Socio Cultural Aspects among Learners of Arabic as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

One of the most significant factors in learning another language is the ability to use the appropriate choice of words and sentences in the appropriate situations. Foreign and second language learners are disappointed when they fall short of having a sufficient amount of knowledge of the socio cultural elements when learning another language. This study investigates the use of socio cultural aspects among learners of Arabic as a foreign language (AFL). We used a corpus of academic Arabic to find out the most common socio cultural aspects used by AFL learners. The findings showed learners' awareness of the aspects distinctively characteristic of the host society.

Keywords: Socio cultural studies, language and culture, Arabic, foreign language learning.

1. Introduction

Humans need to use language, essentially for communicative purposes. Second or foreign (L2 or FL) language learners struggle to use the appropriate choice of words or phrases in the appropriate situations. However, having a higher level of proficiency in another language does not necessarily mean to achieve a native proficiency, but rather to convey a message in the desired format and context of the target language. This target language is one component of the culture of a community. It is, also, a gateway to have a cultural background about a community. Although L2 and FL learners are aware of their social roles in a community, they realize the need to know what, when, and how to use language for particular purposes that agree with the social and cultural norms of the host community.

L2 and FL learners (L2 will be used henceforth to refer to both L2 and FL) are expected to look for socio cultural elements in the target culture along with the linguistic knowledge in their learning. These socio cultural elements reflect their needs to enhance their communicative competence. However, the nature of these elements, though some of them are predictable, is culture or society specific. A wide range of L2 learners from different cultures can help define a workable taxonomy of the common socio cultural factors of certain cultures and languages.

This study investigates socio cultural aspects among learners of Arabic as a foreign language. It seeks to find out if international students studying Arabic as a FL or L2 show certain socio cultural elements in their learning. Having a better understanding of what is being learned or need to be learned by AFL learners can help design learning and teaching materials besides satisfying some of the learners' needs to have a workable knowledge of the socio cultural background of the host community.

1. 1 Objectives of the Study

This study was conducted with two objectives in mind:

1. To explore AFL learners' knowledge of the socio cultural aspects of the host community.
2. To provide educational institutions and researchers with indicators about AFL learners' socio cultural knowledge that can be used as a first step for further development.

2. 1 socio cultural theory and SLA

Socio cultural theory (SCT) that originated in Vygotsky's writings paved the way to look at learning as a social and mental development in individuals and that language is a mediation tool for learning. L2 learners always seek to learn what is socially acceptable to build their cultural and linguistic learning experience. Various social and cultural situations are learning opportunities to L2 learners and that reflects language as a social phenomenon.

The language use out of such learning opportunities is a realization of the learners' social interactions. SCT, as mistaken by some researchers, does not imply (Lantolf and Thorne, 2007) reproducing learning experience through social interaction. This can be clarified through the *internalization* and *imitation* concept in SCT where the relationship between learners and their social environment is rearranged and they engage in a voluntary cognitive activity that empowers them to change the original model. It follows that L2 learners in their social interaction do not assume a receptive role; but rather an active one. They look for all possible opportunities to contextualize their use of language in the proper social setting rendering learning as a continuous, intra- and interpersonal process.

2. 2 Intercultural language learning

It is natural that L2 learners try to make use of their previous experience, world knowledge, concepts, and other related skills to facilitate L2 learning. This shows L2 learners attempt to establish a common ground of their cultural awareness that involves L1 and L2. Thus, it allows for a more intercultural language learning experience. Scarino and Liddicoat (2009) characterized intercultural language learning as a rich and involving experience where learners are active participants and observers in communication to make sense of their and others' meaning making. Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino, and Kohler (2003) tried to define possible principles in intercultural language learning. These principles include *active construction, making connections, interaction, reflection, and responsibility*. These principles emphasize the dynamicity of language learning that offers learners self-actualization and continuous development of their capacity to understand others with different cultures and languages.

