



## Enhancing Libyan Undergraduates' Cultural Awareness through Reading Texts

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### ABSTRACT

*The current study aimed at enhancing Libyan undergraduates' cultural awareness in Libyan foreign language reading classes. Teaching and learning English as a foreign language have increasingly become more important at the present time than ever. Many interrelated economic, political, and educational reasons have pushed towards the process of teaching/learning English as a foreign language. Due to this significance, developing the techniques and methodology for teaching English language has never stopped.*

*Aiming at such developments, the researcher believes that there is still an important cultural element missing from foreign language education in Libyan classes. This is because understanding a language does not mean understanding only its linguistic form; the cultural context of which linguistic form occurs is equally significant. To determine such significance, the researcher conducted experimentation on two groups of Libyan foreign language students in their second semester. The result of the experimentation was highly successful in terms of students' acculturation. Therefore, it is recommended that the cultural knowledge should be provided to students of foreign language together with linguistic knowledge especially through reading texts.*

**Keywords : Definitions of Culture, Techniques for teaching target Culture**

### Introduction

Language and its culture cannot be taught separately in any foreign language program. Foreign language instruction in Libya minimizes the cultural role of the language and emphasizes its linguistic role. Such a lack of sufficient knowledge of sociocultural elements in the Libyan classroom makes students of English language unable to fully communicate their ideas appropriately in real life situations.

To fully function in a particular language students need to understand not only the form of the language, such as the grammar, but also to use that form in its appropriate cultural contexts. Through such meaningful interaction with others as well as functional use in daily life that children develop competence, fluency, and creativity in language. Unfortunately, foreign language instruction in Libyan classes is focused solely on linguistic competence which very often centers on the form of the language.

Consequently, the development of students' communicative abilities cannot occur. Silberstein (2001:103) states that: "Grammatical knowledge alone does not guarantee communication." Instead, the focus should include teaching students the social and cultural aspect of the target language.

### Statement of the Problem

Language and culture are two vital inseparable components in any foreign language program. Many researchers (Valdes 1986, Brown 1994) insist on teaching the language in its socio-cultural context. Brown (1994:164) for instance, emphasized that "a language is a part of culture and a culture is a part of a language. The two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture".

Unfortunately, this was not the case in Libyan foreign language classrooms. The language has not been taught in its

social-cultural context. The cultural part of the language has been badly neglected due to two major reasons. These reasons include: the use of old teaching techniques in reading classes, and the inappropriate selection of reading texts.

Sadly, the first reason originally came from Libyan instructors' constant use of old teaching techniques such as Grammar-Translation method for developing students' linguistic knowledge. Such a method usually compels learners to memorize lists of words, translate from and to native language, in addition to accurate application of grammatical rules without any hints for further cultural goals.

The adoption of such teaching technique originally refers to a misconception of foreign language instruction. According to a study conducted by Latiwish (2003) on methods of teaching in Libyan prospective, learning English as a foreign language in Libya is viewed as a matter of mastering grammatical rules and vocabulary. Moreover, many English language curricula are designed to promote this way of learning through both memorization and application.

A second critical issue is that reading texts taught to Libyan undergraduates in their foreign language program lack an up-to-date content. The reading texts generally were adopted from a sourcebook entitled Practice and Progress by Alexander (1981). These texts are short, outdated, and lack cultural content such as newspapers, literature, and critical incidents. Such an exclusion of cultural content makes students suffer the consequences of an incomplete foreign language instruction. Peck (1998:1) emphasizes that "Without the study of culture, foreign language instruction is inaccurate and incomplete".

The absence of authentic material in students' reading class caused students to lose interest in reading, because the reading material taught to Libyan students does not equip

students with the real knowledge needed outside the class such as the target culture. According to Hadley (1993:198) "reading material should seek to provide students with cultural information of the target culture that suits their level and be of an interest to them".

Eventually, separating language from its' cultural context has made Libyan students unable to pick or use the appropriate expression in the appropriate situation. The focus on detailed lists of vocabularies to be memorized or grammatical rules to be repeated has hindered Libyan students' cultural development and has to be treated. According to Hadley (1993), the teaching policy of a foreign language should focus on further issues of Grammar and linguistics to include cultural issues through which a real usage of language can be obtained.

### Research Question

Q1- Does the teaching of cultural texts have any influence on Libyan undergraduates' cultural awareness?

### Objectives of the Present Study

- 1- Balancing both the Linguistic/cultural aspects of the language by integrating elements of target culture into the reading texts taught to Libyan undergraduates.
- 2- Making the Students more tolerant and appreciative to the target culture which differs from their native culture.

