

***The Efficiency of Implementing the Interpretive
Perspective in Teaching English in Algeria
Case of Middle and High School Textbooks***

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Abstract

The Algerian English textbooks designed for middle and high school levels present the cultural information about the foreign language speaking communities through an interpretive perspective or a trans-cultural information using universal categories of human behavior and the learner is expected to relate and interpret the information and evaluate it. If the learner is not provided with a key to interpret phenomena with the local culture, the interpretive approach outcomes can not be fulfilled and the learner will be introduced to much knowledge without learning a specific information. Following Vygotsky's view on learners' Proximal Zone Development, the teaching of second and foreign languages should implement a task based curriculum to introduce information and to generate learners' cognitive abilities being problem solvers rather than passive learners. The interpretive perspective presents a wide range of varied cultural information but it must be supported with tasks and exercises that can develop learners' critical thinking that prepares them for more advanced knowledge at university level; for instance, in learning literature. The present study presents data gathered from a questionnaire administered to first year university English learners and a language proficiency test (written and oral) they sat for. The two research instruments were used respectively, to collect data on English learners' attitude towards English and its culture as well as the main deficiencies that these learners present as far as critical skills such as comparison, interpretation, analysis and opinion gaps are concerned. The results showed that English learners arrive at university carrying a positive attitude towards the English culture though they recognize the excessive differences between the local and the foreign language cultures and present a serious deficit in cultural critical skills visible through their achievement in the oral and written tests.

Intoduction

Algerian English learners had been taught English starting from the age of 12 and since then had accumulated considerable knowledge about the foreign culture but since the textbooks in former education did not contain cultural concepts that might rise pupils' speculation or disappointment, (Lakhal Ayat, 2008) they were not given the apportunity to comment, criticize or evaluate them referring to their culture in addition to the informative texts implemented in every file/ unit which contain no speculation to raise discussion. Using the interpretive perspective in these textbooks

without teaching the learner how he can interpret the information contained by the textbook is a real educational flaw.

1. The Relevance of Critical Thinking in Second Language Teaching

Many scholars advocated the necessity of teaching second and foreign languages through a critical pedagogy; as Fairclough (1992) who emphasizes that “acquiring mechanical skills of coding and decoding of linguistic structures without a critical element that discusses how the message attains different meanings in social functions deceives the learner.

While Savignon (2005) affirms that teaching foreign languages is related to national ideologies and influenced by the social, educational policy and politics:

“language teaching is inextricably tied to language policy... Diverse sociopolitical contexts mandate not only a diverse set of language learning goals, but a diverse set of teaching strategies” Savignon (2005:637)

Thus, the teaching of a second language has cultural and sociopolitical dimensions that influence the strategies of teaching the second language and consequently guide the target language program content and form designers on the basis of the teaching objectives.

Critical thinking was defined Lipman (1988:39) as skillful, responsible thinking that facilitates good judgment because it relies upon criteria, is self correcting and is sensitive to context. the closeness of critical thinking to intercultural competence can be noted in the following definition by Willingham (2007:8 in Lai, 2011:8)

“Seeing both sides of an issue, being open to new evidence that disconfirms your ideas, reasoning dispassionately, demanding that claims be backed by evidence, deducing and inferring conclusions from available facts, solving problems, and so forth.”

Thus, the need for critical reflection in teaching SL is necessary for assisting learners and train them to evaluate, judge, argue, make a decision or an action.

2. Research Design

In the present paper, and in order to detect the effect of implementing the interpretive perspective in teaching English to high school students without tasks and activities to develop their critical thinking, we sought, first to gather data about our learners’ willingness to learn English as a foreign language which carries usually a foreign culture . Second, a language aptitude test is administered to determine learners’ proficiency level in the four skills.

3. Research Findings

3.1 The questionnaire

3.1.1 Learners' Choice Motives

The Students were required to answer seven questions carrying different motives to learn English; their positive answers is an indication that they refer to the English language spread portrayal than to their personal knowledge or experience as can be noted in questions: 4, 5 and 6

Motive	Positive Answer
Q4) English is socially appreciated	65.35%
Q5) English is the language used to communicate with people abroad	76.47%
Q6) It will be used in the professional life	73.85%

Table 1: Learners' positive answers to questions: 4, 5 and 6

In question four, though in Algeria, English is not spoken outside the educational institutions (middle school, secondary school and university), the students agree on considering English as a socially appreciated language.

