

Cultural Communicative Competence - the case of Textbooks at Yemeni High School: An Exploratory study

**الكفاءة التواصلية الثقافية – حالة الكتب المدرسية في المدرسة اليمنية الثانوية:
بحث استكشافي**

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Abstract:

It is well known among EFL practitioners that the application of communicative methodology is not easy to be accomplished, but it is a challenge that faces EFL teachers because it demands an understanding of the theoretical nature of the communicative competence. Hence, this research aims at showing the important role of integrating the cultural aspect of English as a core component into the development of learners' communicative competence. It will also give a thorough overview about this concept and how to achieve it. On the other hand, this paper also will try to determine what type of activities should be introduced to the students. For that, this paper will focus on evaluating one English textbook taught in Yemeni High schools to figure out to what extent the communicative approach is used and how the target language is stressed to boost students' communicative competence.

Key Words: Communicative Competence, Cultural Competence, Intercultural communicative approach.

المخلص:

من المعروف جيداً لدى ممارسي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية أن تطبيق منهجية التواصل ليس من السهل تحقيقه، ولكنه تحدٍ يواجه معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لأنه يتطلب فهماً للطبيعة النظرية للكفاءة التواصلية. ومن ثم، يهدف هذا البحث إلى إظهار الدور المهم لدمج الجانب الثقافي للغة الإنجليزية كعنصر أساسي في تطوير كفاءة التواصل لدى المتعلمين. كما ستقدم نظرة عامة شاملة حول هذا المفهوم وكيفية تحقيقه. من ناحية أخرى، ستحاول هذه الورقة أيضاً تحديد نوع الأنشطة التي يجب تقديمها للطلاب. لذلك، ستركز هذه الورقة على تقييم كتاب مدرسي واحد باللغة الإنجليزية يتم تدريسه في المدارس الثانوية اليمنية لمعرفة إلى أي مدى يتم استخدام نهج التواصل وكيف يتم التأكيد على اللغة المستهدفة لتعزيز كفاءة الطلاب في التواصل.

Introduction:

Culture and language are two units that are completely intertwined and cannot be separated. Whenever, when one brings a discussion on language on the table; one cannot neglect culture. Hence, for better

understanding and use of a language, the learner must have a great deal of knowledge about the target language culture system. So, s/he can, therefore, avoid misunderstanding and lack of comprehension when communicating in real life situations. That is one of the challenges that face non-native speakers: surviving a communication and using English appropriately outside the classroom.

When speaking about Yemeni students' communicative competence, we assume that it is not up to the required level because of many reasons. The main reason behind this problem is the lack of exposure to cultural aspects of the target language. This goes also to the difficulty of applying the communicative methodology inside the classroom; it is a challenge that faces EFL ('English as a foreign language) teachers because it demands an understanding of the theoretical nature of the communicative competence. Therefore, there are plenty of reasons that contribute to student's lack of good communicative skills. This results in inaccuracy when speaking the language. For that, this paper will focus on evaluating one English textbook taught in Yemeni High schools to figure out to what extent the communicative approach is used and how the target language is stressed to boost students' communicative competence.

Statement of the Problem

EFL classrooms are normally considered part of that is different culture from which that of the target language. English learners' lack of knowledge of the cultural norms and rules is assumed to create a hindrance for their communicative competence. This matter implies that EFL textbooks should provide a decent amount of the target language culture in order to help learners to communicate effectively in real life contexts. Although the CLT approach dictates the importance of integrating the cultural side of the language in the classroom and focus on students' communication in real situations, culture and communication are not given their due value into the application in the classroom. Therefore, students' cultural and communicative competence doesn't meet the desired level. This explains their frustration when communicating in concrete contexts.

Study Questions

1. Does the lack of knowledge of the culture of the English language hinder the communicative competence of Yemeni learners?
2. Does Yemeni textbook at your level contain enough exposure to the target culture?
3. What sources Yemeni students rely on to get the necessary knowledge about the culture of the English language?

