OBSTACLES AFFECTING TEACHING ENGLISH/AMERICAN CULTURE IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT: *This study is an original contribution to the issue of how English/American culture may be integrated into the teaching of English in the Saudi EFL classroom. Unlike other studies it explores the challenges that teachers face from both their own perspective and their supervisors'. Furthermore it provides guidelines to teachers in designing their materials in ways that may gain the approval of the Saudi educational authorities. In order to explore the views of teachers and their educational supervisors, a mixed-study method of qualitative and quantitative approaches was adopted. A semi-structured interview with seven educational supervisors of teachers in the city of Makkah was carried out and a structured questionnaire survey was distributed to 85 English teachers. The results show that teachers experience constraints in teaching English/American culture in EFL classrooms. In identifying and exploring such constraints the research aims to support teachers in overcoming the challenges they encounter.*

KEYWORDS: Authentic Materials, Challenges, English/American Culture, Saudi Schools.

INTRODUCTION

It is commonly understood that gaining knowledge of any language and using it within interactive and social contexts means learning it alongside the target culture. In other words, the language of English, for example, is inseparable from its culture. In this context, Brown (2000: 177) defines culture as "the ideas, customs, skills, arts and tools that characterize a given group of people in a given period of time". Developing this further, Brown (2001: 45) points out that "Culture is really an integral part of the interaction between language and thought. Cultural patterns, customs, and ways of life are expressed in language; culture-specific world views are reflected in language". In the same fashion, and also connecting language and culture, Krech, Crutchfield and Ballachey (1962) point out the following:

- Language occurs through interaction between speakers.

- Language mirrors talkers' culture.

- Language transmits its culture through contacting others.

Teaching English language alongside English/American culture

A language and its culture consist of all intercommunicative activity, and they are considered as interwoven. In this way, Sapir (1921: 8) defines language as "a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols". From this definition, it can be interfered that peoples' ideas, needs and feelings as represented in their culture and ways of life are given voice through their first language. More recent studies have also stressed the strong correlation between language

and culture. Dema and Moeller (2012) mention that second language learners cannot truly learn the target language without learning about its culture. Similarly, Ho (2009) states that language and culture are intertwined. Hence, Genc and Bada (2005) note that the target language transfers its culture through learning processes. From another point of view, learning a language requires learning its culture whether explicitly or implicitly. Hence, introducing English/American culture when teaching English language is, according to some critics, urgently and highly desirable in the learning and effective use of English. Seelye (1993: 9) argues that "both the language and its cultural context ideally are learned together. They are linked. Just as culture cannot be ignored in foreign language classes".

A number of benefits arise from incorporating English/American culture into the EFL classroom. The first is in the encouragement of learners to familiarise themselves with the English/American lifestyle. Chastain (1988) states that exposing learners to the target culture assists them in understanding people's life style and behaviour. Hence, English language learners should be taught aspects of the target culture that reflect the ways of life in such societies by comparing and contrasting them with the local culture. Alsamani (2014) claims that learners should be exposed to the foreign culture in order to develop their cultural competence and help them understand aspects of the target culture. Cakir (2006) also argues that the English language should be taught alongside the target culture, since this helps learners to use English in ways that are comprehensible to others. Integrating the target culture into the EFL classrooms provides a further dimension in learning the target language and enables students to use this knowledge to communicate skilfully with others (Clouet 2006). Another benefit of incorporating English/American culture into the teaching of EFL, comes from maximising the learners' role and minimising the teacher's role. Since teaching English alongside its culture emphasises implementation of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches with a focus on tasks such as classroom discussions, role playing and the information gap, learners will be engaged in interactive language practice.

Sources for the introduction of English/American culture

Nowadays, digital technologies contribute positively to teaching English language with materials from the target culture. It is beneficial to use such technologies in order to gain access to authentic materials that reflect the target culture of countries like the UK and USA, in which English is the first language. In referring to authentic materials, McGrath (2013) identifies two types that teachers can use in the classroom. Firstly, are authentic printed materials such as newspaper and magazine articles, menus, literary extracts and advertisements. Secondly, are authentic recorded materials such as recordings of academic lectures and You Tube. In the same way Evans (2006) mentions that the TV news is a great example of how authentic materials can be used inside the classroom, as it helps English teachers introduce real material representing the voices of native speakers of English.