In question Five, and considering learners' age and the little opportunities that 76.47% among them might have travelled abroad, the positive answer is a reflection of the image of the TL presented by the general education English textbooks as will be explained later, in addition to media.

In question Six, it can be noted that 94% of the students opted for becoming a teacher as a future career. The students have a limited scope of the professional perspectives where English can be useful.

The three mentioned reasons confirm the idea that the learners did not form their positive attitude from a personal viewpoint or experience but from their former education and social environment.

3.1.2 Learners' Attitude to the English Speaking Communities

In questions 08 to 11, where we attempted to detect the first year students' attitude to the English speaking communities and the necessity of interacting with them, students answers are s follows:

Question	Yes	No	Maybe
Q08) We should learn English to interact with English native speakers.	60.78%	15.03%	24.18%
Q09) Being in touch with English native speakers may be useful for Algeria.	37.25%	16.99%	45.75%
Q10) The experts who talk in English took part in our nation's development.	49.67%	18.95%	31.37%
Q11) Algerian scientists and industrialists should interact with English native speakers.	33.98%	52.61%	12.41%

Table 2: Students answers distribution to questions: 8, 9, 10 and 11

As can be noted, the students attitude towards the English speaking communities, presented here through scientists, industrialists and experts is paradoxical. On one hand, 60.78% of the learners agree on the necessity of interacting with the English native speakers (Q 8) and 49.67% consider that the English speaking experts took part in our nation's development (Q10). But, on the other hand, 52.61% among the students do not agree on the necessity of interacting with English native speakers as far as Algerain scientists and industrialists are concerned (Q11). This leads us to consider that the learners motivation to learn English is for integrative purposes rather than intrinsic objectives since the students' understanding of the pragmatic outcomes of learning a foreign language is still restricted to the verbal communication, friendship, chatting and TV programs.

3.1.3 Learners' Perception of the Target Language Culture

In questions 13 to 16, the learners answers were as follows:

Question	Yes	No	Maybe
Q13) University English Teaching curricula should contain aspects of the native speakers' culture.	45.75%	03.92%	23.52%
Q14) Learning a foreign language implies necessarily the learning of its culture.	43.79%	35.31%	20.9%

Q15) Being aware of the foreign language culture helps enriching students knowledge about that language.	65.35%	19.43%	15.22%
Q16) Learning a foreign language means the mastery of grammar, spelling and language sciences.	35.64%	10.45%	24.83%

Table 3: Students' answers to questions 13, 14, 15 and 16

The above percentages unfold three basic ideas:

- ✓ First, the learners consider that the foreign language programs contain cultural information about the target language speaking communities' culture and that this cultural content enriches the second/foreign language learning (Q13 and Q15).
- ✓ Second, the number of students who believe that learning the second/ foreign language culture is a necessity is not that far from the number of students who do not agree on this necessity (Q14).
- ✓ Third, the number of students (35.64%) who answered "yes" about considering the learning of a foreign language as only the mastery of grammar, spelling and language sciences almost equals the number of students (35, 31%) who answered "No" in considering the learning of culture as anecessity in learning foreign language.

Thus, though the learners are aware of the inclusion of culture in the foreign/second language teaching curricula, they do not understand its necessity but as an additional knowledge to enrich the target language learning.

As far as questions 17, 18 and 19, the results showed that in question 17, 60.13% believe that the local culture and the English culture are totally different. In question 18, 78.7% preferred to study English in a European country and finally, in question 19, 63.3% of the learners are convinced that they do not change when introduced to a new culture.

The above mentioned results are indicators of the students' belief that they are learning a foreign language of a totally different culture, they refuse to assimilate this culture. Opting for studying in a European country is the outcome of the image they might have about opportunities in the studies and/or employment.

