The place of foreign culture in the Saudi pre-service EFL teacher education

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Abstract

In this paper, the researcher presents the results of an investigation of the place of foreign culture in pre-service EFL teacher education. Grounded in the context of Saudi Arabia, qualitative analysis indicates that widespread static views of culture across the education sector minimise the place of culture in both policy and practice. Intercultural approaches need to be adapted as a way to reconceptualise culture dynamically. Implications included recommending supportive policies, appropriate pedagogies, and computer-assisted exposure to better emphasise the place of foreign culture within pre-service EFL teacher education.

1. Introduction

Recent language learning theory often emphasises the inseparability of language and culture. A number of studies stress that without the study of culture, teaching a second language (L2) is inaccurate and incomplete, and language study is meaningless for L2 students if they do not have adequate cultural knowledge about the people who speak the target language (TL) or the country in which TL is spoken (e.g. Kramsch, 1993; Byram, 1997). This belief in the affinity of language and culture has evolved throughout the different language education approaches (Pulverness, 2003). According to Corbett (2003), the topic of culture is relevant to L2 learning, and it encourages enquiry into reviewing one's own culture. Corbett thus asserts the importance of adopting an intercultural approach as the topic base and aim of language curriculum. Nowadays culture is presented as an interdisciplinary core in many L2 curricula designs and national language standards in, for example, the U.S.A (Byrnes, 2008), the European Union (Willems, 2002), and Australia (Liddicoat, 2005). In this study, the researcher investigates the place of foreign culture (FC) in the policy and practice of Saudi pre-service EFL teacher education.

2. Current practice framework

Within the current debates in this area, the work of Liddicoat (e.g. 2005, 2004, 2002 & 1997) and his associates (e.g. Crozet & Liddicoat, 1999; Crozet & Liddicoat, 2000; Liddicoat, Scarino, Papademetre & Kohler, 2003) presents clear agendas for research in this area. Through their work, these agendas include making a clear distinction between static and dynamic approaches to culture within the Intercultural Language Learning (ILL) approach. In static views, culture is treated as embedded in knowledge of either facts or artefacts, and the representation of culture becomes closed, final, and fixed. Thus, the FC teaching does not impart learning which can assist learners to understand and participate in cultures as they change in different times, places, and contexts. Dynamically viewed, culture is defined as "sets of variable practices in which people engage in order to live their lives and which are continually created and re-created by participants in interaction" (Liddicoat, 2002, p. 6); and cultural knowledge involves how language is used and how things are said and done in a cultural context (Liddicoat et al., 2003).

The current practice framework of culture dynamicity suggests a prism through which the place of FC is viewed as variable and relevant to the language learning process (Liddicoat, 2002), and hence it should be integrated into "the language macroskills" within language programs (Liddicoat, 2004, p. 61). Further, goals and principles that guide the language curriculum design are set accordingly to inform the culture teaching pedagogy (Liddicoat et al., 2003, p. 46-51).
This framework of dynamic approach to culture builds upon other theoretical and practical models of ILL, and it can establish rich and solid theoretical underpinnings to guide the present study. However, the current practice approaches must be extended and adapted in order to develop context-specific solutions that can meet the needs of specific contexts; for example, Saudi Arabia (SA).

3. Problems and focus of the study

There are three major problems that indicate the need to investigate the place of FC in pre-service EFL teaching environments. Most importantly, EFL policy in geopolitically sensitive contexts stands as a major issue affecting the place of FC in EFL contexts. Perhaps specific to the Muslim/Arabic contexts, the dramatic events of September 11, 2001, as an unprecedented incident, arguably are a turning point that impacted on the global climate in general and educational policies in particular. Acts of aggression against Muslim and Arab countries that followed September 11 and other succeeding sequences have clearly emphasised the sense of demonization of the West and Anglo-American culture (Karmani, 2005). Consequently, the place of FC in EFL education in some Arabic/Islamic contexts has become subject to various perceptions. This notion can be evidenced in introducing EFL in a neutral and culture-free form (Al-Issa, 2005; Byram, 2003).