Although the important role of authentic materials is accepted by many critics and teachers, this approach remains controversial. Some researchers think authentic materials contribute positively in learning English. Gilmore (2007) mentions that authentic materials develop students' communicative competence. Also Akbari and Rasavi (2016) point out that utilising authentic materials in the EFL classroom improves learners' performance. In the same way, Alshumaimeri and Alzyadi (2015) argue that using authentic materials helps learners to utilise and practice in interactive situations. Allehyani, Burnapp and Wilson (2017: 12) recommend that "school textbooks should include authentic materials acceptable to the learners' local culture in order to improve their communicative competence". However, using authentic

materials that include the foreign culture in the EFL classroom is not always welcomed by others, especially parents. Sajith (2005), for example, reported that two mothers in Saudi Arabia feared that their children would lose their local culture because of learning the English language alongside its culture. Similarly, Al-Seghayer (2013) says that some local newspapers reported that certain families in Saudi Arabia criticised a Saudi university because of integrating into the EFL teaching some images and other features of western values found in English textbooks.

Challenges to English teachers in teaching English/American culture

Despite the significance of teaching English language alongside the target culture in the EFL classroom, there are a number of obstacles that cannot be ignored or underestimated. The first challenge is mentioned by Al-Asmari (2008); that is, that teachers have insufficient knowledge of the target culture. Similarly, Chastain (1988) says that one of the key challenges that teachers face is how to present the foreign culture in the EFL classrooms. The second challenge is that, there is a debate on using authentic material that include western values, hence there is some resistance to using authentic material which is commonly considered the most appropriate way (Allehyani, Burnapp and Wilson 2017). The third challenge concerns the time required to design authentic materials and to find ways of presenting them in the classroom as Howard and Major (2004: 101) point out: "Indeed, most teachers spend considerable time finding, selecting, evaluating, adapting and making materials to use in their teaching". The last challenge concerns the contents of the textbooks, for they often lack interaction tasks that may improve learners' communicative competence. Teachers may ignore using authentic materials in the classroom for two reasons; firstly, they consider that they should focus on school textbooks (which don't contain samples of authentic materials) rather than external authentic materials. Secondly, they focus on the textbooks' content in order to prepare students for university entrance exams. So a combination of these factors may affect the teaching of English/American culture in the EFL classroom.

Statement of problem

In principle, teaching English/American culture is both desirable and necessary in order to improve learners' communicative competence. However, the drawbacks of teaching -- such as the inappropriateness of some aspects of the target culture for the learners' local culture, or the teachers' limited knowledge and time -- may cause serious problems for the educational authorities. Hence, this article attempts to explore the dilemmas that both teachers and educational authorities may face when teaching English/American culture and have to consider using authentic materials in the EFL classroom.

Purpose of the study

There have been many studies of the importance of teaching English/American culture in the EFL classroom and ways of presenting such culture. However, there is a dearth of studies that address the challenges affecting this kind of teaching, in particular in Saudi secondary schools. The bias against using authentic materials in the classroom has never been properly explained or traced to the problems affecting its implementation as a teaching method. The research in this article aims to identify the problems that Saudi teachers encounter when using authentic materials to present the target culture in the classroom, and to suggest remedies or provisional solutions in order to assist them overcome these obstacles.

The study aims to answer the following two questions:

1.   What challenges do Saudi teachers encounter in teaching English/American culture in relation to using authentic materials in the EFL classroom?

2.   How can Saudi teachers overcome the challenges that they encounter in their classrooms?

A mixed-method qualitative and quantitative approach was used in order to collect data; firstly, a semi-structured face to face interview with seven educational supervisors (whose role is to observe teachers inside the classroom and to guide them) in the city of Makkah. They were chosen due to their experience in the field and because they are responsible for presenting workshops for English teachers and visiting schools to observe teachers' performance. Secondly, a structured questionnaire was distributed to 85 teachers in secondary schools in the city of Makkah.

