foreign Language (FL) whether we include it overtly in the curriculum.

We all are aware of that knowing a foreign language (FL) does not just mean knowledge of target language syntax, phonetics and phonology, semantics or huge number of vocabulary, but knowing also the target language culture as social construct. Therefore, on a general level, culture has been referred to as "the ways of a people" (Lado, 1957) or "...the whole way of life of a people or a group" (Montgomery, M., & Reid-Thomas, H. 1994) which "includes all the social practices that bond a group of people together and distinguish them from others".



We are also aware of that in traditional education programs, language teaching was seen as teaching the forms and usage of the target language and such implications were seen as representatives of cultural values of the target language. Traditional view of culture has been seen as summarized by Allen (1985): "...prior to the 1960s, the lines between language and culture were carefully drawn. The primary reason for foreign language (FL) study in the earlier part of this century was access to the great literary masterpieces of civilization".

In the last decades in Saudi Arabia, nevertheless, using Arabic in EFL classroom objectives shifted their route to a more attractive one. For example, The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has undergone great political, social and economic development. To meet new challenges, the Ministry of Higher Education has introduced English as a foreign language in universities since 1925 (Al-Ahaydib, 1986). According to the educational policy in the Kingdom (1974: 13), the aim of teaching English was furnishing the students with at least one of the living languages, in addition to their original language, to enable them acquire knowledge, arts and useful inventions, transmit our knowledge and sciences to other communities and participate in the spreading of Islam and serving humanity. Besides the above reasons, the position of English as the world's prestigious language seems to place demands on citizens to be able to communicate with people from different parts of the world. Since intercultural competence is defined as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of other cultures being aware of their values, norms and their thinking, feelings and acting.

Objectives of the study

During the last four decades, investigations into the use of MT in L2 classroom have dramatically increased, gaining widespread attention. The current case study took place in the Department of languages and translation studies, Al Ula Campus, Taibah University, Saudi Arabia.

The EFL teaching is always affected by socio-cultural factors. Many Arab students, attending the EFL classes, come from the background where English is unknown. Of course, they are taught English in their primary and secondary schools, but they are taught English only as a formality. Teachers as well as students take EFL lightly. They only need marks to pass the examination and they even pass the EFL examination by memorizing the answers without learning any English. Consequently, they spend their valuable years in schools without learning anything of English language. However, when they come to college or university or take admission professional courses like medical, nursing, computer science, engineering etc, they need English language because they have to study everything in English. At this stage, English becomes a problem for them. At this problematic stage, only an intelligent and competent teacher may come for their rescue. If, unfortunately, a student does not get a competent teacher, his interest in learning English will disappear forever.

Literature review

Saudi Arabia is a country where English language is considered a prestigious skill. It has been indicated that 84.9% of Saudi Arabian students learn English to get better-paid jobs (Moskovsky & Alrabai, 2009, p. 6). A review of literature has shown that there is little research on how EFL teachers of Saudi Arabia (Taibah University) envisage intercultural competence teaching and on their general disposition towards it. The issue of using students' first language in learning English as a foreign language has been a critical and controversial issue for a long time. In fact, such issue is as old as language teaching itself (Kelly, 1969). Inclusion or exclusion of mother tongue or MT from EFL classes has attracted the attention of different linguists and researchers who have shown their beliefs about advocating this trend or objecting it.

There are many studies advocate Mother tongue/ L1 use in EFL classroom at primary, secondary and tertiary level, and reveal its advantages in language learning. As in Littlewoods's study (1981) who claimed that MT/ L1 can be used for certain purposes such as giving class instructions and class management, but at



the same time he emphasizes that learners should be encouraged to use L2 as a medium of communication even for class management. Some researchers who believe that specific use of MT is a helpful technique in the EFL classroom. This is one of the reason many scholars have figured ways out to use Arabic in EFL classroom teaching. For instance, Atkinson (1987) claimed that the use of the mother tongue can facilitate checking understanding and giving instructions; it is a valuable technique for exploiting class time. He considered that the potential of the students' mother tongue use in the classroom requires more and more exploration. David Atkinson (1987) also adds that the gap in methodological literature is somehow responsible for teacher's hesitation and uneasiness about using the students' mother tongue or not in the EFL classroom. Cook (2001) stated that if MT is regarded as a resource for classrooms, it is able to assist both teachers and students in many ways: for teachers, it helps in conveying meaning, explaining grammar and organizing the class, while also being used in collaborative tasks and individual strategy use for students. Furthermore, the learning process between children and adults is different. We found that the that a high percentage of the undergraduate group of students agreed with using MT in their EFL classroom as they believe that it helped them to understand difficult concepts. Generally, they hold positive attitudes towards using MT in their EFL classes.