1. Literature review

1.1. Communicative Competence

The theory of communicative competence was built on the Chomskian revolution in linguistics. Hymes' theory (1972) came as a complementary to Chomsky's theory to add the fourth competence which is: the communicative competence. He defines it as the knowledge of both rules of grammar and rules of language of use in a given context. His work has revolutionized the linguistic framework and shifts the focus from the study of language as in isolation to the study of language as a system of communication. On the other hand, he believes that linguistic competence and communicative competence are intertwined, and that the notion of linguistic competence is with no real importance if it is not studied along with the communicative; that is, taking the context into consideration. In addition, did not postulate that the linguistic competence is not important for the language user but instead he states that besides the knowledge of the linguistic forms; the user should take into consideration social variable so that he can be a competent language user.

In brief, Communicative competence for Hymes includes the linguistic competence plus the knowledge of the rules and conventions for using language items in contexts. Canal and Swain (1980, p.30) on the other hand, described it as "socio-cultural rules of use". They added strategic competence i.e., the ability to avoid and correct mistakes in communication. They argued that a valid measure of language ability

needs to include these four components. Nevertheless, this model has been criticized by Shohamy (1996) on the grounds that it is not known how the different components interact among each other. From the other hand, and despite the criticisms, she indicates that this Framework put foundations to teaching and learning a second language. She stated, “it is not important to emphasize that the acceptance of Canal and swain framework was not necessarily an indication of the strength of the model, but rather an indication of the state of the art in language teaching and learning at the time” (Shohamy,1996, p .144).

1.2. Communicative Language Teaching Approach

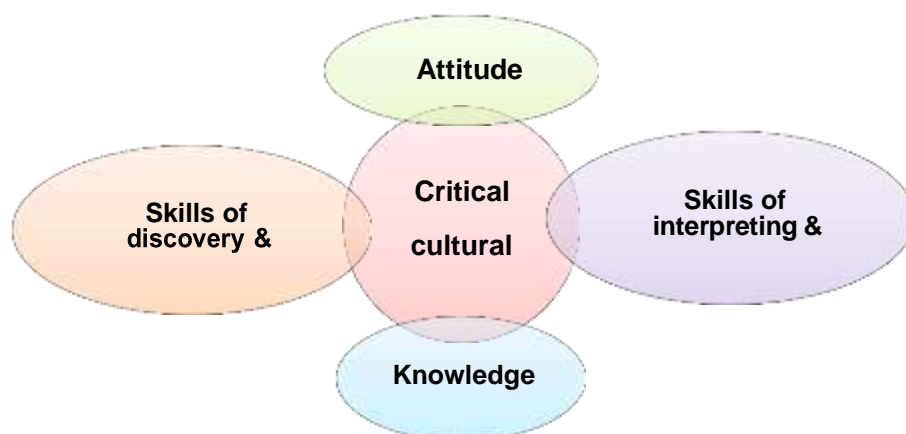
The main aim of the CLT approach is to focus on the communicative aspect of language rather than focus on the linguistic one. Widdoson (1978, p. 1) assumes that in this approach “language is automatically taught as communication by the simple expedient of concentrating on notions or functions rather than on sentences”. CLT and the traditional methods such as the Audio-Lingual Method and the Direct Method are similar in that they all aim at teaching language for communication. The Audio-Lingual Method for instance relies on imitation, repetition and drills, whereas the Direct Method tries to establish a direct link between the target language and meaning by immersing students in a rich sample of the structural and lexical items (Widdowson,1978). However, according to Widdowson (1978, p.3), the focus on grammar does not help learners; “learners need to develop their communicative abilities and encouraged to communicate using constructs other than rote memorized patterns”. He points that meaningful communication supports language learning and intends to provide opportunities in the classroom in an attempt to engage learners in the target language and that classroom activities must focus on the learner’s needs to communicate information and ideas. Bern’s (1984, p.5), an expert in the field of communicative language teaching, supposes that the focus must be on form along with meaning in social contexts. He writes that “language is interaction; it is interpersonal activity and has a clear relationship with society, in this light, language teaching has to look at the use (function) of language in contexts, (both

linguistic and social context)” For many educators, the CLT approach is a flexible method rather than a defined set of teaching practices in the meaning that learners are required to be active and participate freely in the class room activities without any pressure or obligation. Nunan (1991) claimed that “CLT is usually characterized as a broad approach to teaching, rather than as a teaching method with a clearly defined set of classroom practices”. He drew the basic features of this approach, and listed some characteristics of classroom practices, such as focusing on learning to communicate through interaction, engaging learners in learning process i.e., making the learner an active element in the classroom, and also making learners’ own personal experience an important element in the classroom learning. As these features show, the communicative approach is concerned with the unique individual needs of each learner who can acquire the desired skills rapidly and agreeably if we apply the idea of making the language relevant to the world and the outside environment rather than making it relevant only to the classroom. For the practices inside the classroom, priority should be given to different topics and therefore to more exposure to the target culture.

