

Socio-cultural Factors and Teaching a Foreign Language

By

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Abstract

Teaching a new language to learners has several bases and considering the culture of the target language is one of them. Whenever teaching a new language has not been accompanied by teaching the new culture, many problems have been reported, so far. This paper presents a study on how noticing socio-cultural factors in language classes (EFL) for teaching the culture of new language assists educators to intensify the quality of their teaching. In this study, we consider “cultural constitutes of the target language” as an important factor in learning a new culture. And also we need to know what “socio-cultural competence” is. The technique is exposing language learners to new language’s culture and equipping teachers with strong social and cultural pedagogical materials, and then analyzing the student’s efficiency in class, their ability in doing the tasks, and the amount of saved time to find out how teaching Target Culture (TC) effects learning a new language. Results show that how perceiving socio-cultural constitutes raises students’ consciousness beyond mere memorizing of communication strategies to self-understanding and empathy with teachers, other learners and/or native speakers of the target language. The findings demonstrate that understanding social and cultural features of target language in one hand enables the learners to perceive the new language better and helps them to decide how, when and where to apply target language structures and saves time in class in the other hand.

1. Introduction

Teaching culture has been subject of discussions among linguists and language teachers for many years. Some teachers believe that teaching culture will enable language learners to be engaged authentically with the culture of a particular native-speaking community (Bright, 1968). After we understand the significance of teaching culture, we need to perceive the importance of socio-cultural factors and their application in teaching culture since they play an incredibly important role in learning and using a new language better and easier and in the other hand when these factors are not applied in teaching a new language negative consequences like disability in understanding very culture-dependent lessons have been reported. That is the reason why many language learners complain about very vague and ambiguous situations in native speakers’ communications in the native environment (Brown, 2007). Today, EFL programs across the globe are attempting to incorporate these ideas into their lesson planning programs and training programs for their non-native language teachers. They hope to enable students to better their understanding of the new language and facilitate teachers’ performance. It should be noted, however, working on socio-cultural competence in language classes doesn’t mean asking students to abandon their culture and adopt another identity, but it means offering pieces of information about underlying cultural and social factors which affect discourse and communication instead. This triggers learners’ motivation for receiving the new language identity (Williams, 2002). In this study we try answer this question; how teaching culture in language classes boosts socio-cultural competence and from there whole the teaching process becomes more influential by increasing learners’ efficiency and saving the instruction time?

2. Review of Literature

The study of previous works on culture and its relation to learning a language reveals the importance of teaching the culture and language together. This fact that language is a tool for culture transfer is another confirmation on this issue. In their study (Alptekin, 2002) and (Williams, 2002) state that language and culture are interrelated and studying language needs to be aware of culture of that language. Whether the language learning is for interactive or instrumental purposes, is better to be accompanied with the detailed characteristics of its spoken community, named culture (Guest, 2002). In another related research (Kilickaya, 2004) shows that course book designers in developing textbooks for language classes must consider the new language's cultural characteristics. Any language is embedded in a particular culture and when you learn a language you inevitably learn about its underlying culture (Kramsch 1998).

Theoretical Basis

Generally there are two major ways to achieve the new culture, living in the target society and studying about the new culture. Theoretically, living in the target society gives adequate and necessary cultural exposure to individuals. Since it is not possible for majority of language learners to live in the target language community (Guest 2002). According to Kramsch (1998), culture is "a membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting". This definition focuses on discourse as an important issue, therefore, communication is a key element in studying culture because they can bridge the cultural gap between newly joined and existing members of that community (Leather, 2001). In order to establish comprehensive communication, the new joiner should be equipped with several tools; one is socio-cultural competence that is an important "cognitive" factor in learning the new language which encompasses social and cultural constructs, among them are: social-contextual factors, stylistic appropriateness factors, cultural factors, and non-verbal communicative factors (Kramsch 1998). These components contain almost all unfamiliar parts of new language's culture (Tavares & Cavalcanti, 1996). In this regard weak cultural backgrounds of the new language learners", and "the distance between source and target language", are two hindering factors on learning a new culture that are problems and limitations of this study.

3. Materials and Methods

Sample

Fourteen Classes of both genders in elementary level and ten classes in pre-intermediate level have been studied. Classes have been selected totally by random. Totally 258 students were selected as samples which 162 of them were elementary students and 96 of them were pre-intermediate students. Most classes contained one gender (line-education). There were 105 girls and 57 boys in elementary level, and there were 61 girls and 35 boys in pre-intermediate level.

Materials

The books of New English File: elementary and pre-intermediate student books, Oxenden and Latham-Coning, (2007) Oxford University Press, in Tehran Oxford Language Centre, and the book of New Interchange, English for international communication: students book one, Richards, Hull and Procter, (1999) Cambridge University Press, in Shokouh English schools were selected as study materials since they are official course books in mentioned language schools.

