

The Place of Culture in Moroccan English Classes: Towards Investigation

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Abstract—undoubtedly, culture plays a vital role not only in our society, but in all societies as well. It has become an important part of people's everyday life. The reason behind this truth is that culture is closely connected to everything that is human-made. In the field of education, for instance, culture has proven to be an integral part of language learning, which implies that culture cannot be available without language. The latter is considered as the cornerstone of culture because it is strongly shaped and influenced by culture. So, following this fact, many scholars mention that language and culture are closely connected to each other and can never be separated. This is why they confirm that culture should not be taught as a separate subject, but rather in connection to language. The present paper aims, on the one hand, to shed some light on the importance of culture in the field of second language education in Morocco and, on the other hand, it tends to investigate whether culture should be taught as a separate subject, or alongside the foreign language itself.

Keywords: English Importance in Morocco, Culture Definition, Role of English Textbooks in Morocco, Methods of Teaching Culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is a means of expression; it not only helps people to express their feelings, emotions and needs, but also allows them to get in touch with each other since it is an important form of communication (Jim Wang, 2011). Today, English is considered the most important language of wider communication in the world thanks to the British colonial power in the nineteenth century. More importantly, English has become the main language of science and technology as well as popular culture and globalization. Similar to many countries in the world, Morocco is giving much importance to English, because it really plays a vital role in the country, especially in the educational system. For instance, English is regarded as the third foreign language after French and Spanish among the educated youth, and is taught in all public and private schools from the third year onward. Morocco has one private, English-language university, Al-Akhawayn. It was founded in 1993 by King Hassan II and King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, and its curriculum is based on the American educational model. However, in the last few years, many scholars and researchers, especially those from the field of linguistics and sociolinguistics, have been concerned with the question whether “culture” should be taught along with English, or as a separate subject.

II. ENGLISH IMPORTANCE IN MOROCCO

Definitely, most people around the globe acknowledge that English has become one of the most important languages in the world. The reason behind this fact is that English is able to unify people, makes them gather and share new ideas, opinions and experiences. In Morocco, for instance, English is widely believed to have gained a very big prominence over the last several years, and it has become very necessary and

crucial to various domains such as education, tourism and business.

It is true that the French and Spanish languages were forced on Moroccan people during the years of colonialism. Nevertheless, people, in the last several years, started to feel an urgent need to learn and deal with another language, which is English. This is why one may safely claim that English, nowadays, has become in a position that allows it to compete with French and Spanish in many realms of the Moroccan society. The proof for this fact is that English tends to take advantage from the wide support of the government in different domains especially business, economy, tourism and education. In an attempt to shed some light on the crucial role of English, F. Vahdany (2005:96) who is one of the most significant anthropologists of language and culture, explains that “speaking English is the key to employment”. He also stresses that “speaking English helps you to join the international community.”

Before going further into more important details and trying to investigate the close relationship that exists between English and culture, I would like, first, to raise an important question, which is of great significance to this topic. The question is “why do people give much importance to learning English?” And “is there a real relationship between language and culture?”

As a matter of fact, numerous researchers such as Edward Said (1993), for instance, have been trying to provide an appropriate answer to this question. For the majority of them, the most significant reason behind this interest is related to political and economic powers. This means that since the United States and Britain are powerful countries politically and economically speaking, they tend, as a consequence, to impose their linguistic domination over other countries. To confirm this fact, a close look at Said's book titled *Culture and Imperialism*, for example, will offer insight into this idea.

Said shows that colonialism, today, is taking different ways and forms; unlike the past when the colonizer needed to move militarily to intervene in other states, today it is possible to talk about a new form of colonialism_ linguistically, politically and culturally speaking.

Recently, a huge number of young Moroccans started to feel a strong desire to learn English for a variety of reasons: First, they look at English as a Lingua Franca. This means that English is widely spoken all over the globe and, therefore, can be useful in several domains. Second, most young individuals think that English has become a vital language in the world and even more useful than their native languages such as Arabic or French, for instance, and, therefore, learning it will certainly yield positive consequences either in Morocco or elsewhere. A third suggestion shows that people in Morocco are interested in studying English because they want to use it as a means of learning about other cultures. To put it differently, the Moroccan young generation wants, on the one hand, to learn English as a language and, on the other hand, to discover everything related to American and British habits, customs, traditions and cultures through their language. This idea is clearly shown by Vahdany (p.97) when he explains that “although people are not necessarily prisoners of their language, it is undoubtedly true that the way a culture sees the world is reflected in its language.”