Other techniques proposed by Widdoson(1978),such as using authentic language and classroom exchanges where students engage in negotiation and cooperate between each other taking the form of pair and group work, he also suggested fluency-based activities that encourage learners to develop their confidence, role-plays in which students practice and develop language functions, as well as grammar and pronunciation focused activities.

1.3. Byram’s model for intercultural communicative competence

Native speakers should not be a model for language learners, according to Byram (1997), since such a level is difficult to be reached. So, he introduced the 'intercultural speaker' term. Byram's model (1997) consists of two reciprocal components. The first part is the communicative competence which based on the improved version of linguistic, discourse competence and sociolinguistic competence. The second part based on van Ek (1986), social and sociocultural competence. Thus, these the two competencies recently become intercultural competence due to Byram's model. In this model, Byram considers attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction and critical cultural competence components as the center of effective intercultural communication.



Byram's ICC model (source: Byram, 1997:73)

In this model, Byram introduces the intercultural competence intended for foreign language teaching. He builds his model on the basis of Hymes and Van Ek's models of communicative competence. There is a necessity for detailed analysis about the aspect of knowledge, skill, and attitudes, which affect intercultural communication. In addition, Byram in his model suggests it to foreign language teachers to enhance their specific beliefs and perceptions as foreign language instructors. For Hoff (2014:510), Byram' model views language learning as communicative, interactive and meaningful process. For Byram, communication through cultures involves three factors which are attitudes, knowledge, and skills. In relation of attitudes, they are what to do with people from different cultures. While for knowledge, it is people's knowledge when communicating

with individuals from other countries. Whereas skills are the capacity of interpreting texts depending on person's own understanding and of the other.

Finally, as seen from the above figure, Byram (2002:13) gives more explanation about intercultural competence factors affecting communicating:

- Attitudes: curiosity, openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures
- Knowledge: knowledge of social groups, their practices, products, etc.
- Skills of relating and interpreting: ability to relate and interpret a text from another culture
- Skills of discovery and interaction: ability to acquire new knowledge of culture and the ability to operate in real-time constraints.)

Critical cultural awareness (savoir s'engager): Evaluating one's own culture and other cultures critically.

1.4. English Language current status in Yemen

The English language holds an important place in the curricula in Yemen. English has become necessary given to its worldwide use. Since the beginning of the new millennium, English has achieved as tat us of an international language "EIL". According to House (2002b). Four main factors have been promoted its status namely, the world-wide extension of the British Empire, the political and economic rise of the United States to world power status after the Second World War, the unprecedented development in information and communication technology and the recent economic development towards globalization and internationalization. English is the world's leading language of technology, science, and communication. It is the native language of many countries in the world and the second language in some other countries like South Africa, Nigeria, etc. In addition, English is the lingua franca (ELF). The knowledge of English is

therefore essential in almost all branches of education and research. It helps in establishing cultural, economic, political, and commercial relations with the rest of the world owing to its real role of communication among different nations. Robert Burch Field, editor of Oxford English, cited in Crystal (2003), has said, "Any literate educated person on the face of the globe is deprived if he does not know English". This spread worldwide has given English the following five main privileges outlined by some scholars (Coulmas.1992; Kachru, 1991; and Crystal, 1997) as cited in Zughoul (2003).

One of the main goals of teaching / learning English is to develop in learners what is called 'functional competence', 'pragmatic competence', or 'communicative competence' this implies a general ability on the part of the learners to use the English in a variety of contexts. A closer look at the English language teaching / learning process in Yemen is of potential significance to weigh up the pros and cons of that process. However, it will reveal the crucial disappointing weakness of the TL learners. It is believed that the English graduates in Yemen, where Arabic is the native language, face difficulties in using English language for communication. When engaged in an authentic communicative situation, they often lack some of the vocabulary or language items they need to get their meaning across. As a result, they cannot keep the interaction going for an extended period.

