



A –Relatively- New Approach to Address the Teaching of the Target Culture in Algerian Middle Schools: The Fifth Use of ICTs in Language Learning

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Abstract

Both language teachers and applied linguists are becoming aware of the importance of addressing the culture of a community while teaching the language of its speakers [8]. In Algeria, in the case of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in middle and secondary schools, the four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking are the first concern of both teachers and educators. Teaching the foreign culture; however, is rarely taken into account when planning and designing curricula and textbooks for instance. One of the reasons behind this is that it is not yet clear how to teach culture, at what stage of learning the language it should be added and how to make young learners aware of the differences between their own culture and that of the target language. My research investigates the possibility of using educational technologies, specifically Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to raise cultural and intercultural awareness amongst Algerian middle school learners of English. It aims first at checking the current situation of the target culture in textbooks of English at the level of middle schools; second, identifying the factors affecting the use of ICTs in teaching and learning EFL. Last and most importantly, it aims at finding out how ICTs could be used in teaching the target culture rather than restricting their use to develop the language skills only. I will be using qualitative methods in collecting my data, I will first conduct a textual analysis of the two middle school textbooks of English, the old one and the new one. Then, I will use interviews with both Algerian EFL middle school teachers and inspectors of English of the same level. I will also try to get access to textbook designers and interview them, and take some field notes during teachers training courses. Based on the analysis and discussions of my data, I intend to formulate suggestions and recommendations concerning both future use of ICTs in EFL learning and the status of culture in the process of teaching and learning EFL in Algeria.

1. Introduction

Modern technology brought so many changes to all domains of education and made the status of learning much easier, learners nowadays can get access to any information they need with one click. In the field of foreign language learning, technology is offering learners many options through which they can develop their language skills as well as their knowledge about foreign cultures in general. In practice, inside the class, specific use of technology is required depending on what is needed to be learnt as well as the objectives of the lessons. Technology tools like iPads, laptops, mobile phones, etc. can be used as both facilitating tools and information access tools. In Algeria, as in many other countries around the world, the use of technology inside the classroom is limited in comparison to countries like Japan and Korea. However, teachers are trying to use the available tools they find in schools to facilitate the delivery of information to their pupils. In terms of EFL teaching and learning, textbooks are the first and foremost used tools by both teachers and pupils to develop the learner's ability to listen, speak, read, and write in English as this is the main goal teachers want to achieve. The cultural element, however, is not given much consideration in comparison to the other skills mentioned above for some reasons only textbooks designers know. This makes the chance for the learners to become aware of the cultural diversity less; therefore, they become culture bound because they are living in a monocultural environment [7]. Algeria is still in the episode of encouraging the use of educational technologies in classrooms, one of the reasons behind this situation can be that education is for free at all levels so the government cannot support to provide all schools in the country with ICTs that can be used by both teachers and students in all subjects. However, teachers of English are sometimes managing to use tools like laptops. Throughout my research I would like to investigate the specific use of ICTs in Algerian middle schools as well as the status of the cultural element within teaching and learning EFL and how ICTs can be used to develop pupils cultural and intercultural awareness. My specific research questions are:

1 What resources are currently used for English language teaching and learning in Algerian middle schools?

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- 2 How far do these resources currently support the development students' cultural and intercultural awareness?
- 3 What are the factors affecting the process of broadening the students' cultural and intercultural awareness in relation to schools, teachers, and students?
- 4 What is the potential of ICTs to support the development of students cultural and intercultural awareness alongside English language teaching and learning?
- 5 Are Algerian middle school teachers and learners of English "ready" to use ICTs to support the development of cultural and intercultural awareness?

2. Literature review

Since early centuries, culture has been considered as one of the most complicated terms the English language has got [5] [13]; this makes it just more difficult to define especially if it is about how this term could be taught. Through looking at how culture is seen from many different points of view, I can say that the definition of culture depends on the discipline this definition is used in. In linguistics, Brown, like many other scholars refers to culture as “a way of life” adding that it is “the context within which we exist, think, feel, and relate to others” [2]. In more details, culture can be considered as the way of life of a particular community in a particular period of time, this way of life covers all the aspects that differentiate a group of people from the other like: art, music, customs, traditions, beliefs, dance, history, religion, and of course language. Culture then is learnt and transferred from one generation to the other with the potential of change in between. It should be clear though that culture is not a characteristic of language, but an information transferred through language [1] [9], this does not mean that language cannot be a part of culture; it is believed that language is an integral part of culture and that there is an interrelation between both in that each spreads across the other, and that no one – either culture or language- can be perceived without the other [11].

In terms of language education, teachers and learners of the foreign language should be aware that there are other cultures and that people are not different just because of the colour of their skin [3]; this awareness is not enough though, learners need to know and learn about other cultures to enrich the linguistic knowledge they have, or will have. Also, the “dynamic” relationship between culture, language, and learning makes culture an element that cannot be discarded from the process of language learning [12]. Amongst the reasons why culture should be taught are motivation and improvements of attitudes [10]; more specifically, one of the ways of achieving students' high motivation is through culture classes because students prefer activities based on culture like music, dancing, etc. [8]. Also, cultural awareness is a challenging objective to be achieved through introducing culture within language teaching and learning. For language learners, it is necessary that they develop this awareness because learning language then becomes useless if they are not aware of the fact that every nation, or community, has its own characteristics like food, music, dance, etc. [10]. One other effect is that individuals would be able to “see themselves from a different point of view” and this makes them less ethnocentric and culture bound [7].

Due to globalisation, immigration, multiculturalism, the potential change in culture, and some other effects, it would be difficult addressing a particular culture as it does not exist anymore. Cultures change, and the way of life of a particular community is not the same over years, all habits traditions, customs, etc. may relatively change, nothing is stable except for landmarks. Therefore, learners' intercultural awareness should be broadened instead. The other issue that faces language teachers when coming to raising cultural or intercultural awareness rather than “what to teach?” is how this could be taught or addressed to young learners aged between 11 and 14 years old without embracing them to the risk of culture shock, and how to make them wanting to learn about other culture and not making them in favour of one rather than their native culture? Traditional methods of teaching have been addressed in Tomalin and Stempleski's book of “Cultural Awareness” where they proposed a range of activities in which learning about culture is the main objective; these activities include the use of some tools like pictures, newspapers, currency coins, and anything that represents a part of the culture. In this digital age, the use of such tools in teaching language in general is rare, what is most used thus is technology and ICTs in particular. However, ICTs are mostly used to develop language skills –listening, speaking, reading, and writing- and the cultural element sometimes comes at the end of the interests of teachers and sometimes does not.

3. Methodology

To answer the above research questions, I intend to use semi-structured interviews with ten inspectors of English and twenty teachers of English both at the level of middle school. The reason behind opting for interviews is that they enable participants to express their views through verbal, non-



verbal, spoken and heard channels [4]. To select my participants, I would use the snowballing sampling method because it is difficult to get access to participants from different parts of the country. I also intend to analyse two middle school textbooks of English, one has been announced this September, and the other one has been in use since 2001. Both books are for first year pupils, through the analysis, I could compare the status of both foreign culture and ICTs in both textbooks. Depending on what the Government allows, I also plan to interview textbook designers and do participant observation so that I can check the participants' definitions of some of the key terms in my research and so that I can observe behaviours, actions, views, etc. that may not show up during interviews [4].

4. Conclusion

Depending on the results of my data analysis, I intend to formulate recommendations concerning the use of ICTs in teaching and learning EFL and the status of cultural and intercultural awareness at the same level.

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