



An investigation into cultural effects of l2 learning: a case study of Iranian young versus adult learners of English

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at discovering if young and adult learners of English language who had been taught Interchange Series would be similarly affected in terms of cultural orientations. To unravel whether learning a foreign language presupposes cultural adaptability, the study also sought if the two groups would perform differently on their achievement tests. To conduct the study, a questionnaire was constructed based on the cultural components discovered in the Interchange Series by Zarei and Khalessi (2010). The two groups of L2 learners who had already completed the three volume Interchange Series in a language institute in Isfahan, Iran, were asked to list the cultural issues from the most preferred to the least. At the end of their program they had sat for their final exams, which were analyzed later. The results indicated that while the adult learners' preferences were domestically oriented, the young learners of English gave precedence to the cultural issues with western flavor. As regards their course scores, the two groups were not meaningfully different. It can be gathered that textbooks can make young learners conceptualize the world as portrayed therein. The results rejected the idea of acculturation adaptability as a pre-requisite to learning a foreign language.

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Introduction

Learning a foreign language was in the past posited as an attempt to develop a language proficiency which was primarily and predominantly a reflection of syntactic rules and vocabulary integrated into the sentences forming propositions about different affairs. Later the behaviouristic framework failed to account for some important socio-pragmatic considerations which a foreign language could find most relevant to the social bedrock of practice. All this was rooted in the misconception that a language was considered merely a code easily translatable into another one (Kramsch, 1998). This conviction thus played an instrumental role in promoting the approaches to and shaping the learning milieu for a foreign language. Challenging the mechanistic views of language, communicative competence theory soon permeated the foreign language learning and blazed a new trail for scholars to consider the role of context and the circumstances under which to use the language appropriately. This theory marked a turning point in the history of foreign language learning towards a socio-pragmatic era where language learning was construed on no account less than a proper integration of culture and code. As such, learning a foreign language was largely learning sociocultural dynamics underlying the language by gaining insights into very fabric of society and culture. However, this social communicative theory was questioned on different grounds including its emphasis on the copying of native behavioral standards, and the fact that meaning is grasped through transmission of L2 cultural prescriptions (Kramsch, 2001). Therefore, the idea has been pushed further, contending that all languages are historically situated with the users making meaning at a particular juncture in time with a special purpose in mind (Kramsch, 2001). This view of historical contingency also known as intertextuality distinguishes one individual from another in the context of

language use, implying that in the case of a foreign language learners are likely to carry with them some emotional and historical backgrounds of L1 quite distinct from the L2 functional intentions. The idea of intertextuality coupled with the dialogic process of meaning construction also brings language and associated cultural issues into a new perspective. This new position asserts that language learners use language to create and represent the realities they come to experience (Vygotsky, 1962; Haliday, 1978). Thus foreign language learners are not only the carriers of what they have been exposed to but also the creator of meaning from what is presented to them afresh. In other words, the foreign language learners do not put the new foreign words into their old moulds or platonic templates but rather through the new language generate the new ideas incomparable to their L1 (Kramsch, 2001). This makes us think that young learners of foreign language are most likely to conceptualize and mentally shape the world around them in a form that is delivered to them. In this direction, Vygotsky (1962) assumes that conceptualization of realities is mediated through the channel of communication, hence stressing that language is a social semiotic representing socially and culturally oriented facts and realities. The implication derived from the two positions elaborated above is that adults are more likely to be the carriers of L1 backgrounds into the foreign language learning context contrary to the young who may be considered the creators of social realities as they need to construct a new world which best serves their own social interests as yet unprecedented in their life. Motivated by the issues raised in this sketchy review of the relationship between language as a code and socio-pragmatic issues expected to be transmitted to the learners of language, this study is intended to practically launch an investigation into the way the young and adult learners of the English language as

foreign learners of language are culturally influenced and also the way their learning is affected.

English language learning and culture

Though the relationship between English language learning and culture has been differently defined, it is however generally accepted that language and culture are inextricably associated and any attempt towards learning the language requires some degree of cultural literacy as well. It must be noted the word literacy must not lead us away to assume that culture is distinct from language. Culture is believed to be an inseparable facet of language constituting the spirit of language and satisfying biological and psychological needs of the learners (Brown, 2007). In this connection, Halliday (1978) also maintains that language and culture coevolve in the same way as do the meaning and expression and thus cannot be divorced. Whether or not to incorporate the culture of English language into the teaching/learning programs has spawned much discussion among both theoreticians and practitioners. And the pendulum of their opinions has swung widely against and for teaching culture in the English language. On the whole, the analysis of the English language teaching contexts in relation to the issue of culture has brought out three distinct positions as reviewed below.