Arabic is the official language that is used in Yemen. It is the medium of communication, education, administration, and discussion in the parliament, legal procedures, and mass media. Compared with Arabic, English is considered to be a foreign language. It is used for the purposes of international communication. However, this does not imply that the use of English is confined to the purposes mentioned above. As a matter of fact, there are situations and environments where English maintains the status of second language within the country. The foreign companies investing in different parts of Yemen, for instance, use English as a medium of communication and administrative procedures. Moreover, there are many expatriates living and working in the country who take recourse to English as a language of Communication with the Yemeni people. In short, the importance of

English in Yemen is not restricted only to interests and purposes outside the country. Its importance has been increasingly felt as a catalyst of progress for the country. English is taught from the seventh grade of the primary school as a compulsory subject. Students of different levels use English only in the classrooms. Some of them use it outside the classrooms or colleges for restricted purposes, e.g., giving direction to a tourist. Further, more and more Yemeni people realized that they need more English to come to achieve everyday tasks.

2. Data collection and analysis

2.1. Sample and Instrument

Concerning this paper, the population chosen consists of Yemeni students who are currently studying or have studied English as a foreign language. They belong to different educational levels. The instrument that was used to collect data was a questionnaire designed by the researcher. It aims at figuring out to what extent Yemeni students' lack of the English language cultural aspects will interfere with their communication competence in English. It contains two parts in which we find eight questions in total. The parts of the questionnaire are personal profile of the respondent and cultural awareness needs assessment. The first part will enable us to discover the level of the background of the informant. On the other hand, the second part contains questions about cultural awareness and its presence in Yemeni English textbooks. Other questions were about the English textbooks expectations or what should be changed to have that cultural awareness. The questionnaire was administered in two languages: Arabic and English one.

2.2. Data Presentation

The data presented was collected in Yemen based on a questionnaire. The number of participants was 166. They were from different regions and study in different schools in both the private and the public sectors. Students were asked about how proficient they think they are in the English language. It will be found that most if not all learners who study English have in mind the idea of using it as a job

not as a hobby. Moreover, they have expressed their lack of knowledge about the culture of the English language. The vast majority have said that they have no idea about the target culture. Concerning the areas in which these students feel they lack knowledge of the English people's style of life are two socio-cultural traditions and accent, their answers varied, where the vast majority expressed their problems with accent. In addition, students face problems to communicate due to the lack of knowledge about

the target culture. Our informants were asked whether the fact that they know many things or anything about the English language culture prevents from communicating properly with their English friends at the school. Besides, most informants said the lack of exposure to the target culture hinders their communicative skills especially the speaking skills. In relation to the source of English language culture, the majority said that they rely on the school curricula. On the other hand, some informants have chosen extra school courses, printed media and last audio and audio-visual media. The last question that our informants had to answer was 'to what extent the textbooks in Yemen provide enough insights about the target culture?' where the majority had said 'no' while, a few of them had said 'yes'.

2.3. Data analysis

Based on the collected result we answer the question of the study as follows:

Does the lack of knowledge of the culture of the English language hinder the communicative competence of Yemeni learners?

Based on the data obtained and presented previously, we can clearly answer this question by stating that the lack of exposure to the target culture leaves Yemeni students with no communicative skills to express their own ideas. Only 5% percent have said they highly know the culture of the English language. In other words, the 5% belongs to the private sector, where students use different textbooks, extra materials, and less larger groups which mean a good environment for the teacher to provide necessary knowledge. Looking at other data

concerning where students use language in real life, they said they have problems to communicate their thoughts since they lack that cultural background about the English language. Having said this and based on what we obtained in the data collection and analysis; Yemeni students lack knowledge about the culture of English language; this prevents them to communicate properly.

Does Yemeni textbook at your level contain enough exposure to the target culture?

The analysis of the Yemeni textbook used at the various levels of high school have shown some important points that we would like to emphasize by the end of this piece of work.