A relevant problem concerns the policy and practice nexus which is often ignored in FC related research. The educational policy standing towards cultural issues can be a crucial factor that influences the place of FC in language education (Liddicoat, 2005). Yet language education policies do not duly acknowledge the place of FC (Garrido & Alvarez, 2006). Also, Field (2000) claims that there is a possible gap between policy and practice when policy advances according to global and theoretical developments. Considering these factors, when teacher education programs are policy-driven (Gale, 2007), and EFL curriculum is top-down (El-Okda, 2005), the place of FC is very likely to be minimised in practice.

A second problem is that there has not been any common framework for deciding "what is an appropriate concept of culture" for a certain context (Byram & Risager, 1999, p. 83). This dilemma is specifically evident in the discrepancy of views and practices related to FC in monocultural and conservative contexts. In such contexts, EFL teachers hold concerns about introducing FC in their practice. In Korea, for example, there have been explicit worries of arousing misconceptions about FC (Kim, 2002). Similarly in SA, EFL teachers were limited in their involvement in FC teaching due to worries over their students' cultural and religious beliefs (AL-Qahtani, 2003). Also in Turkey, EFL teachers held concerns about negative effects of being overly sympathetic with the FC countries (Önalan, 2005). Although teaching FC has been discussed in terms of EFL teachers’ views and attitudes in several studies (e.g. Önalan, 2005; Stapleton, 2000; Byram & Risager, 1999), in general, there is still a paucity of research on other EFL stakeholders’ perceptions and views about the place of FC, especially in monocultural conservative contexts such as SA.

Finally, as is typical of many EFL investigations, there is also a lack of research on the place of FC in pre-service EFL teacher education. Thus, the need to investigate the place of FC in pre-service EFL teacher education can be synthesised from previous studies. For example, in-service FL teachers lacked the background knowledge of the Target Culture (TC) (Byram & Risager, 1999), especially those who were Non-Native Speakers (NNSs) (Kramsch, Cain & Murphy-Lejeune, 1996). Also, EFL teachers lacked experience in culture teaching and had inaccurate knowledge about TC (Kim, 2002). Further, EFL teachers lacked a profound understanding of the role of culture in language teaching (AL-Qahtani, 2003), and they perceived FC in aspects that were irrelevant to language and communication (Önalan, 2005).

Previous research on in-service language teachers raises serious questions about the place of FC in pre-service EFL teacher education. Furthermore, there has been a persistent need to include the theoretical and methodological elements of intercultural studies, which would constitute the foundations for systematic culture education in pre-service FL teacher education (Aleksandrowicz-Pedich, Draghiacescu, Issaiass, & Šabec, 2003, p.35). Specifically in SA, there is an urgent need to train and recruit increasing numbers of EFL teachers due to the high status of English in SA (Al-Hazmi, 2003). These findings suggest that there is a need for a major study that investigates the place of FC in policy and practice of the pre-service EFL teacher education.
4. Methodology

The current study design involved multiple-qualitative case study based on document analysis, interviews, and classroom observations. First, the present place of FC in the pre-service Saudi EFL (SEFL) teacher education was examined through relevant document analysis including public and official documents. Second, semi-structured interviews were employed to deeply investigate the pre-service EFL teacher education stakeholders' perceptions and views about the place of FC in EFL education. The participants of this study were 16 selected informants falling into three categories: 3 policymakers, 7 academic EFL instructors, and 6 pre-service SEFL teachers. Investigating their perceptions and views within these three levels (i.e. policymaking, teaching, and learning) was intended to provide multidimensional insights into the current state of FC in pre-service SEFL teacher education from different perspectives. 15 classroom observation sessions were also conducted to uncover issues related to FC teaching and learning and to verify assumptions that have emerged from the other sources of data.