The first position points to the significance of cultural issues in the context of language learning. A good number of scholars (e.g., Whorf, 1956; Lakoff, 2004) stress the inalienable and consolidated entity of the two, namely language and culture, on different grounds. They believe that language and culture are intrinsically intertwined in lexical, discursive, ideational, and textual levels. This camp states that a language to be learned cannot be dissociated from cultural elements (Pulverness, 2003; Kramsch, 1988, 2001). And language curriculum devoid of culture would fail in developing a communicative competence in the language learners (Bada, 2000; Genc & Bada, 2005). In the same vein, some have even pushed the limits further and postulated that learners of a foreign language can achieve their linguistic goals provided they desire assimilation, or to a lesser degree, acculturation (Schumann, 1976). This radical stance assumes that cognitive and affective gaps between the two languages need to be bridged by converting to the new language cultural norms. Also, Brown (1980) attributes the failure in mastering a second language to the learners' inability to bring the linguistic and cultural development into synchrony.

While the first position stresses the cultural transformation in learners' views as a driving force for learning a foreign language, some other scholars have refused to approve of such a need as a pre-requisite to learning. As an example, Stevick (1976) talks about the fragility of students in the face of learning a culture different from their own which may arouse some feeling of alienation and estrangement. In the same line of thinking, Zarei and Khalessi (2010) caution that incorporation of foreign language culture into the instructional materials could account for some students' failure in learning a foreign language as they may desire to get rid of what they may take as unsolicited cultural impositions. Also, Adasko, Britten, and Fahsi (1990) discovered nothing motivating in using Western culture, but rather breeding learners' dissatisfaction with their own culture. This opposite force sometimes grows even more intense in regard to the English language, portraying a totally negative picture of the language with lots of unpredictable consequences (Kim, 2002; Yarmohammadi, 2004; Chatterjee, 1993). This radical opposing wind warns that English language

can gradually drive other languages and cultures to the sideline and ultimately force them to die out.

The third position takes up a moderate stance towards culture and language and stands half way between the two above reviewed opposite positions. This position does not accept either way absolutism in regard to culture and language. Rather, it emphasizes a culture fair curriculum where cultural awareness and intercultural competence find prominence (Alptekin 2002; Smith, 1976) and students are supplied with strategies to cope with the cultural differences (Hyde, 1998). Kramsch and Sullivan (1996) imply that foreign language pedagogy should help learners feel at home in both international and national cultures, avoiding those patterns which are alien, irrelevant, or sometimes adversarial. Likewise, Widdowson (1998) suggests that instructional materials should include native-nonnative and also nonnative-nonnative interactions as well and discourage the exclusive use of native norms as many language learners do not use them in authentic settings.

Research Purpose

Since language is believed to symbolically represent a microcosm of culture and social values, language learning textbooks necessarily reflect cultural values and thus learning the language via such books transmit such values to the learners. And, also because young language learners are more likely to get culturally affected as they are exposed to certain instructional materials in comparison with adults who are already in their established social characters, this study tried to investigate if young and adult English language learners who are taught a special series of books (Interchange) come to perceive the cultural issues differently. Moreover, the study focused on the language learners' achievement in the instructional program to uncover the way their cultural perceptions may be linked to their success or failure in learning a foreign language.

Method

Participants

The study involved two groups of participants. The first group consisted of sixteen male learners ranging in their education from the second year of junior high school to the second year of senior high school and in their age from 11 to 15. The second group included twelve male adults, three of whom were high school diplomas, eight bachelor holders and one a master. Their age ranged from 23 to 28. These two groups had already finished learning English in an institute, Isfahan, Iran, through three volume Interchange Series.

Materials

To collect the data, a researcher-constructed questionnaire was used. The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions, each embracing a general cultural topic (e.g., entertainment), followed by 4 relevant choices (e.g., A. Dance (*Western*) B. Harakate Mozun (*for dance in Iran*) C. Violin (*Western*) D. Santour (*an Iranian musical instrument*), for the same general topic 'entertainment'). The topics and two of choices were supposed to represent 'Western cultural issues' already used in and thus extracted from Interchange Series by Zarei and Khalessi (2010). The other two choices were Iranian counterparts used to counterbalance the Western choices. The purpose was to see which of the cultural choices (Western or Iranian) for the general topics would be prioritized. The participants were required to rank the four choices from 1 (the most preferred) to 4 (the least preferred). The questionnaire was supposed to unfold the participants' cultural priorities.