Data collection tools

In this research, in order to collect information about students' cultural knowledge in English especially about England and the US a "Cultural Information Questionnaire" which is a form including 10 questions about English speaking countries' important historical places, social characteristics, customs and traditions, heroes and icons, geographical status and their history. Two versions (A and B) of this questionnaire were used to estimate the amount of knowledge and information that students have about target language culture, before and after they were advised to participate in this study and indirect cultural exposure.

In order to evaluate students' level of proficiency, "Culture-bound Achievement Tests" have been used. These carefully graded tests are an important part of the educational syllabus in these language centers that play an important role in assessment and evaluation within the system.

Method

Students' perception about different cultures in the world usually shapes their socio-cultural competence and this competence in return enables them to understand the target language better and easier. Students in this research were asked to increase their information about the target language culture in these ways:

- Surfing Wikipedia (Free Web-based Encyclopedia) and Google (The Most Popular Search Engine on the Internet).
- Watching satellite channels such as: National Geographic and Travel Channel.
- Asking the students who traveled to English speaking countries to share their experiences, videos or photos they have.
- Reading books, papers, magazines and any other printed sources of information about target language culture.

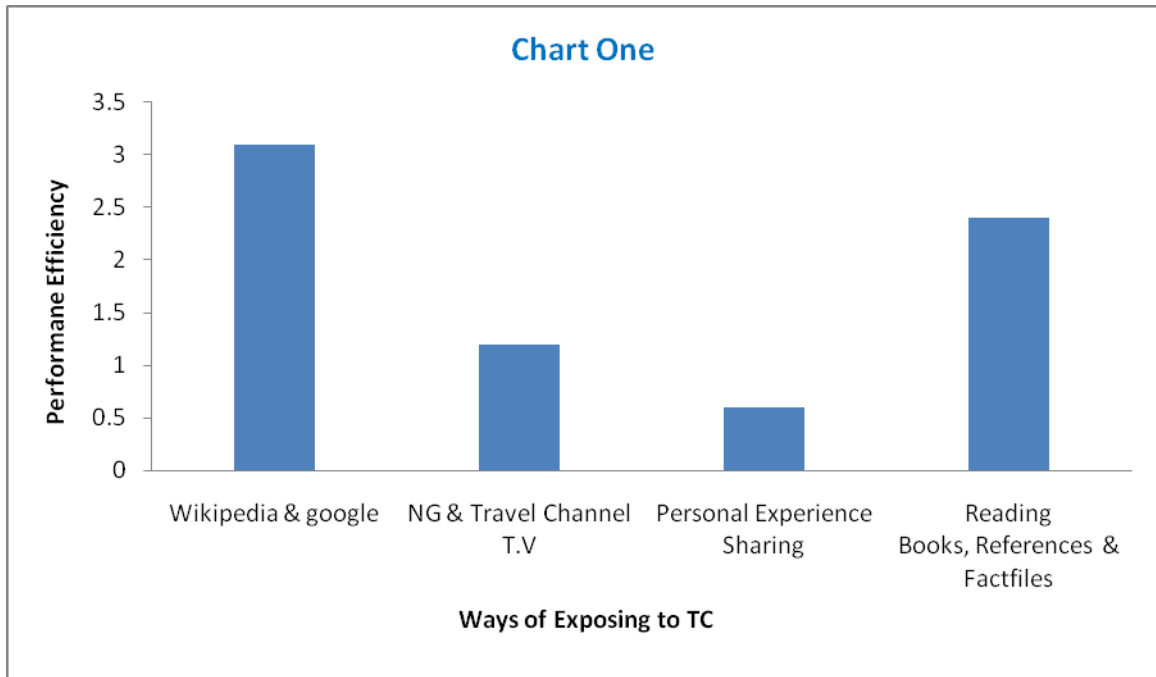
Unlike other language constructs, socio-cultural factors are rather tangible and it is not very difficult to discover about the culture of a country when you live out of that society, therefore, in doing this research these combined techniques were used. All samples were carefully measured before the research studied and they all filled the cultural information questionnaire and their marks out of 10 were recorded in their profiles. They are asked to use four ways of indirect exposure to the target language culture during the study. After one term the students are tested using culture-bound achievement tests and their cultural information was evaluated by the B version of cultural information questionnaire. Their scores were recorded too.

Purpose of study

The purpose in this research is to measure the increase the students' *efficiency in doing tasks* in class, and *the amount of the saved time* in instruction, to show the positive effects of indirect cultural exposure on language learning and language learners.

