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Role of mastering English, translation and simultaneous interpretation skills in cross-cultural dialogue promotion

English language acquisition and mastering translation and interpretation skills in cross-cultural dialogue promotion (abstract)

The purpose of the present paper is to show that higher learning institutions which provide instruction designed to promote the acquisition of foreign languages like English actually contribute a great service to their countries and to the interests of their nation as much as to international understanding. They further help to develop the learner's capacities and promote his chances for a better and a more prosperous future. The acquisition of a foreign international language like English at an advanced level together with the development of some practical competences like translation and interpretation enables students to participate in the society whose language they study and to operate within different linguistic and cultural contexts. This helps students to promote cultural relations between their country and the countries whose language they study, and thus serve as ambassadors for their own country within the foreign society and they can also view their own society from new perspectives. They can advantageously and critically draw up comparisons between diverse visions of the world thus promoting inter-cultural understanding and helping to remove misconceptions about their own cultures and national image. This obviously can bring about distinctive benefits both to their own society and to the society or societies of the target language. The paper further explores the vital significance of English language mastery in confronting the ferocious media campaigns launched against the Arab and the Muslim world particularly at the present juncture.
Role of mastering English, translation and simultaneous interpretation skills in cross-cultural dialogue promotion

In a world that knows no boundaries and at a time characterized by astounding advances in the field of information and rapid and ceaseless innovation in international communication techniques and channels, which have virtually converted the world into a global village, the acquisition of foreign languages and the development of practical aptitudes and skills like the skills of translation and interpretation have gained paramount importance. Such aptitudes and skills are not only necessary for creating links and establishing communication between various peoples and nations but have also become essential for promoting national development and for advancing efforts to establish and maintain dialogue and interaction between cultures as a prelude for the preservation and maintenance of international peace and security. Translation is undoubtedly the most significant channel for effecting this type of fruitful communication between peoples, for without it, it will be virtually impossible for peoples and nations to come close together and the cherished cultural interaction will be virtually inconceivable. Allah, the Almighty, has actually urged people to know one another and to establish bonds of familiarity, intimacy and genuine cooperation. He says “O mankind! We have created you from a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know one another. Verily, the most honorable of you with Allah is the most pious” (4:9). Such bonds which have been enjoined by the Lord can only be established and cemented through translation which serves as a bridge for linking nations and peoples speaking different languages and having diverse cultures and heterogeneous experiences. Bonds of familiarity, intimacy, compassion and fraternity can in turn lead to mutual understanding which is indispensably necessary for eliminating antagonism, hostility and apprehensions.

The skills of translation and interpretation require mastery of the foreign language or languages into which the translation or interpretation is to be effected. Translation or interpretation cannot and will not take place unless the translator or interpreter is capable of understanding the source language text or utterance perfectly well. The translator’s or interpreter’s ability to understand the source language should be almost comparable to that of a native speaker [1:p.79]. Unless the translator or interpreter has a very good command of the source language (we are here referring to English), his understanding of the message will be imperfect. “For the comprehension of source texts to run smoothly, no words or expressions should protrude to hamper understanding … Once words or expressions stand out because they are difficult or not known to the interpreter, they will obscure meaning and obstruct comprehension” [2:7]
Universality of English

While the acquisition of foreign languages in general is of paramount importance the acquisition and mastery of English in the present juncture is particularly more so English nowadays is unquestionably and indisputably the most influential and the most pervasive language in the world. As far as the number of native speakers is concerned, English is the second most widely spoken language in the world. Official figures indicate that there are approximately 350 million native speakers of English and another 350 million who speak or use English as a second language while no less than 200 million use English as a foreign language. Approximately fifty countries use English as an official or co-official language. Besides the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, where English is a native language, English plays the most predominant and pervasive role in the cultural, political and economic life of several countries with majority English speaking populations.

English dominating the international media

What is more significant is that 60 percent or more of the world’s radio stations broadcast in English and more than half of the periodicals of the world are published in English [3:329]. The media is dominated worldwide by English.

The ”Big Four“, that is the major Western-based news agencies: two American agencies, namely, the Associated Press (AP) and the United Press International (UPI), the British agency, Reuters, and the French Agency Agence France Presse (AFP) are the world’s most powerful news agencies. They possess the financial and technological potentialities which enable them not only to ”collect news from most countries and territories of the world but also distribute news to most countries and territories“ [4:14]. These world news agencies, three of which distribute news worldwide in English have the greatest influence on nearly all newspapers in the world. Even newspapers published in countries outside the English speaking world “are wholly or at least heavily dependent on these four world agencies for their fare of news about other countries either directly or indirectly by subscribing to national news agency selections from world agency files, by monitoring world broadcasts many of which will have also derived initially from world agency news reports, or both“. [5 Boyd-Barrett (1980) argues that because of the political, cultural and economic sway of the ”Big Four“ agencies, the effect has been indelibly felt on a total world daily newspaper circulation in excess of 450 million and a world broadcast audience well in excess of 1,283 million persons. The figures quoted by Boyd-Barrett are the 1976 UNESCO figures for the total circulation
of daily newspapers (readership would be much higher) and broadcast receivers. Of course after the lapse of more than a quarter of a century now, the figures must have been doubled at least.