3. 1 Social and cultural factors in L2 learning

In the course of learning another language, learners will have to use L2 in the appropriate context enforcing their linguistic, social, and cultural knowledge to take effect. Research findings on successful L2 learning associate it with differences among learners. Some of these differences are related to learners' age, personality, and motivation. Other factors are related to curriculum, culture, and teaching quality. However, it is normal for learners to vary in their grasp of L2 that enables them to communicate efficiently in a particular language community. This variation can be seen in terms of micro social perspectives (Troike, 2006) such as familiarity with the various forms and functions of linguistic elements and learners' attention to the diverse linguistic forms used by native speakers of the target language. Awareness of the situations (formal or informal) and participants' stances amount to the degree of L2 proficiency. There are also macro social factors related to the surrounding political and social system within a given language community. This can be referred to the social class of language users and social attitude towards different varieties and language users. As we see above, higher proficiency level in L2 predicates on a combination of many psychological, linguistic, and social factors. Therefore, L2 learners have to develop sensitivity towards such factors and this means going beyond language learning context. Thus, real life experience and interaction with individuals of the language community expose L2 learners to different situations through which they can observe varieties of linguistic and socio cultural components of native speakers' use of language. It is then, learners' task to use these varieties of language usages in similar situations or interaction opportunities.

3.2 Language Learning and Communicative Competence

The differences between learners as they acquire another language are reflected on the amount of general knowledge and skills possessed by learners. Communicative competence was conceptualized to broaden Chomsky's competence and performance, capturing a wide range of learners' knowledge and abilities when approaching language learning task. Thus, Canale and Swain (1980) as mentioned in (Davies and Elder, 2004) extended the concept of competence to include not only linguistic but also sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and socio cultural ones. The subsequent attempts to explicate competence seem to take a holistic approach in search of establishing a ground to base other factors on from different areas. However, explaining learners' competence when acquiring and using language is still controversial opening the door for more research not only in L2, but even in L1.

3. 3 Socio cultural Aspects and Learners' Awareness

It is apparent that the social and cultural aspects of a language community are not static to be learned or taught in classrooms; rather they require learners to go beyond the academic environment to be familiar with them. However, a reasonable knowledge of these aspects can be learned.

This may impose extra burden on learners to learn social norms encoded in linguistic structures which means that learners have to assume a more active social role to be acquainted with the varieties of behaviors and language uses. Here, the social function of language is clearly reflected in learners' cognitive development as they strive to use language appropriately in social interaction. Realizing the need for using language appropriately, it follows that learners should use various strategies to engage in real life situations that offer interaction opportunities with native speakers. For instance, greeting and thanking. This realization of the necessity of language in use underscores the interactional facet of language (Bianco, 1999) which might not be sufficiently promoted by educators in educational settings. However, as a first step learners are expected to identify the social context and the possible use of language based on their L1which is normal. They are believed to understand social norms of the community, such as making a request and apologizing and the social context for using them. As they are engaging in various social situations using the native language, they will be exposed to a wider range of social norms and language usages. The feedbacks and reactions from native speakers may take different forms such as acknowledging, approving, and correcting which are key to enhancing learners' confidence and competency in the course of learning another language.

4.1 Arabic as a Language and Culture

Arabic is the language of the Arab world that is culturally and geographically connected. Modern standard Arabic developed from classical Arabic, which is the language of Qur'an and is a liturgical language among Muslims. However, Arabic has a diglossic use in which there are two forms of language; the formal one used in formal situations and the colloquial one used in informal situations. Standard Arabic (the formal) is used in all Arab countries, but the colloquial form is widely used as dialects and subdialects across the Arab world. Naturally, Arab world is characterized by collectivism and shares a lot of traditions, customs, beliefs, cultural values and assumptions, and social norms. These commonalities are reflected on the use of Arabic as a language. Therefore, Arabic L2 learners are likely to be exposed to social and cultural knowledge common across Arab world. However, there are culture and society specific factors. For instance, greeting and thanking are relatively similar, yet there are differences in word choice and the situations they are used. However, these differences are mutually intelligible.

4. 2 Learning Arabic as a Language and Culture

The centrality of culture in language learning is undoubted, yet embarking on this task is hard to both teachers and learners. According to Sharaf Eldin (2015) knowledge of native culture along with the target culture is essential and can facilitate Arabic learning. This can be achieved in different ways such as exchanging discussion about native culture with Arabic speaking friends or individuals. Using their own knowledge of the world and culture, learners can identify commonalities and differences between their cultures and the native one. This requires socializing, interaction from both learners and natives to have a rich and diverse exposure of the socio cultural background of the country where the target language is learned. However, the amount of knowledge and information is intense to grasp which may stand as a barrier for learners and this urges us to understand what socio cultural aspects that AFL learners can learn.