Upon the construction of questionnaire, the researcher asked two colleagues to read and improve the quality, and also piloted it with seven sample language learners to get rid of ambiguities. The order of choices, appropriacy of choices especially the Iranian ones, and transparency of instructions were all considered and improved.

Then the scale represented in Table 1 was designed for the evaluation of results. Based on the four choices used for each general topic, it was realized that the learners would rank each item in one of the six possible orders of preference, indicating different degrees of cultural effects. The first three orders started with a 'Western' choice collectively representing the so-called 'Western Inclination' and the second three orders were initiated with an 'Iranian' choice', collectively representing the so-called 'Iranian Inclination'. So, the obtained results from the questionnaire were first assessed for their 'inclinations'

Next, in order to provide a precise picture of the overall effect, taking into account individual preferences (rather than collective inclinations), the six graded categories of preferences were rated from 'very strong' to 'no effect'. The top rate is 'very strong' where the first two places are given to the Western choices, indicating the strongest case of 'effect'. The last rate 'no effect' indicates that no Western choice was given the first or the second place in the order. In other words, in this particular case the priority was given to the two Iranian counterparts (e.g. for 'entertainment', the choices *Harakate Mozun (for dance)* and *Santour (an Iranian musical instrument)* both of which considered Iranian were given the first and second place), and showed 'no effect' as regards the cultural influence of the books studied. Also, the six categories of rates (Top to bottom: very strong to no effect) were weighted from 5 points to 0, respectively, depending on their degrees of effect for further analysis. This made it possible to assess the distinct effect the two groups experienced apart from their overall inclinations which considered each of the three preferences as equal along the two dimensions of Western and Iranian.

Also, as the language learners were finally given a test of 20 multiple choice questions for the assessment of their achievements by their institute the researcher received their final scores for the cross comparison of their performance.

Data Collection

The questionnaire was administered simultaneously to the two groups in their institute classes. Before starting the job, the participants were briefed on how to do the task and also on what purpose was pursued by the questionnaire. All the participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of information received in order to help with the responsibility to be fully discharged, thus increasing the response validity of the inquiry. They were asked to rank the four choices of each item in actual order of preference (The most preferred choice be put in 1 and the least preferred one in 4, under each general topic) depending on their own priority for the words. The two groups finished the task in almost 17 minutes.

Results

This study aimed to investigate the culture and language relationship as it unfolds within the foreign language learning milieu. The focus was on the cultural effects that particular books can have on the learners. Also, an attempt was made to see if learning the language presupposes the cultural effects. To that end, two groups of participants, namely, adult and young learners of English language participated in the research. First, both groups were asked to prioritize their perceptions of the

identified cultural issues, which had been extracted from Interchange Series. The results, as shown in Table 2, clearly confirm that these language learners demonstrated skewed cultural orientations. The two groups stand in sharp contrast with each other with the young learners registering 83.1 vs. 16.9 and adult learners 25 vs. 75 percent for Western and Iranian Inclinations, respectively. Moreover, the two groups also vary in their consideration of specific cases. For example, while the adult learners go for 'entertainment' and 'sport' in Iranian Orientation most young learners prefer 'food' the most and 'names' least with Western flavor.

To cast light over the precise weight of each category, the researcher analyzed them further one by one. This was because the 'inclinations' were determined collectively regardless of distinct categories. That is, an analysis of this sort finds, for example, the first order of preference 'Very Strong' (firs two choices of Western) with greater effect compared with the following ones. As can be seen below (Table 3), G1 (Young) shows an effect of 1209 points versus 485 gained by G2 (Adult). As the number of the subjects in the two groups differed, Table 4 compares the obtained figure with the maximum possible effects each group could receive. Supposing that all the group members would choose the first order of preference (Very Strong with 5 points) on the 20 topics of questionnaire, each group could get a maximum number calculated through 5 times 20 multiplied by number of subjects, converted into percentage for better comparison. The results thus obtained (Table 4) indicate G1 has shown an effect of about 75 percent while this is around 40 for G2. Clearly, the first group received a remarkable degree of effect and moved towards the cultural features presented in the language books. The statistical analysis also revealed that the two groups were statistically different (Table 4).

Regardless of extraneous variables at work exerting influence on the language learners, the results of this study make it clear that language textbooks tend to shape the young learners' cultural visions.