Qualitative data analysis techniques followed inductive, cyclical approaches (Mackay & Gas, 2005; Richards, 2005), and self-reflection to deeply "reveal the hidden and the counter" (Holliday, 2007, p.19). Also, different techniques to enhance the credibility (i.e. validity) of data collection and analysis have been exercised. These techniques included continuing the data collection over sufficiently a long period of time (about 3 years), collecting data through different instruments, form different sources (i.e. multiple-level participants), and in multiple sites (Jeddah and Taif Teachers Colleges) to assure providing a comprehensive description (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003).

5. Results

5.1. The place of FC in policy

Data analysis revealed that there has been a focused global pressure on the Saudi education to enact a cultural reform in curricula. While such global factors had a positive impact on the national tendency towards interculturality, policymaking in pre-service SEFL teacher education has not reached a positive realisation of such global and national developments. Instead, responses revealed that several policymakers perceived this cultural reform as an external imposition and subsequently hindered emphasising FC aspects in the curriculum. This notion was enhanced by a state of centralisation in policymaking that restricted curriculum development to a few national committee members who were found to suffer from: a) time constraints, b) expertise limitations c) and individuals' bias. Consequently, a gap between policy and practice was subsequently created. This gap has allowed for individual policymakers to impose their own agendas of eliminating FC aspects as evidenced in a recent version of textbooks (i.e. the Middle East Edition).

Curriculum was perceived amongst policymakers broadly as any aspect related to the whole program. Based on that, curriculum policies including goals, course objectives and description, and suggested pedagogies were exclusively language-focused. Being largely top-down, the pre-service SEFL teacher education curriculum has no clear policies or guidelines that consider introducing FC either in content or pedagogy. Further, FC has not been integrated in the language macroskills (i.e. EFL teaching courses); rather, FC appeared as an advanced course called ‘Language and Culture’ which presents culture as a macroskill per se.

All the three participating policymakers dominantly signified the place of FC in pre-service EFL teacher education for theoretical, professional, and humanistic purposes. However, policymakers' perceptions of FC in EFL education were inconsistent and indecisive. While one policymaker defined FC in terms of sociocultural/anthropological facets such as values and beliefs that were irrelevant to the language itself, the others expressed a difficulty to provide a clear definition of the concept of culture in EFL education. Thus, they called for a reconceptualisation of culture appropriate to its place in EFL education.

From a policy perspective, the place of FC in pre-service EFL teacher education could be challenged by contextual or cultural constraints. Contextual constraints included the absence of national standards for EFL education in SA, resistance of global pressure, and centralisation of policymaking. Cultural constraints included existing ideologies of establishing broad 'red lines' around sensitive aspects of the native culture (C1) and FC aspects as well as a prevailing sense of ethnocentrism in the context of SA. This has led to a practice of cultural sheltering which is a proactive procedure of circumventing a wide range of FC aspects under the assumption of preserving C1.
5.2. The place of FC in the academic EFL instructors’ teaching practice

Results showed that the participating instructors' perceptions of FC in EFL education tended to define FC in terms of societal norms and practices such as beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and traditions. Such perceptions were found to view culture as a static phenomenon that stands for factual information about the native-English speaking countries and people. Although interview questions were directly focused on FC in EFL, aspects of engagement, communication, and practice in FC were almost absent in the instructors' responses. Clearly then, the place of FC in EFL education became attenuated by perceiving it in terms of facets irrelevant to the language teaching process itself. This was further evidenced by a tendency toward creating a dichotomy between language skills and cultural aspects that placed the latter as complementary.

Despite the high conceptual awareness about the inseparability of language and culture stated clearly by instructors, the place of FC in language teaching was found minimal, incidental, and inconsistent. In pedagogy, data showed that instructors' approached FC statically in the form information, facts, and artefacts. Further, rarely is FC integrated in EFL teaching courses (i.e. language macroskills); rather, they are often replaced by C1 aspects. Therefore, there is an indication that academic EFL instructors’ conceptual awareness of the importance of FC in EFL education does not necessitate translating this awareness into practice.