RESULTS

Interviews

Although the academic supervisors' views of teaching English/American culture in the light of using authentic materials in the EFL classrooms were positive, they identified two kinds of dilemma faced by English teachers in Saudi Arabia. Figure 1 shows these challenges; the first consists of hindrances in designing authentic materials and the second is associated with using authentic materials inside the classroom.
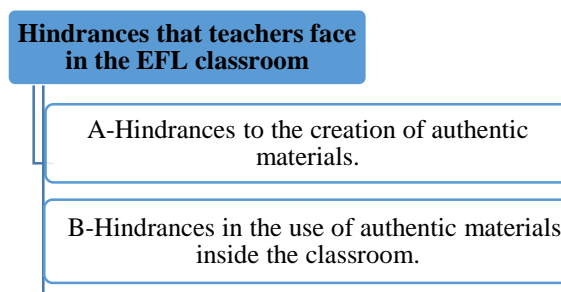
Figure 1: Obstacles that teachers face in the EFL classroom.

A - Hindrances to the creation of authentic materials

The educational supervisors who were interviewed reported two areas in which teachers are limited in designing authentic materials: lack of cultural knowledge and lack of time. Two of them mentioned that educators do not know how to choose authentic materials because of their insufficient cultural knowledge. Another supervisor added that another problem is the length of time required to search for the materials and to make such selections. The other supervisors considered both issues constitute real problems.

Here are some extracts from the interviews:

Interviewee 1:

        I think they need too much time to find appropriate authentic materials. Another point is that teachers do not know how to use them.

Interviewee 3:

> To find suitable materials for our students, teachers have to work harder because it is not easy to find acceptable materials. Also, it is time consuming. So, they may ignore the external materials.

Interviewee 3:

> Well, to find appropriate authentic materials we need full knowledge about the foreign culture, how to find authentic materials and also we need time.

B - Hindrances in the use of authentic materials inside the classroom

As shown in Figure 2 below, the educational supervisors reported four areas in which teachers are limited in their use of authentic materials in the classroom. They are as follows:
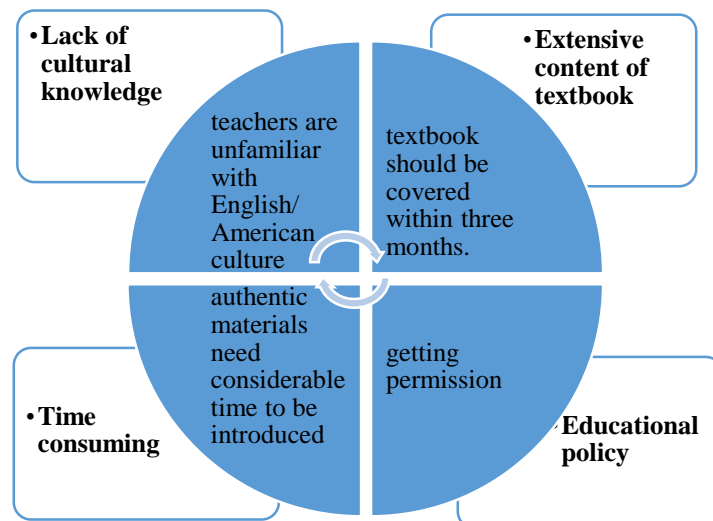
Figure 2: Obstacles to using authentic materials in the EFL classroom.

- Lack of cultural knowledge: teachers are unfamiliar with English/American culture and also ways of introducing such culture.

- Extensive content of textbook: teachers have to teach the textbook within three months. Thus, it is difficult to reconcile the demands of the existing textbook with the demands of preparing and introducing external authentic materials.

- Educational policy: teachers do not have the authority to use authentic materials inside the classroom. They need to consult the educational authorities to get their approval, since some authentic materials are considered not suitable for learners' local culture.

- Time consuming: teachers need a lot of time to prepare learners and present the authentic materials.

Here some quotations from the interviews:

Interviewee 2:

> There are some factors that limit the use of authentic materials. The first and main factor is insufficient knowledge of the foreign culture; our teachers are not sufficiently familiar with English/American culture. The second factor is the curriculum; the teachers should cover the whole curriculum within three months. The third factor is that teachers need to consult educational authorities before using them to make sure they are suitable.