Through the first year students' answers to the questionnaire, we could elaborate a general view about their attitude towards learning English as a foreign language at university, being aware that learning the language implies learning about a culture that is to a large extent different from their own culture. First year students arrive at university with an image of the English language as the language used in developed countries that can ease communication with any people abroad. Their general knowledge about English is shaped by media, since for the majority reading scientific books which actually reflects the spread of English in international documentation is absent. Considering their age, and the little chances that these learners might have to travel, their answers reflect a limited scope of the target

language culture presence in the teaching programs which may be due to the general education; middle and high school textbook and the approach used to implement the English speaking communities culture in the taught syllabi.

In concluding terms, the questionnaire results showed that the students are highly motivated to learn English for integrative purposes.

3.2 The Language Proficiency Test Results

To check the second hypothesis about learners' deficiencies in Foreign language skills, a language proficiency test was administered following the Cambridge Certificate tests. The success rate in the language proficiency test is 44.08% among the 96 informants who sat for the test. The first year students' achievement in the test is presented below:

3.2.1 Reading Comprehension

The learners were required to answer four (4) comprehension questions, the results showed that:

- Only 11.62% answered the four questions correctly
- 33.88% could answer two questions correctly
- 33.88% could answers three questions correctly.
- 18.60% answered one question correctly.

The students' achievement was low, if we consider that the candidates are familiar with the text's main topic and vocabulary. The text is about the English grammar, the vocabulary used is simple and contains some new terms like 'the Cherokee', Atlantic slave trade, ethnicities, pidgin, circumlocution and Creole that were either defined in the text or made explicit through the context. In addition, the questions followed the paragraphs' order; the student can focus on one paragraph to find the required answer. The questions were basically of two types: searching the meaning of a phrasal verb/word or extracting an idea.

It could be noted that the candidates achieved well in question one (60.5%) though the question concerned 'the Cherokee' tribe in the first paragraph; the term, for the first year students, is completely new. As for the second and third questions, they consisted in finding out the meanings of "Make-shift" and "consistent" with which the learners are familiar.

3.2.2 The Writing Test

It includes three activities: use of English, Grammar and Written Expression.

The students' achievement in the 'use of English activity', where they were required to fill 12 gaps with functional and content words, (see appendix 2), was low if we take into account that none of the candidates filled the gaps with 09 correct words and that only 13.66% of them reached eight (08) correct answers. One of the reasons that

might have entailed this result is the high number of gaps if we compare this number to the type of tasks that the learners are familiar with (noted in the middle and high school textbooks), on one hand, and on the other hand, the high number of optional words for each gap, that are close in meaning.

In the Grammar activity, the candidates were introduced to nine different syntactic areas:

- Present continuous use.
- Simple tense : imperative and present.
- The use of “as good as”
- The use of comparatives.
- The use of perfect tenses.
- The use of possessive forms.
- The use of conjunctions.
- The use of auxiliaries.
- Detection of ungrammatical expressions

The students’ achievement in this activity, is considerably high in areas like the simple tenses (87.5%) and present continuous (78.125%), medium in areas like the use of auxiliaries ((50%) and possessive forms (46.87%), but very low in the use of comparatives (15.62%). These results show that the middle and secondary school curricula had emphasized learners’ grammar instruction and rules retention in the areas noted above through typical drills for this purpose. It is noteworthy, here, that the learners’ underachievement in the use of comparatives denotes also that comparatives were attributed little importance in the absence of comparison in the curricula tasks. All in all, the candidates’ mastery of grammatical rules is considerable.

In the written expression activity, the learners expressed their career choice providing one or two arguments to justify their choice. The main flaws noted were more in vocabulary use than in grammar. The majority of errors are due to mother tongue interference .

The writing test results show that the learners’ former English instruction focused on typical drills for grammatical rules retention and practice which explains learners’ mastery of some areas at the expense of others. Through the analysis of middle and secondary school textbooks, it could be noted that the comparison tasks are minimal which explains the learners’ deficiency in using comparatives.