Media dependence on these world agencies takes a variety of forms the most visible of which is the quantitative extent to which media around the world depend on the world agencies not only for general world news but also for news of their own.
Reasons for the universality English

Various factors have actually contributed to the universality and undisputed international prevalence of the English language. Brumfit argues that the predominance of English can be attributed to two periods of world domination by English speaking countries: British imperialism in the nineteenth century, and the economic influence of the United States in the twentieth century and he goes on to say that the combination of political influence and technological superiority acquired through these two successive movements has given English an advantage over other major imperial languages such as French or Spanish, while the relative geographical restrictions of Russian, Chinese in its many forms or Arabic have made these languages less influential internationally. Nevertheless, the fact that English has been identified with British imperialism has sometimes raised suspicions that this language has been used as an instrument of cultural and ideological domination particularly in parts of the world which have suffered from the scourge of colonialism and foreign exploitation. It is this which has prompted strong attacks against the role of English in many countries in Africa, Latin America and even in some European countries like France ad Italy, which have been regarding the irresistible domination of English with dread and apprehension.

Communication or isolation?

This view is in some sense justified since people in any country whether highly privileged or under-privileged are legitimately entitled to be brought up in their own culture using their own language which is both an embodiment and a reflection of this culture. However, chauvinistic attachment to one’s own culture and refusal to draw upon or benefit from other languages and cultures could lead to isolation. This is absolutely dangerous in an age dominated by an imperative need for communication. Brumfit stresses this point when he describes it as “naive” the view advocated by some people that the teaching of English represents a perpetuation of linguistic imperialism. “This view which does have the virtue of recognizing the genuine threat implicit in external linguistic domination nonetheless fails to recognize the complexity and power of the forces towards communication on a larger and larger scale. Isolation is impossible, and for many peoples the choice is between communication and exploitation. Possession of any language is highly significant nowadays as it helps us to establish cultural links with other nations and makes it possible for us to communicate with groups other than our own, and as the world becomes more and more interconnected by trade, improved communications, medical political and cultural demands, the need for communication-as a way of enabling people to control and influence their own destinies- will inevitably increase”
Need for English in national development

The acquisition and mastery of English has nowadays become essential for the promotion of national development plans. As far as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is concerned, the intensive study of English and the acquisition of practical competence in the use of that language have gained increasing significance in view of the country’s ambitious national development programmes and the fast growing rates of economic, industrial, social commercial and educational expansion. Foremost among the exigencies of national development is the preparation of well-trained, highly qualified and efficient Saudi nationals who can occupy influential positions in various domains and who can contribute effectively to the country’s overall development in the economic and technological fields. This necessitates that considerable care and attention be consistently and constantly devoted to the teaching of English at an advanced level.

Furthermore, the international conferences, seminars and symposia which are frequently held both inside and outside the Kingdom use the English language as the main medium of communication and this makes it imperative for Saudis to possess high level aptitudes of effective communication in English. An excellent command of English is an indispensable prerequisite for occupying significant posts in the domain of diplomatic and commercial representation. Whoever represents his country abroad must have remarkable communication skills and he must also have the ability to apply such skills in appropriate contexts. This involves the aptitude of presenting sustained and persuasive written and oral arguments cogently and coherently. Such skills are also required by Saudis who occupy sensitive posts in national and international petroleum companies and those who are recruited for giant upstream natural gas projects.

Advocating Islamic teachings

Apart from these industrial projects, there are also activities of a purely spiritual nature which also require the preparation of graduates equipped with a high level mastery of the English language. Such activities are mainly related to the task of Islamic da’wa or the dissemination of Islamic call. This is a duty strongly urged by Allah and by the noble Prophet Mohammed, may Allah’s peace and blessings be upon him. The number of Muslims has been steadily increasing in various parts of the world and notably in the United States and Western Europe thanks to the efforts liberally and ceaselessly exerted by the government of Saudi Arabia and to the donations unstintingly given by Saudi authorities to Islamic centres worldwide. New converts to Islam need to be informed in detail about the duties of good Muslims, about various issues in Islamic Shar’ia and about the teachings and injunctions of Islam in matters affecting their daily behaviour and practices. This obviously requires the preparation of du’ah or well trained callers to Islam who are not only well-versed in the principles of Islamic
jurisprudence but who can also present their arguments in persuasive and attractive ways using the limitless potentialities of English in order to reach to the hearts and minds of people in the communities where they advocate their call. This task has actually gained increasing importance particularly in the present age in which everything has become extremely complicated, where cultural and media channels have become countless and where thousands of intellectuals of various religious, ideological and political affiliations are engaged in a feverish pursuit to affect and form public opinion, using the most proficient and attractive ways in presenting their ideas and propagating their views. This has doubly complicated the mission of callers to Islam. The competition to convince others has become extremely hard. Weak voices and pale arguments will definitely drown amidst this tumultuous sea of media clamour. ” It such a hectic atmosphere, those who understand the spirit and culture of the age will excel, especially if they add to such understanding ideal and decisive means of convincing others and directing the public opinion. Hence, the volume and quality of cultural background has become remarkably different from what was previously required to make the mission of the caller successful. “:7[3