Next question addressed whether or not learning a foreign language had anything to do with the cultural issues. This goal of cultural acculturation as a prerequisite to learning a foreign language has very often been voiced and highlighted. The two groups' performances on their final achievement test show they have learned their materials similarly. As can be seen in Table 5, the two groups have achieved a mean of around 16 (out of 20) and a standard deviation of around 2, confirming their equal status. The t-test also confirms that the difference between the two groups is not statistically significant (Table 5).

It can be gathered from the results that learning another language is not necessarily tied to the changes in the learners' cultural perspectives. Though very limited in scope, the results of the study display that although the language learners have not accommodated to the book embedded cultural patterns identically they have managed to acquire the language (so-called linguistic competence) to the same extent.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results reached in this study suggest that learning a foreign language is largely a way of constructing certain cultural identities. However, the cultural identities expected to be developed in a foreign language learning context are to a great extent a function of the age at which learners come to experience the new language. As shown in this study, the young learners of language tend to perceive the world portrayed in the books

differently in comparison to their adult counterparts. The difference between the two groups of learners in the present study also indicates that young learners get a different feeling, perception and interpretation of the world around them probably because they have not already conceptualized the cultural patterns of their society, compared with adults. Therefore, they come to touch the situation at first through their second language and accept it as their modes of thought, feeling and behavior. It is believed the young undergo certain process of socialization and change. The early years usually before puberty are considered formative years which constitute the learners' cognitive, affective, and cultural filters to perceive and interpret the world accordingly. This is to say that young learners are more prone to the cultural effects of the instructional materials. This finding is in line with Vygotsky's (1962) claim that thought and subsequently behavior reflect conceptualized actualities people are exposed to. The results also imply that culture learning is a way of creating meaning through experiencing the new world (Brown, 2007).

However, it must be noted that these remarks are not supposed to verify the strong version of language and culture interface which stresses the interdependence of the two for learning the language (acculturation). As shown in the study, the learning of language seems to be independent of the cultural conversion. Though textbooks are always cultural artifacts developed by authors with their own cultural assumptions and biases, the learners of language can have their own distinct goals and thus may not accept the value systems promoted in the books as they are. In other words, the learners of a particular foreign language may develop an intercultural competence whereby they can culturally understand and interpret foreigners but may not necessarily transform themselves into other cultural identities. The implication of this study is that cross cultural awareness may suffice for the learners to function successfully in a foreign language context without any need for acculturation. On the contrary, one needs to remember that appeal to an ecumenical approach to culture (Atkinson, 1999) cannot always end up in the success on the part of the learners as they may view the foreign cultural patterns unsolicited; something they desire to know what it is like but not as something they have to digest and absorb in their characters. Thus, the two groups of learners in the study uncover this important fact that they may, irrespective of their cultural orientations, still continue to acquire the linguistic competence equally well.

While the above mentioned results may cast some light over the issue of culture and language, we must be careful that it is not possible to read too much into a research of the present scale. On the whole, the results reached in this study are to be taken as suggestive rather than definitive since a multitude of issues might work for or against any attempts made for illumination of the culture-language relationship. The English language books may be considered one crucial factor among many others. As an important point, the participants of the study were not assessed on their initial state of cultural inclination to have clear comparison with their final state, and also it is very likely that they have been exposed to lots of other cultural input during the two year long program of learning the English language. The multiple choice exam is another factor which cannot usually evaluate the learners' knowledge of language as regards the cultural issues in the books. Also, the reader needs to remember that there are still lots of other factors which may have affected the results in this study, thus limiting the

interpretation of the results. The factors clearly range from specificity of instrument, subjects, and cultural context, to subjects' age, gender, number, sociocultural and family backgrounds. Therefore, the results of the study have to be cautiously interpreted and generalized.

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Table1. Questionnaire analysis scale

| Inclinations | Possible Orders of Preference | | | | Rating Scale | Weight |
|--------------|-------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|----------------|--------|
| 1. Western | 1. a. Western | b. Western | c. Iranian | d. Iranian | 1. Very Strong | 5 |
| | 2. a. Western | b. Iranian | c. Western | d. Iranian | 2. Strong | 4 |
| | 3. a. Western | b. Iranian | c. Iranian | d. Western | 3. Moderate | 3 |
| 2. Iranian | 1. a. Iranian | b. Western | c. Western | d. Iranian | 1. Weak | 2 |
| | 2. a. Iranian | b. Western | c. Iranian | d. Western | 2. Very Weak | 1 |
| | 3. a. Iranian | b. Iranian | c. Western | d. Western | 3. No Effect | 0 |