In fact, a close examination of the educational system in Morocco reveals that English is truly considered a significant school subject. Clearly, English is taught at the final year of middle schools, and also at high or secondary schools. More significantly, English began to enjoy a cultural prestige over the last several years as most young students tend to give it much importance and would prefer to learn it more than French or Spanish. In trying to make reference to this reality, Fatima Saddiki (2007), who is one of the well-known Moroccan scholars of gender and language, reports in a survey that was conducted in 1991 that more than 87 per cent of people welcomed the idea of seeing English spread in Morocco, and more than 81 per cent believe that English will be very useful for Morocco and Moroccans.

In addition to Saddiki, the famous Moroccan scholar named Moha Ennaji (2005), who is also concerned with the field of language and culture, has tried to contribute to this notion by showing how important the English language is to the Moroccan educational system. Ennaji bases his arguments on the fact that English is compulsory for Moroccan students since it is required to pass the high school graduation exam. More specifically, English is needed to pursue higher education either in Morocco or abroad, where most countries insist that foreign students should have an acceptable level of English so that they would be able to join the educational system there. Other reasons reported by Ennaji are related to the efficiency of learning English. For him, the latter remains the unique and best language that allows students to make research and get in touch with foreigners.

III. CULTURE DEFINITION

Since the present paper is devoted to investigate the relationship that exists between English as a language and the host culture, I will be concerned with the case of English textbooks that are used in Moroccan schools such as *Gateway 1 and 2* or *Visa to the world*. However, before doing so, I think that I should start by trying to provide a brief definition for the word *culture*. Generally speaking, culture as a concept is believed to have a very long history; most anthropologists still find it very difficult to understand because they believe that culture is closely attached to human orientation, and is present in almost every interaction. Therefore, they argue that *culture* can have a strong impact on everything people do in their society, which proves that language and culture are closely connected to each other. To explain this fact, Nieva and Hickson (quoted in Salwen and Stacks, 1996:299) mention that “Culture is human-made; it includes ideas, values, and codes known to all members of the group; it is transmitted from generation to generation. A culture does not exist until it is shared with other human beings. It influences the way in which a person behaves toward others in the group and also the way that a person expects others to behave.”

Definitely, the difficulty and complexity of the concept of culture lies in the fact that culture tends to cover everything that is human-made. This implies, for most theorists, that culture has to do not only with material objects such as houses and means of transport, for example, but also with other aspects of life such as behaviors, languages, values and customs. This is why it is believed that it will be quiet unreasonable to mention that either culture or human connections can occur before the other. Following this fact, Trompenaars and Wooliams (2004:148), who are also two of the major anthropologists interested in culture, dealt with this concept from a different perspective. For them, culture is likened to an onion and the outer layer of it is quite different from the inner one. They put it as follows: “The outer layer contains that which we can perceive easily: for example, buildings, clothes and people. Beneath this skin lies a deeper layer in which its people behave. Here are to be found the beliefs, values, norms and expectations that frame the way in which people perceive and engage with the world. These differences stem from the “innermost layer.”

As mentioned earlier, the present paper aims at placing an increasing emphasis on the role of culture within ELT in particular. So, it will be worth noting to say that there has always been a lot of discussion among scholars such as Kramsch (1993), for instance, who strongly insists that culture must be taught alongside the foreign language itself. This necessity is related to the fact that both language and culture are believed to be closely attached to each other and can never be separated. To exemplify this idea, Kramsch argues that when someone, for example, decides to study a language like English, he or she not only learns about its linguistic components with regard to grammar, phonology, or morphology, but it also means everything related to Britain

and America's_ customs, traditions, norms and habits. This fact is emphasized by Kramersch (p.12) when she points out that 'language-culture connections must be highlighted by teaching not only the language, but cultural customs, values and ways of thinking.'

Basically, when we try to link the idea of culture to the teaching of English in Morocco, we come to the conclusion that it is almost impossible to teach English without making reference to cultural presentations. As a matter of fact, Moroccan teachers of English are forced to go through textbooks like *Visa to the World*, which is devoted to common core students and *gateway 1 and 2* that are addressed to 1st and 2nd year students of the Baccalaureate degree. But, this does not mean that teachers are obliged to follow all the activities and programs of these books without having the right to add, skim or delete some activities, in case they see them unnecessary. Of course, teachers are asked to stick to the program of these textbooks because pupils will have to pass their final exam in order to be able to join their higher studies.