Interviewee 4:

> I think they do not have the authority to introduce these materials. They have to contact the Administration of Education to get the permission. Thus, our teachers will use the textbook and ignore the external materials. Also, another factor is the lack of cultural knowledge.

Interviewee 5:

> In my opinion, the main factors are insufficient knowledge of the types of authentic materials and then of how to use them. Some authentic materials are suitable for teaching listening, some for teaching speaking and others for teaching grammar and vocabulary. Also, authentic materials should meet the objectives of the textbooks.

Questionnaires

The first category: Obstacles (teaching English/American culture)

Table 1. Frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations of teachers' responses related to obstacles (teaching English/American culture)

No.	Arrange	Statement	Degree Approval										Mean	St. dv.
			Strongly agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly disagree			
			F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
1	2	Teaching English/ American culture requires preparing Saudi teachers to improve their knowledge about English/American culture.	20	23.5	38	44.7	-	-	27	31.7	-	-	3.60	1.17
2	1	Teaching English/ American culture requires finding training courses about using authentic materials in the light of using the CLT approach.	34	40.0	35	41.1	1	1.2	10	11.8	5	5.9	3.98	1.19

3	3	Teaching English/American culture requires designing textbooks that refer to English/American culture.	1 3	15. 3	1 3	15. 3	6	7.1	1 8	21.2	35	41. 1	2.4 2	1.5 2
		Total											3.3	1.0 5

Concerning the dilemmas about teaching English/American culture in the EFL classrooms, the results in Table 1 show that English teachers encounter specific obstacles. More than half of the teacher respondents (68.2%) said that their insufficient cultural knowledge is considered one of the problems. So they believe that teachers' knowledge about English/American culture should be developed. On the other hand, 27 teachers (31.7%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the first statement. The respondents were also questioned about whether teaching the target culture necessitates equipping educators with training courses in using authentic materials. The bulk of participants (81.1%) strongly agreed or agreed with the second item. However, 15 teachers (17.7%) did not support the statement. Whether teaching English/American culture requires designing course books related to English/American culture or not, approximately one-third of teacher respondents (30.6%) claimed that designing course books that reflect the target culture is essential to teaching western culture. On the other hand, nearly two-thirds of teachers who were surveyed, (53% or 62.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that teachers can use external authentic materials instead of school textbooks. So, they did not consider this as an obstacle to teaching the target culture.

DISCUSSIONS

1.   What challenges do the Saudi teachers encounter in teaching English/American culture in the light of using authentic materials in the EFL classroom?

In order to answer this question, educators and academic supervisors were asked about challenges in teaching English/American culture in the EFL classroom. The results clarified two major problems, as shown in Figure 1. The educational supervisors perceived that these are: 1. designing authentic materials that reflect the social life in societies that use English as a first language; and 2. utilising them in the EFL classroom. Regarding designing authentic materials, the interviewees reported two points; teachers do not have enough background knowledge of the target culture to design authentic materials and also they need considerable time to collect and design such materials before using them in the classroom. Integrating authentic materials into the EFL classrooms requires knowledge about designing such materials and sufficient time to look for and select suitable materials. These two points are confirmed by Al-Asmari (2008), Chastain (1988) and Howard and Major (2004).

The educational supervisors also reported four challenges that teachers face in relation to using authentic materials in the EFL classrooms. They are as follows: insufficient cultural knowledge and ways of presenting such culture, the extensive content of the course book that has to be covered within one semester, current Saudi education policy and the preparation time that

teachers need to present English/American culture in the classroom. Belaid (2015) points out that from teacher participants' perspectives, teachers need training courses that assist them to select authentic materials and use such materials in the EFL classrooms. Similarly, Hassan (2008:45) states that

> in spite of the appeal of the idea that one must learn the culture of the target language, familiarizing teachers with the target culture is challenging. This is particularly true in the case of EFL teachers who may not have first-hand knowledge of or experience with the culture.