In accordance with previous studies, Mukattash (2003) mentioned, "using MT in EFL teaching has been found to " facilitate both teaching and learning, systematize comprehension of EFL structures and items and hence leads to meaningful learning." In a similar study, Sercu (2002) investigated whether and to what extent MT is going to support EFL classroom. English is having its own identity and it cannot be replaced with any other language. He strongly objected to use MT in EFL classroom teaching. Flemish, English, French and German teachers support intercultural objectives and are willing to promote the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence through their foreign language teaching.

Methodology

The case study examined the perceptions of teachers, administrators and students, actual uses of Arabic and their frequency in English language classrooms. In order to reach a good understanding of this issue, three tools were used. The form of this research data is quantitative; the manner of data collection is both descriptive and experimental. Participants are selected randomly from the study population in an unbiased manner, and finally, data from the culture questionnaire were analysed statistically. Three sets of questionnaires were prepared. First one for Secondary School, 44 students and 3 teachers were participated, Second one were prepared for Preparatory college, 60 students and 6 teachers were participated, and finally at University level, 74 students and 5 teachers were participated (Total 178 students and 14 teachers), and 13 classroom observations (generally two classroom observations for one teacher). Results of the three methods showed facilitative uses of Arabic by both teachers and students, despite some conflicts between the theoretical understanding of using MT and how to employ it in the L2 classrooms.

Sample / Participants

The data about teachers and language learner's perceptions of culture and culture teaching/ learning was collected through a questionnaire to see whether there is a significant difference between the groups, but it is slightly modified by the researcher to suit the requirements for the writing course. The questionnaire used a 5 point scale, requiring participants to respond to each item once whether strongly disagree (1 point), disagree (2 points), undecided (3 points), agree (4 points) or strongly agree (5 points).

Data collection procedures

After some revision, the questionnaire is developed as two parts.

- (A) The first part contains biographical information about participants such as age, gender, educational background etc. And
- (B) The second part consists of 13 questionnaire items.



As mentioned earlier in the data collection procedure, the method of analysis is statistical analysis.

Conclusion

It is a good idea for sure to use target language most of the time in the EFL classroom; however, teachers should also know that they should not feel guilty while using MT when it is really necessary and appropriate to do so. The situation might also be in the opposite way, that is, the teachers might be counting too much on MT, which provides less amount of target language input. In this study, we have found out that the teachers at Taibah University used MT most for rapport building purposes, making the topic/meaning clear, explaining difficult concepts or ideas, etc. MT can be useful in helping students find the correct answers for the questions & activities in for the tasks in their textbooks. It was also found out that, both the teachers and the students at all the levels are aware of the importance of using the target language as much as possible in the classes; however, they could not deny the need of mother tongue from time to time. Both the teachers and students were satisfied about the amount of target language use in their classes. Actually to teach English to students who do not have much understanding about English is a very difficult task. An EFL teacher should not be afraid of handling of these students in the classroom. If he handles these students carefully and patiently, he/she can achieve her goal. The teacher, who teaches such students, has great courage and patience. In a class of 45 - 50 students, if 75% of students do not know English or have no interest in English, they do not understand what the teacher says or teaches, in the classroom. Gradually they lose their interest in EFL classes, where a teacher has to decide at what percentage he has to use MT in EFL classroom. This study may have an impact on teachers in terms of questioning their own MT use, and being more aware of their own teaching. Teacher trainers may also make use of the present study while they are training the prospect teachers. They may explain that using the target language as much as possible should be the goal of every foreign language teacher; however, the use of the students' MT might also be necessary from time to time.

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