IV. THE ROLE OF ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS

In the educational system, textbooks are very important tools because they help teachers to provide good lessons and include culture in most of their activities. In other words, textbooks are very significant to the teaching and learning process, as they help to convey knowledge and culture by making them available and apparent to the learners in a selected, easy and organized way. To shed some light on the role of textbooks, Hutchinson and Torres (1994:317) point out that "The textbook has a very important and a positive part to play in teaching and learning of English. The state that textbooks provide the necessary input into classrooms lessons through different activities readings and explanations. Thus, they will always survive on the grounds that they meet certain needs."

Indeed, the English textbooks designed to Moroccan students reveal that they try to carry the cultural representation alongside the English language. This fact can be clearly observed if we look carefully, for example, at the topics, characters, places and other components of the textbooks, which are, most of the time, reflecting the idea of culture. Numerous essays and articles about the history of Morocco and some ancient or modern places like Fes, Tangier or Volubilis, for instance, try to provide a vivid representation of the Moroccan culture. In addition to this, exposing students to various types of clothes and food like the "Jellaba" and "Harira", for instance, can also help students to discover about their culture and be proud of their cultural heritage.

Nevertheless, the negative point, which is, most of the time, observed is that Moroccan textbooks tend to focus more on the target culture than the host one. This gives the impression that English textbooks in Morocco try to deprive English from its cultural specificities by directing the student's

attention to the target culture and neglecting the host one. A close examination of the textbooks titles mentioned earlier show that it is almost impossible to find an activity or a skill, where students are exposed to the English or American culture. For example, Moroccan students are usually asked to read or write a short paragraph about how to prepare tea with mint or 'Harira', but their attention is never drawn to talk about English people, who would prefer black tea with milk together with a big breakfast in the morning in contrast to Moroccans, who prefer a big lunch or dinner with too much bread.

V. METHODS OF TEACHING CULTURE

Indeed, the question whether or not culture should be taught alongside the language itself because it seems to be something that troubles teachers and creates a lot of confusion. This is due to the fact that teachers do not really understand if they should include cultural presentations in their classes or not (Teresa Pica, 1994). It should be noted that a number of anthropologists have expressed their agreement for involving cultural presentations while teaching English in classes for a variety of reasons. One of the best examples is Kramersch, who believes that there are three principles, which bounds both language and culture.

The first principle revolves around the shaping of cultural reality. This means, for Kramersch, that only few people can view their language as a representation of their cultural reality and, as a result, they try to align themselves with the culture once they start using the language (William Littlewood, 1982). It should be admitted that language is more than just words; it embodies the values, beliefs, customs, and traditions of a particular culture. In other words, language shapes how people perceive the world around them and influences their thoughts, behaviors, and interactions with others. Through language, individuals express their unique identities and assert their place within the society.

The second principle, for Kramersch, is related to what is known as cultural identity, which implies that people themselves are conscious that language can also help in the shaping of their cultural identity (Fengping Gao, 2005). Generally, people do not only use words because they want, on the other hand, to express facts and ideas, and on the other hand, reflect their attitudes and behaviors, which proves that culture is implicitly used and expressed in their language. It should be acknowledged that language is acting as a tool for social integration, because when individuals learn and use the language of their new community, they become more connected to its people and customs, facilitating cultural assimilation. In short, language acts as a vehicle for cultural exchange, enabling individuals from different backgrounds to share ideas and experiences.

As for the third and last principle, it has to do with what is called cultural preservation. Undoubtedly, language preserves the cultural heritage by allowing communities to pass down traditions, stories, and values from one generation

to another. Language also plays a crucial role in preventing language extinction and ensuring the conservation of diverse linguistic heritages. This means that when a language dies, it signifies more than just the loss of grammatical rules and vocabulary; it represents the disappearance of an entire way of life, history, and cultural identity. So, by actively engaging in language revival initiatives, communities can maintain their unique cultural practices, values, and worldviews. Additionally, language maintenance helps foster intergenerational transmission of knowledge and strengthens social cohesion within communities because it provides individuals with a sense of belonging and pride in their heritage while contributing to a global linguistic diversity. Therefore, efforts towards language preservation are not only about words, but also about sustaining cultural preservation for the coming generations.