3.2.3 The Listening Test

The learners’ achievement in the listening comprehension activity shows that this skill was completely ignored in the former education. We could note in the analysis of middle and secondary textbooks that the listening activities were performed by the teacher as a source of speech. The learners are familiar with the authentic American pronunciation more than the British received pronunciation, mainly via TV programs (with translation) and assisted by visual aids. The results show as well that 25.24% of the students provided no answer and only 14.23%

filled six (6) gaps correctly, out of the activity's nine gaps. (see appendix 2). Furthermore, the absence of authentic material use in teaching listening comprehension also, resulted in a variation in the learners' pronunciations as will be discussed below.

3.3.3 The Speaking Test and Oral Performance

The speaking test was designed as part of the language proficiency test of the four skills, reflecting learners' syntactic, spelling and lexicon use errors, on one hand, and. On the other hand, the speaking test aimed at reflecting the candidates ability to relate, interpret and evaluate cultural differences as one of the five skills of intercultural competence. (Byram, 2002: 12-13)

The speaking test results showed learners' little experience in facing the audience and oral performance in general. It could be noted that the discussion was poor taking into account the learners little participation; only 4-7 students in each group took part in the discussion. Students's use of vocabulary is limited. The learners' utterances carried many deficiencies:

- Pronunciation: the pronunciation of weak and strong forms.
- Syntax: double subject, interchangeable use of conjunctions and incomplete sentences.
- Lexicon use : misuse of vocabulary, mainly caused by mother tongue interference.

3.2.4 Cultural Issues Discussion

The students' skill of interpreting and analyzing cultural issues where differences are visible among the learner's culture and the target language culture, constitutes a basic requirement for value judgement ability to form a positive attitude towards the target language culture and its speaking communities, as layed out by Deardoff (2006, 2009) who stresses that the critical reflection is a basic requirement for the individual's ability to evaluate knowledge. The analysis of the learners' interventions took into account the following criteria: the topic choice, the use of interpretation, comparison, analysis and evaluation to form or discuss a value judgement. The obtained results show that the majority of learners opted for general topics as we can see in the following table:

Chosen Topics	Students Percentage
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Characteristics of a good friend	43.37%
The role of aesthetic surgery in improving people's life	16.94%
Third World characteristics	37.36%
Comparing Non Muslim women in the Western countries with Muslim women	11.23%
No intervention	06.28%
Total	100%

Table 4: *Topics' Choice Distribution (Speaking Skill)*

The choice of topics as presented in the table, indicates that the learners avoid to take the risk of indulging in a discussion on conflictual cultural differences explained and opted for general topics ('the characteristics of a good friend' and the Third World Characteristics') where the learners do not feel obliged to personally judge a foreign cultural value. Avoiding the cultural issues discussion denotes the absence of the intercultural competence skills described by Byram and Zarate, (1997a: 7-9) as "Attitude" or "the curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own."

It could be noted as well that the learners who opted for discussing the cultural differences in topic 2 and topic 4 (The benefits of aesthetic surgery and comparing Muslim women with non-Muslim women in Western countries) adopted a cultural conflict avoidance strategy by avoiding to refer to the religious standpoint about the aesthetic surgery (Topic 2) as one of the issue aspects, or the difference/similarity between Islam and the other religions (in topic 4) in terms of behavior and thinking. Instead, the learners gave different definitions of the aesthetic surgery, emphasized the fact that they do not have a friend who may undergo such a surgery, the surgery risks and side effects, and gave examples of other countries where this type of surgery is widely practiced as Lebanon and Egypt unlike Algeria. In topic 4, the learners provided many characteristics of non-Muslim Western women as liberal and having different priorities, while they referred to the Muslim women as an example of "religious" women. Finally, they believe that Muslim women should be careful when interacting with non-Muslim Western women. These answers reflect a cultural conflict avoiding strategy; the learners avoid completely to raise a religious comparison between the target language speaking community and the local community to escape pointing at their opinion about the other religions.

In concluding terms, we noted common features in the learners' interventions in the four topics: their answers are confirmative, the issues are not analyzed and the learners do not present or argue for a personal judgment or viewpoint, they rather report general knowledge. The English learners' linguistic knowledge carries deficiencies in the speaking and listening skills, that the first year English learners have a considerable deficiency in the speaking and listening and reading comprehension. Their former education focused on grammar rules retention and vocabulary use mainly in writing.

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Appendices:

- 1. *The questionnaire***
- 2. *The language proficiency test***