### Definitions of culture

At first, it should be noted that finding a precise definition for the concept of culture is almost an impossible task. Such a difficulty refers to the broad interdisciplinary nature of the concept and the wide area that it covers. Williams (1983 cited in Barker 2008:39) indicates that the contested character of culture and cultural studies made it "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language".

However, the attempts of narrowing down the concept of culture have been frequently made by different theorists from different disciplines. The way they looked at the meaning of culture has been influenced by their different backgrounds. Some scholars define culture as "ways of peoples' life of certain communities" (Lado, 1957; Byram 1989; Rivers, 1981).

Nevertheless, the above definition is so broad to the extent that the readers may not be able to understand it and recognize its components. This doesn't necessarily mean that their attempts towards defining culture have failed. On the contrary, this is because the territory that the concept (culture) covers included almost all the aspects of life of a community.

Other scholars deprived the concept of culture of its holistic meaning to be limited to 'music, literature, and art of the country' or what is known as Culture with the "big C". (Brooks, 1968:21; Williams, 1983b: 90). Such a definition has excluded elements that lie at the heart of culture such as none artistic activities practiced within a community that include values, attitudes, behaviors and so on.

The precise definition that the researcher highly values and has employed through the current article is the definition made by Haviland (1974:264), who looked at Culture as "a set of rules or standards which, when acted upon by members of a society, produces behavior that falls within the range of variance that members consider proper and acceptable".

Such a definition summarizes the researcher's attempts of integrating some aspects of these cultural "roles" and "standards" in the reading texts of the Libyan undergraduates. In this way, students can absorb these sets of rules and standards to act upon later, and their behavior will be seen as appropriate within the society where the target language is spoken.

These "sets of rules" and "standards" are further elaborated and specified by Valdes (1986:179), who looked at culture as "the attitudes, customs, and daily activities of people, their way of thinking, their values, their frames of reference. It in-

cludes geography, history, and achievements in the sciences, the social sciences and the arts".

Again, through including samples of 'attitudes', 'customs', and 'daily activities' of the people of the target culture in the reading class will develop students cultural background. Consequently, this will contribute to a development on both linguistic and cultural aspects of their language which is the researcher's ultimate goal.

### Selected Techniques for Teaching the Target Culture in the Reading Class

There are many cultural techniques that an instructor can adopt for teaching the target culture in foreign language classroom. However, the techniques adopted in the present study were limited to the ones that are suitable for the integration in reading texts. In other words, role-playing, videos, and mini drama are all recommended for teaching culture, however, due to their nature (suitable for speaking and listening) cannot be implemented in reading texts. Hence, of the most common techniques that were selected are culture assimilators, critical incidents, historical events, idioms and proverbs, newspapers, and modern poems.

### Methodology of the Study

In order to gather sufficient data about how successful the integration of culture in reading texts, the researcher has conducted classroom experimentation. Libyan students of foreign language in their second semester were selected as the sample of the study. Two classrooms (of fifteen students each) were assigned by the English department of Baniwalid University according to students' GPAs of the last semester.

The two classes (Controlled group and Treatment group) were instructed for half a semester differently. The treatment group received certain cultural treatment unlike the controlled group which did not receive any treatment. Both groups were pretested and post tested to see whether the treatment conducted had any effects on students' level. The treatment group has revealed positive results in terms of the cultural treatment conducted.

The controlled group on the other hand has not shown any cultural progress. The result of the two tests (pre and post tests) was analyzed to find out the difference that has occurred on the student's level. Through such process, it has become clear that elements of the target culture can be successfully integrated into reading texts and can enhance Libyan students' cultural awareness. Figure 1.1 below shows the difference between the means of both groups' test scores:

**Table 1.1 Mean Differences of the Two Groups' Test Scores**

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Controlled	14	13.29	4.41	1.17870
Treatment	14	22.93	4.38	1.16950

**Figure1.1 Means of the two groups' test scores**

### Results

It is quite obvious that there is a huge difference between the levels of students of the two groups. The above comparison between the means of the two groups shows a significant development on students' level of the treatment group. In purely statistic view, while the students' scores of the treatment group on the pretest had a mean of 14.43, it has increased to become 22.93 after the treatment. Unlike the controlled group which had a mean of 14.21 and scored even less (13.29).

### Conclusion

Cultural familiarity can be developed through adopting various cultural materials that suit classroom setting and found to be highly manageable in a reading class. For instance, daily news papers and magazines, literary works, idioms and

proverbial uses can acculturate foreign language students. Through familiarizing students with such cultural sources, students can develop their cultural awareness which is the ultimate goal of the current study.

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