5. Socio cultural Knowledge

Socio cultural knowledge implies a broad spectrum of social norms and cultural details that distinguish a given community. However, these norms and particulars are infused into a whole framework of political, economic, religious and other systems that characterize the community where the language is used. This framework, in turn, is reflected in the behavior and language usage of the individuals and here where language learners need to observe and learn how these elements are encoded in the target language. So, it is clear there is a huge body of information that learners need to discern. However, learners usually tend to look for language uses that are relevant and needed in certain contexts and for particular purposes. Thus, it is natural to start with basic language uses in daily life situations that occur frequently in and out of classroom settings. There have been attempts to describe and classify aspects of socio cultural knowledge drawing on universal commonalities among a wide range of cultures. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL) provides some features that are relevant to European societies. These features are related to various domains such as *everyday living, social conventions, ritual behaviors, interpersonal relations* as well as other features. These features underlay sub factors that go under the generic ones. Obviously, there are features that are society and culture specific which require more interaction to recognize.

Learners are expected to observe how these aspects are manifested not only by using language in certain situations but also in the behaviors and body language of the members of the target community.

6.1 Materials and Methods

To search for socio cultural aspects among AFL learners, the researcher, being a native Arab from Saudi Arabia, set five categories for what is believed to imply the most important aspects. These aspects were selected due to their high frequency in daily life interaction. The categories are presented in table *I* below with sub entries that go under them. These entries are phrases or expressions that represent various actual uses of the aspects in real life. Entries that occurred in contexts that were not clear to be appropriate were excluded. For instance, when translating experiences or events that took place in learners home countries. We targeted only the situations where learners use socio cultural aspects in suitable contexts.

Table I: Categories of socio cultural aspects

Greeting	Thanking	Religious expressions	Apologizing	Requesting
السلام عليكم [Peace be upon you] مرحبا [hello] كيف الحال [how are you] أهلا (وسهلا) [welcome]	شكرا [Thank] شكرا لك [thank you] شكرا جزيلا [many thanks]	بسم الله [In the name of Allah/God] بإذن الله/إن شاء الله [God willing] الحمدلله [thank Allah] سبحان الله [Glorybe to Allah]	أعتذر [to apologize] العفو/أعذرني [excuse me] معليش /آسف [sorry]	أرجو/ارجاء [please] هل (من) ممكن [may I] لو سمحت [if you please]

The researcher used a corpus linguistic analysis method to find out the target entries in learners' languages. The software *Antconc* was used as a concordance tool to search a digitized corpus of AFL writings. Each entry set under the five categories was searched separately in the corpus.

6.2 Data Collection

Data were collected using Arabic Language Learners corpus (Alfaifi, Atwell, and Hedaya. 2014) which comprises 1585 of written and spoken materials of AFL learners. The corpus was collected in 2012 and 2013 from more than 900 students with different languages coming from over60 countries. Learners were studying Arabic as a foreign language at different levels in different Saudi universities. The data were provided in digitized files along with learners' (non-identifiable) academic information.

6.3 Results and discussion

The results show that the religious category recorded near 800 entries followed by the greeting with 94 and thanking with 65 entries. The requesting and apologizing categories recorded the least entries with 18 and 4 entries consecutively. Table II below displays these results by category along with the most frequent entries per each category.

Table II: frequency of socio cultural aspects by category.

	Greeting	Thanking	Religious expressions	Apologizing	Requesting
Frequency	94	65	791	4	18
Most frequent	[Peace be upon you]		[thank Allah]	[sorry]	[please]

It appears from the findings that socio cultural aspects of a religious nature were the most frequent ones used among AFL learners. This is normal when we understand that religion plays a pivotal role in Arab societies and religious expressions are used in a wide range of contexts. On the other hand, greeting and thanking are universally associated with politeness and showing good attitude and AFL learners used them properly.

These findings revealed learners' awareness of the significance of the social and cultural characteristics as part of their learning and using another language. However, the socio cultural aspects that appeared in AFL learners' writings were restricted to limited contexts. Some aspects, which were not used in the current study, were associated with particular behaviors or practices such as eating or sitting. These aspects require observing learners' behaviors if we want to see whether learners use them in accordance with social conventions. Yet, it can be clearly seen that learners were assuming receptive roles to improve their knowledge of language uses in different contexts. This should stimulate educators to train learners and expose them to diverse uses of language that are key to the mastery of language.

Conclusions

Socio cultural knowledge is broad to be learned yet very important to FL learners for a more successful language learning experience in and out of classroom contexts. Learners showed positive attitudes to learn and use socio cultural aspects that were significant to the host community. More exposure and training along with feedback are needed on varieties of language uses in different socio cultural contexts. Educational institutions and teachers should assume a more active role in designing teaching materials and activities to allow for more interaction and learning opportunities.

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