Within the same vein, another two important researchers whose names are Tomalin and Stempelski (1993) have also tried to contribute to this discussion. They have enumerated a number of reasons behind the necessity of bounding language with culture. More importantly, both researchers have pointed out that students need to learn English in association with culture for a variety of reasons among which we can speak about:

Students should recognize that each group of people all over the globe has their own culture which might be different and, consequently, they should distinguish theirs from the host ones in order to come across the differences and similarities. One of the best ways to understand other people's cultures is to, first, examine your own. Most people take their background for granted and don't even realise that their customs and beliefs might seem strange to someone else. When people think of their own way of life as the default and everyone else's as a strange variation, it's hard to approach those differences with respect.

Concerning the second reason, students need to understand that social environments such as places, ages and sexes are all to be considered while dealing with culture. This implies that the signs of culture, which are accepted in an area by a category of people, may not be necessarily accepted in other places by other individuals. Also, it means that some words or gestures may have different meanings and, as a result, may deprive people from reaching mutual understanding and effective communication. Of course, the word culture is a real complex idea; the term refers to various things like food, holidays, clothing, music, and religion, but it also goes much deeper than that because behaviours, customs, beliefs, and values are also part of people's culture. So when individuals from different cultural backgrounds interact, they may sometimes find that there are big differences in how they see the world, even if they dress in a similar way or speak the same language.

The third and last reason is closely connected to the fact that students are strongly recommended to develop the necessary skills that allow them for locating and organizing

information about the target culture so that they would be able to deal with it in the right way. Of course, this can be done via various strategies such as making friends, talking to foreign people, reading books, watching movies or listening to radio and broadcasts. These strategies will certainly allow individuals to stop stereotyping others and deal with them in a more appropriate manner. It should be understood that life would be very boring if all people were alike. This is why it is of paramount importance to understand that the best way is to respect peoples of other cultures, embrace their differences and enjoy a win-win process with all partners.

In the field of education and in an attempt to help teachers in their classes, H. Stern (1992), who is one of the famous anthropologists of language and culture, tries to suggest some solutions that may be very helpful to English teachers. He distinguishes between three suggestions in which the teaching of culture can take place:

The first solution proposes that learning English culture requires that students should be immersed in the English community by knowing about native speakers' ways of thinking and styles of life. For example, when an English man says, "It is a piece of cake!" or "It is not my cup of tea!", only those who know about the English culture can understand the meaning of these expressions. It is not a matter of knowing about words to understand the meaning of these sentences, but it is a matter of being aware of the English culture. Students can learn English only when they have a full understanding of the English cultural settings. In this regard, D. W. Johnson and Stanne, M. B. (2000 :53) explains that "Humans learn through the cultures in which they are reared, gaining competence as they mature and often possessing passionate loyalty to their cultural origins."

The second solution warns that in case English is learnt a part from its cultural context, this will, surely, lead to a big failure in interacting with native English speakers in authentic situations. Today, students are living in the 21st century, the era of technology and globalization, and it has become much easier than any time before for them to contact each other. The most prominent obstacle they might encounter while communication is using the English language, which may not be very understood by either party. Furthermore, students might misunderstand each other because each language associates connotative meanings for words according to its own culture. For example, the word "dog" has a positive connotative attitude in the English culture. So, English people use the sentence "You are my lucky dog" to mean "You are my faithful friend." In contrast, the word "dog" has a negative connotative attitude in the Arabic culture. Arabs use dogs for guarding only, and they consider dogs dirty. Therefore, the same sentence is judged disgracefully.

As for the third solution, it strongly recommends that students need to understand that learning English is not a mechanical process; it is rather a mental process. More importantly, it is mainly based on the knowledge of English

in its cultural context. Of course, this indicates that culture includes all aspects of life shared by people who live in that community. However, for those who do not belong to that community, it really remains very difficult to penetrate these ethnocentric layers unless they become part of that cultural setting. Accordingly, Johnson and Stanne, (p.48) emphasizes that “much of what we know and believe to be real has no concrete manifestation at all, but is made concrete only through its applications in everyday life.”

VI. CONCLUSION

As mentioned earlier, Cultural differences exist all over the globe; they can represent the way in which other groups, societies or countries are socially organized, developed and communicated. Cultural differences involve customs, laws and lifestyles from other ethnographic groups. Therefore, understanding the target language can never be an easy task without being aware of the cultural context of that language. Generally, it is widely acknowledged that students cannot truly master the language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs. Linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners to be competent in a language. Culture proves to be an integral part of the language learning curricula. This is why teachers are expected to make their students aware of the cultural features reflected in the English language. To reach this goal successfully, teachers are forced to make cultural features an explicit topic of discussion when appropriate. As a result, students will be globalized and able to come across the similarities and differences that exist between the target culture and the host one.

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