The analysis started by a general look at the activities and the layout of the book which shows some problems in terms of organization and order of activities and tasks. We should not forget that the order in which the four skills is not appropriate for such levels. Productive skills (writing and speaking) are not given their due. In specific words, when looking for cultural aspects the textbook seems to be poor in this area. There are not many activities in which culture is the purpose. Most activities are about language functions, grammar, or vocabulary. In other words, the presence of the local culture (Yemeni culture) is clearly seen while the presence of the British or American cultures is neglected. Some units such as *Tables, flow charts and diagrams* are not relevant and do not give the chance to the learner to practice his communicative skills. One other point to mention is that, after a closer look at the activities provided, we can clearly notice that the textbook is grammar oriented. Attention is given more to grammar over communication and cultural and literary topics. This evaluation falls within the research we conducted to verify whether Yemeni students lack communicative skills and why. One of the reasons was the lack of exposure to the target culture. As foreign language learners, the first source in which we should find culture is the textbook we use; being the first source to which we are exposed most of the time. The last idea that we would like to add is that when we teach a language, we teach many aspects along with that. Some advance aspects. we teach are for example, culture, norms, beliefs, traditions, lifestyle, and ways of

thinking. We found these aspects these things are somehow lacking in our textbook. English is taught just for the sake of speaking the language not to have a general idea about how English people live or behave, which, in our opinion, should be reconsidered

What sources Yemeni students rely on to get the necessary knowledge about the culture of the English language?

The sources that most Yemeni students rely on to get knowledge about the target culture are the textbooks and what is included in their curriculum. When we asked the question about the source, the data showed a great gap between the choices we presented. Again, we can relate the low percentages we got on the audio and audio-visual media to the lack of equipment in most of the schools. By equipment, we mean, electricity, audio-visual materials so the teacher is not able to use the CDs that go along with the textbooks they use to teach.

Conclusion:

To conclude, this paper has dealt with the data presentation, data analysis and discussion. We started by presenting and analyzing the data we collected based on the questionnaire. We presented every single question on its own so as to be clear. The results show that Yemeni students lack knowledge in terms of culture of the English language because of the limited exposure in textbooks they use. Consequently, they face real problems when they want to communicate in real life situations; let alone the fact that they do not learn communicative skills in class because the textbook as we said earlier is grammar oriented. Based on the fact that Culture and language are completely intertwined, the teaching of English should focus on the cultural aspects of the target language. For better understanding and use of a language, the learner must have a great deal of knowledge about the target language cultural system. So, s/he can survive in real life contexts interactions. Because as we showed above, English is spoken as a foreign language, this requires a great deal of focus of providing the necessary atmosphere inside the classroom to fill the gap of the fact of the lack of lots of chances for Yemeni students when they go outside the classroom. After evaluating the English textbook taught to high school students, we discovered that the textbook does not provide enough exposure to English cultural norms and

rules. This affects Yemeni students' communicative competence. So, there should be a great deal of exposure to cultural aspects of the target language.

Another problem is the difficulty of applying the communicative methodology inside the classroom; it is a challenge that faces EFL teachers because it requires an understanding of the theoretical nature of the communicative competence. So, the reason is multifaceted. This calls for a huge attention from the part of the textbook designers first and therefore the teachers. EFL classrooms are normally considered part of a different culture from which that of the target language. Therefore, students who lack the knowledge of the cultural norms and rules of the target language will have difficulties in their communicative competence. This suggests that EFL textbooks should provide a decent amount of the target language culture to help learners communicate effectively in real life contexts. Although the CLT approach shows the importance of integrating the cultural side of the language in the classroom and focus on students' communication in real situations, culture and communication are not given their due into the application in the classroom. Therefore, students' cultural and communicative competence does not meet the desired level. This explains their frustration when communicating in concrete contexts. Hence, the findings of this research show the importance of integrating the cultural aspect of English as a core component into the development of learners' communicative skills. This will give learners the ability to communicate successfully in genuine contexts and help them gain more confidence and therefore succeed in their interpersonal relationships.

From the findings and discussions, we can deduce that culture understanding, and knowledge of the target language helps in learning the language in question and enhances the appropriate use and comprehension of the language productive and receptive skills.

Recommendations:

A great deal of focus must be devoted to providing the necessary atmosphere inside the classroom to fill the gap of the lack of lots of chances for Yemeni students when they go outside the classroom.

The call for a huge attention from the part of the textbook designers to take into account integrating the culture of the English language into Yemeni curriculum of English.

The textbooks should provide a decent amount of the target language culture to help learners communicate effectively in real life contexts.

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