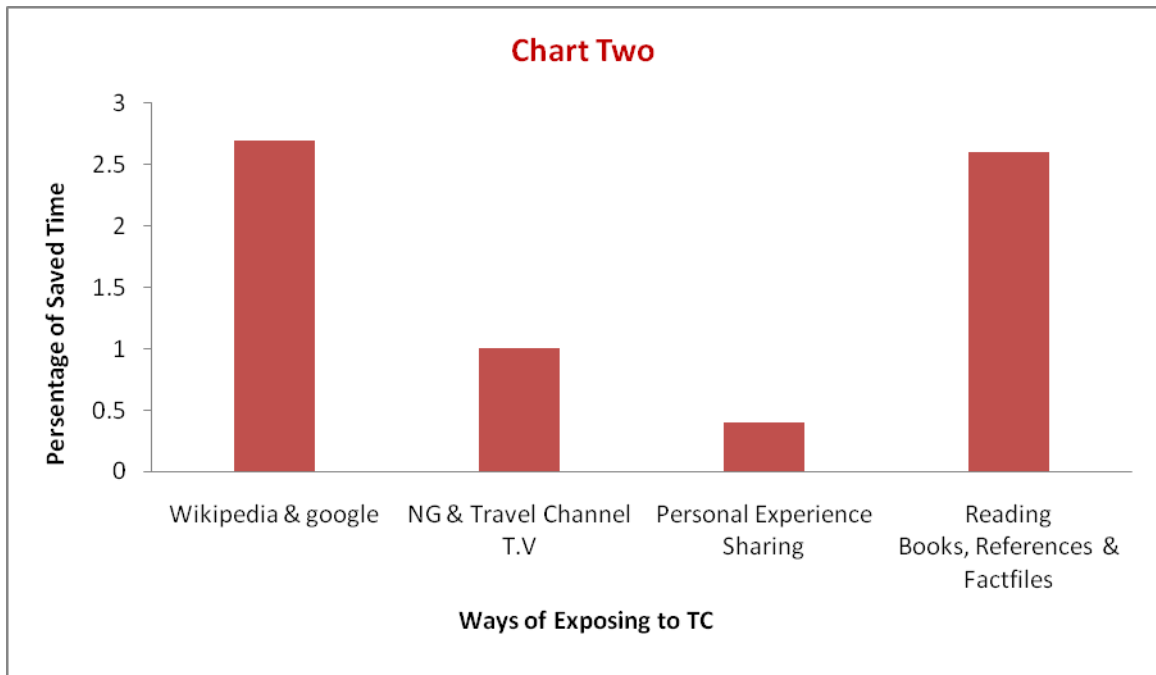
Data analysis

A statistical analysis of students' perception was carried out to assess the amount of *performance efficiency* and *saved time* as the motivating qualities of a successful EFL class. To measure the performance efficiency, students' scores recorded from two versions of cultural information questionnaire were compared and the general increase in their test scores were recorded these information were studied and analyzed carefully. To measure the amount of the saved time, educational supervisors asked the teachers to take note of the time they think is saved each session in classes (in minute) when students were pre-exposed to socio-cultural components, by adding an extra column in their standard lesson plan writing the minutes that they saved while presenting the new culture-bound topic. Chart one demonstrates the percentage of performance efficiency influenced by four separate ways of indirect cultural exposure in both elementary and pre-intermediate levels.



The average overall performance efficiency of students in these classes was nineteen percent.

Chart two demonstrates the amount of the time which is saved, influenced by four separate ways of indirect cultural exposure in both elementary and pre-intermediate levels.



The average saved time in these classes was sixteen percent.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

Studying these two tables gives these results: surfing Wikipedia (Free Internet Encyclopedia) and Google (The Most Popular Search Engine). The results show an increase in students' information about English speaking countries' history and culture and because they felt more optimistic about language learning process they *did* better in class, and also because less effort is required by both teachers and students, they asked fewer questions did the tasks faster, a lot of time is saved. Watching satellite channels such as: National Geographic and Travel Channel, because they don't have permission to select television programs and watch them, they were not able to gain needed information. Results show, about twelve percent increase in their performance efficiency, and about ten percent of class time is saved when they watched TV, learning about the new language culture. Asking people to share their travel experiences, bringing videos or photos they have about their trips was another way of indirect cultural exposure. Less than seven percent of selected students had opportunity to travel abroad and touch cultural components in person (are mostly western, European or Latin countries). Students showed a lot of interest in this part eagerly hearing those people. Comparing other ways, students' knowledge about TC was not increased remarkably much in this way. Their performance efficiency showed only six percent increase, and teachers still had to spend remarkable amount of time on culture-related tasks and lessons. Less than four percent of class time was saved in this way. Next recommended way of indirect cultural exposure was reading books and resources. Although this is a good method of gaining knowledge, but the problem is that, there aren't enough and qualified libraries that learners could take advantage of, therefore, students should buy or borrow the books. This is a little unpleasant for them and they sometimes do not show too much interest about it and what's more studying these books and resources takes a lot of time. In spite of these, results show remarkable increase in their class performance doing the culture-dependant tasks, about twenty four percent, and saved much more time in class. About twenty six percent of time is saved. The study of data resulted from this experiment showed that if language learners learn about target language culture, teaching the new language would be an easier task. Contributing the outcomes and experiences gained from this experiment to the class teaching techniques and strategies helped to improve learning efficiency and spend less time for instruction.

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