Al-Musallam (2009: 92) mentions that the teachers who were interviewed in his study stated four issues that constrain the use of authentic texts: "time, students' abilities, heavy teaching load, and the rigid college curriculum". This coincides with our findings and therefore this article confirms what has already been published by Al-Mussallam. Some teachers indicated that they need training courses and workshops in selecting suitable authentic texts, creating classroom activities and applying them in the EFL classrooms (ibid).

The results in Table 1 reveal that the majority of teacher respondents believe that teachers need to be well prepared to raise their own cultural awareness. The results from the second statement also confirm that most teachers assume that teaching English/American culture necessitates training courses for utilising authentic materials in order to implement CLT approaches. Nearly one-third of the teacher participants claimed that teaching English/American culture requires designing textbooks which mirror English/American social life.

In this respect, we can infer that teaching English/American culture in the EFL classrooms is a burden for teachers, in particular novice teachers. However, it is still possible to teach the target culture in the EFL classroom. In order to overcome the challenges mentioned earlier, teachers should be aware of practical procedures they can follow in order to teach English language alongside English/American culture.

2. How can Saudi teachers overcome the challenges that they encounter in their classrooms?

The useful steps that help teachers to overcome those challenges and still be approved by the educational authorities in Saudi Arabia are as follows:

- Providing teachers with authentic printed and viewing materials sources to build their knowledge of English/American culture.

- Offering training courses or workshops organised by the Ministry of Education about teaching the target culture in the light of using authentic materials.

- Identifying lesson objectives by preparing authentic materials that reflect social life in British and American societies, and matching them adequately/closely to the school course book objectives.

- Searching for and adapting authentic materials so that they are acceptable to the learners' local culture.

- Designing communication tasks such as role playing, discussions and the information gap in order to emphasise language use in the communicative context.

- Piloting the target materials by involving teachers and academic supervisors in evaluation of those materials and giving feedback.

- Submitting a copy of authentic materials to the educational authorities in order to get approval.

- Applying authentic materials in the classroom, monitoring students' responses and getting their feedback about these materials.

- Evaluating authentic materials by reviewing the teachers' diary and students' feedback.

Rationale for Research

Many valuable and interesting research studies to date have been carried out in Saudi Arabia on approaches to the teaching of English; their main focus is on vocabulary, grammar, the foreign culture, evaluation of materials and using the learners' first language (Al-nofaie 2010, Aldera 2017, Ahmad and Shah 2014). However there is a scarcity of research about obstacles encountered in teaching English language alongside its culture. Hence this article contributes to the research field in two ways. Firstly, focused on data collected from schools in the city of Makkah, it identifies the problems found in teaching English/American culture both by teachers and their academic supervisors. Secondly, noting the lack of guidelines for teachers who wish to present English/American culture in the EFL classroom, this article designs practical solutions to help them overcome these challenges and that may gain the approval of the Ministry of Education.

Implications of study

It is hoped that the outcomes of this research may help the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia gain a better understanding of the problems that teachers encounter in integrating English/American culture with the teaching of English in the EFL classroom. Secondly the results will be made available to Saudi teachers for reference when creating their own materials in order to gain the approval of the educational authorities. Finally it is hoped that this article may encourage scholars to undertake further research on the likely problems related to presenting the target culture to the EFL classroom.

Suggestions for further studies

The authors of this article have suggestions for future study to assist teachers presenting English/American culture in line with teaching English language. They are as follows:

- Targeting participants from advanced levels at universities in order to provide their insights about the barriers affecting the incorporation of the target culture into the EFL classrooms.

- Determining what authentic materials should be used in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

In summary, in this study, as confirmed by the above discussions about challenges in presenting the target culture in the EFL classroom from the point of view of both teachers and their academic supervisors, teachers face considerable challenges in teaching English/American culture. They were identified as follows; lack of cultural knowledge, the extensive content of course books, educational policy in Saudi Arabia (sensitive to unsuitable authentic cultural materials) and the length of time involved. In spite of such obstacles, however, the notion of teaching the target culture in the EFL classrooms is able to be realised, if some support is offered to the teachers. Hence, the Ministry of Education needs to be made aware of these obstacles in order to help solve those challenges. This article concludes with the recommendation that the Ministry should provide the workshops and training courses about teaching English/American culture and teachers should be encouraged to attend them.

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