In terms of challenges to the place of FC in practice, results indicated that culturally sensitive issues emerged as one key challenge that influenced the place of FC in practice. All instructors explicitly expressed worries about approaching issues related to such topics as religion, sex, and politics. Tracing back their responses, the researcher found that such worries were originated from strict curriculum policies that broadly dictate circumventing such sensitive topics. Also, instructors’ responses conveyed concerns about reactions towards approaching such topics and subsequently, displayed a misconception of the extent of sensitivity of FC aspects. Consequently, instructors, especially those unfamiliar with C1, would rather not initiate discussions on FC, and in many occasions, they avoided responding to queries related to similar issues such as pre-marital marital relationships, holidays, and drinking. Other challenges to the place of FC included the instructors' lack of awareness about the place of FC in practice, insufficient knowledge in FC, and national and educational background which more or less affected knowledge about FC and C1 within the monocultural conservative context of SA.

Results also indicated that academic EFL teachers commonly viewed computer technology as an important means of FC teaching and learning due to the wide range of cultural opportunities it offers and the widespread of the Internet. Amongst the various uses, the role of computer technology included providing FC content and facilitating communication and pedagogy. However, results showed that instructors' actual involvement with computer technology in FC teaching was very limited due to barriers including the instructors' lack of sufficient computer literacy, worries about cultural risks, and the limited access at colleges.

5.3. The place of FC in the pre-service SEFL teachers’ language learning

Surprisingly unlike instructors, all the participating pre-service teachers perceived FC in EFL education as any thing that comes with the language. They defined FC comprehensively in terms of societal norms and practices in all responses. Responses also included high culture in the form of civilisation aspects (e.g. literature and music) and area studies (i.e. geography and history) of FC. Most importantly, pre-service EFL teachers’ perceptions of culture reflected dynamic views of culture stressing the relationship between FC and the language learning process in clear terms of engagement, interaction, and practice. Besides, several references were made to highly abstract aspects of FC such as thoughts and attitudes. Accordingly, this notion implied the significance of the place of FC in academic EFL learning and the pre-service teachers’ immediate need to integrate FC dynamically.

Results revealed that pre-service EFL teachers pursued FC learning autonomously beyond formal instruction. Also, data analysis showed that pre-service teachers sought further opportunities to learn about FC through media and the Internet due to the lack of FC resources in the context of study. As a key emerging issue, despite the pre-service SEFL teachers’ initial preference of having academic Native Speakers (NSs) instructors to teach about FC, this choice was subject to several criticisms by pre-service teachers themselves. They initially viewed academic NSs instructors as representatives of FC with wide knowledge about its
aspects. Yet NSs were found to be highly sensitive about presenting certain aspects of their culture partially under the assumption that they might be condemned by learners or policymakers. This revealed another disadvantage of having NS instructors which was their lack of familiarity with C1 and its people, an aspect which is crucial to perform interculturally. Consequently, there was a consensus that Saudi/local academic instructors would perform better in teaching about FC provided that they have been in the FC context for a period of time long enough to gear them with sufficient expertise in FC.

According to data, there were two major issues challenging the place of FC in language learning. Having been itself influenced by several factors that were explained earlier, the instructors’ teaching practice has an obvious impact on the FC learning. Overlooking FC in practice as well as instructors’ insufficient FC knowledge played an essential role in minimising the place of FC in language learning. What the researcher found as a key factor, yet serious, in this context was the pre-service teachers’ growing disbelief in their instructors’ cultural credibility. This issue is explicitly laid out by pre-service teachers as a result of their instructors’ avoidance of approaching FC aspects, providing vague responses, and the detected lack of sufficient knowledge in FC.