Table 2. The overall inclinations of the two groups as shown in frequency and percentage

| Cultural Topics | Frequency | | | | Percentage | | | |
|---------------------|----------------|-----|----------------|------|----------------|------|----------------|-------|
| | Group 1 (N=16) | | Group 2 (N=12) | | Group 1 (N=16) | | Group 2 (N=12) | |
| | W | Ir. | W | Ir. | W | Ir. | W | Ir. |
| 1. Entertainment 1 | 14 | 2 | 0 | 12** | 87.5 | 12.5 | 0 | 100 |
| 2. Social relations | 14 | 2 | 1 | 11 | 87.5 | 12.5 | 8.4 | 91.6 |
| 3. Clothes | 11 | 5 | 1 | 11 | 68.8 | 31.3 | 8.4 | 91.6 |
| 4. Place 1 | 11 | 5 | 2 | 10 | 68.8 | 31.3 | 16.6 | 83.3 |
| 5. Music | 15 | 1 | 3 | 9 | 93.8 | 6.3 | 25 | 75 |
| 6. Market/Exchange | 11 | 5 | 4 | 8 | 68.8 | 31.3 | 33.3 | 66.6 |
| 7. Food | 16** | 0 | 2 | 10 | 100 | 0.0 | 16.6 | 83.3 |
| 8. Holidays | 15 | 1 | 3 | 9 | 93.8 | 6.3 | 25 | 75 |
| 9. Names | 9* | 7 | 4 | 8 | 56.3 | 43.8 | 33.3 | 66.6 |
| 10. Celebrities | 12 | 4 | 5 | 7 | 75 | 25 | 41.6 | 58.3 |
| 11. Sport | 15 | 1 | 0 | 12** | 93.8 | 6.3 | 0 | 100 |
| 12. Films | 13 | 3 | 2 | 10 | 81.3 | 18.8 | 31.3 | 68.8 |
| 13. Animals | 11 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 68.8 | 31.3 | 50 | 50 |
| 14. TV/Radio | 15 | 1 | 5 | 7 | 93.8 | 6.3 | 41.6 | 58.33 |
| 15. Entertainment 2 | 15 | 1 | 4 | 8 | 93.8 | 6.3 | 33.3 | 66.6 |
| 16. Education | 12 | 4 | 3 | 9 | 75 | 25 | 25 | 75 |
| 17. Place 2 | 14 | 2 | 1 | 11 | 87.5 | 12.5 | 8.4 | 91.6 |
| 18. Cinema | 14 | 2 | 7 | 5* | 87.5 | 12.5 | 58.3 | 41.66 |
| 19. Miscellaneous 1 | 15 | 1 | 5 | 7 | 93.8 | 6.3 | 41.6 | 58.3 |
| 20. Miscellaneous 2 | 16** | 0 | 2 | 10 | 100 | 0.0 | 16.6 | 83.3 |
| Total | 266 | 54 | 60 | 180 | 83.1 | 16.9 | 25 | 75 |

G1=Young; G2=Adult; W= Western; Ir.= Iranian Inclinations

**=Max; *=Min

Table 3. The overall cultural effect on the two groups

| Effect Rate | W | G1 (N=16) F | G2 (N=12) F | Total Weight G1 (F × W) | Total Weight G2 (F × W) |
|-------------|----|----------------|----------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Very Strong | 5 | 121 | 29 | 605 | 145 |
| Strong | 4 | 94 | 11 | 376 | 44 |
| Moderate | 3 | 51 | 20 | 153 | 60 |
| Weak | 2 | 28 | 84 | 56 | 168 |
| Very Weak | 1 | 19 | 68 | 19 | 68 |
| No Effect | 0 | 7 | 28 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 15 | 320 | 240 | 1209 | 485 |

F= Frequency; W=Weight

Table 4. Possible max effect and actual effect compared

| Groups | Maximum possible effect | Actual effect obtained | Actual effect % |
|-----------|-------------------------|------------------------|-----------------|
| G1 (N=16) | 1600 | 1209 | 75.56 |
| G2 (N=12) | 1200 | 485 | 40.41 |

$X^2=.37$ p<.05 Sig:.00

Table 5. The two groups' performance on final exam

| Groups | N | Min | Max | Mean | SD | t | Sig. |
|--------|----|-----|-----|-------|-------|------|------|
| 1 | 16 | 13 | 20 | 16.81 | 2.007 | .321 | .75 |
| 2 | 12 | 12 | 20 | 16.41 | 2.27 | | |