In terms of exposure, pre-service SEFL teachers used computer technology extensively to seek cultural resources and interact with interlocutors from FC. Besides the monocultural nature of the context, they explicitly stated that the current curriculum and the teaching practice do not provide sufficient exposure to FC. Another key finding is that computer technology surpasses other resources of FC by being interactive and more efficient in providing specific answers to specific queries. On the other hand, issues of access at colleges and lack of pedagogical guidance in computer-assisted FC learning were found to be main barriers to the use of computer technology in FC learning. Most importantly, cultural risks which may include reaching untrusted sources of information, downplaying C1, or making pre-mature judgments about FC were often encountered in such unguided exposure to FC.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The findings revealed that there has been a global pressure to enact a cultural reform in Saudi Arabian (SA) educational curricula. Such pressure has impacted on General Education curricula and resulted in positive national inclinations towards embracing intercultural concepts. However, policymaking in pre-service EFL teacher education did not reach a positive realisation of this cultural reform, and the place of FC remained absent in the curriculum policies. Central problems included resisting this cultural reform as an outcome of external imposition. There was also a gap detected between policy and practice. In contrast to Field’s (2000) assumption, the policy itself may lag behind global and theoretical developments. Similar to Gale’s (2007) argument, the pre-service SEFL teacher education was found to be policy-driven. Drawing on the absence of FC in policy, this notion suggests that the place of FC is bound to be further marginalised in practice.

In practice, instructors were highly aware of the place of FC in EFL despite their perceptions of FC that depicted static views which were irrelevant to language teaching. However, the place of FC in the actual teaching practice was challenged by culturally sensitive issues, policy influence, lack of sufficient cultural knowledge, and the instructors’ national and educational background. Evidenced by their static and incidental FC teaching, this finding suggests that the instructors’ awareness about the place of FC remained conceptual and did not translate into practice. Pre-service teachers, on the other hand, perceived FC as a highly dynamic phenomenon that is inseparable from language. Confirming the cultural flaws in the current curriculum and the instructors’ practice, pre-service teachers pursued FC learning autonomously beyond the formal instruction. Their responses conveyed their immediate need to integrate FC dynamically into their language learning. Their dominant tendency to use computer technology to facilitate the exposure to FC needs to be formally considered.

Relating these findings to the current practice approaches to culture (Liddicoat, 2005, 2004, 2002; Liddicoat et al., 2003; Crozet & Liddicoat, 2000, 1999), context-specific concepts have been synthesised to respond in an appropriate fashion to concerns raised in SA context. At the conceptual level, the place of FC needs to be reconceptualised interculturally by valuing the significance of both C1 and FC. This entails that emphasising FC in language education is a national and theoretical demand rather than being perceived as global/political. Drawing on the cultural risks expected from the currently unguided exposure to FC, consequences of cultural sheltering (i.e. censorship) and deemphasising FC (i.e. ethnocentrism) displayed in policy and practice constitute a real threat not only to
FC, but also to C1 simultaneously. Clearly, then, formal and guided integration of FC following intercultural concepts becomes a way of maintaining C1. Also, reconceptualising FC dynamically establishes a solid place for FC in language teaching and learning by emphasising it in the language macroskills and pedagogy.

In a policy-driven conservative context however, emphasising the place of FC may remain a far-reached aim unless supported by appropriate policies. Implications for this process in policy include the need for further involvement of instructors in curriculum development, recruiting intercultural instructors, and promoting the use of computer technology. This can be enacted through providing adequate access, setting appropriate curriculum guidelines, and enhancing the instructors’ computer expertise. As for practice, further opportunities for exposure to FC are required to provide sufficient cultural input to work with in formal instruction. This exposure to FC can be most facilitated through the boosting growth of computer technology which was found to exclusively and interactively connect the monocultural, dispersed SEFL context to FC. At the heart of the dynamic view of culture, sufficient guidance and appropriate pedagogies that involve communication, practice, and engagement with FC need to be deliberately planned by instructors as a core component of the EFL teaching process.

Findings of this study suggest future directions for further investigations. For example, large-scale quantitative studies can be conducted on emerging issues such as the impact of cultural sheltering and the instructors’ cultural credibility on the process of language learning. Also, the use of computer technology as an efficient means of exposure to FC can be experimentally examined considering the contextual and pedagogical conditions of the pre-service EFL teacher education.

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8. References


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