**Hostile propaganda campaigns**

The need to acquire English and to constantly and earnestly develop high level communication competence has gained added significance particularly after the events of the eleventh of September 2001. Even prior to that date, there had been ferocious campaigns of hatred and hostility levelled by Zionist circles against Muslims in general and the Arab countries in particular. It is a well-known fact that the Zionist and Jewish lobby has traditionally dominated the media in the United States and has spared no effort to wage the fiercest attacks against Arab countries, including of course the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Such campaigns have intensified since the 11th of September attacks. Satellite channels have assumed a major role in leading such vicious attempts to discredit and tarnish the image of Islam. The Zionist lobby which either directly possesses or indirectly dominates over 85 percent of these channels in the United States and Western Europe has endeavoured to take advantage of the 11th of September events in order to strike at Islam and Muslims and to level the most ferocious attacks against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia considering that the Kingdom is the land of the Revelation where the most sacred Islamic shrines are located.

Such media channels have endeavoured with unprecedented tenacity and perseverance to create a stereotyped image about Saudi Arabia in the minds of most Americans. Television programmes, newspapers, magazines, movies, advertisements and other publicity materials have resorted to devious methods and vicious techniques in order to impress such a stereotyped image on the minds of people. They have repeatedly depicted the Saudi society as a retrogressive
society where religious extremism, intolerance and fanaticism prevail, where women are ruthlessly subdued and subjugated and where terrorism and intimidation are used to silence and nip in the bud all calls for modernization and moderation.

Western media focus on certain issues which are unpalatable to the people in their countries such as the head cover or the veil put on by Muslim women. The veil, which according to Muslim beliefs is a symbol of chastity and modesty, is depicted by Western media as a concrete evidence of the subjugation and debasement of women. The media notably in the United States and some European countries endeavour to impress on the minds of their people that women in Islamic countries are forced under duress to put on the veil. A woman who puts on the veil is erroneously regarded as a victim of a religion that favours masculinity and debases all that is feminine. The image of Islam presented in Western media is distorted. It is dominated by apprehensions of what they describe as rigid radicalism and uncompromising fundamentalism.

Under the powerful influence of Zionists, Western media, notably in the United States, has endeavoured to impress on the minds of the public that Islam means cruelty ad barbarism. Following the 11th of September events, Islam has been equated with terrorism. The fear of Islam or "Islamophobia" is a new phenomenon that is gaining momentum in the United States and in some Western European countries. Such harsh, defamatory campaigns have been responsible for the discriminatory treatment to which Muslims have been subjected in these countries. Despite the attempts of many Islamic centres and organizations to efface such mistaken assumptions, many Muslims are still being exposed to harassment, maltreatment and insults in the United States.

It is true that the Saudi government has exerted tremendous efforts to counteract such vicious propaganda and to repair this mental image. The Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been active in trying to repulse such antagonistic publicity. However, such efforts have not always been crowned with success because of the shortage of highly trained people who can effectively and professionally discharge these highly specialized media functions and owing to the dearth of information and media material written and broadcast in foreign languages, notably in English, in order to confront these lies and allegations.

Alexis Debat, who has conducted a study entitled "Renewing the News: Marketing Saudi Political Transition in the U.S. Broadcast Media," says that despite the many efforts exerted by the Saudi government, the image of Saudi Arabia in the U.S. media has dramatically eroded in the past two years. This crisis is especially acute in the broadcast media. Debat, who works as an editor and media adviser, says that a systematic study of these efforts aired in the
past 27 months on ABC, CBS and NBC shows that Saudi Arabia has been portrayed negatively in 74.3% of all reports. A semantics analysis also shows that the country has been closely associated with such concepts as “Al Qaeda“, ”hijackers“ and ”women’s rights“. These powerful images have rung so constantly in every media market from Miami to Seattle that they have become a vehicle of socialization even among educated Americans. Saudi political transition has taken a back seat to this negative coverage, which now seems to be the only one deemed newsworthy on .Utelevision .Son and radio“ }ibid[

**Confronting the media campaigns**

In order to confront such virulent attacks, it is essential that we should prepare well-educated intellectuals who can work in Islamic centres in the United States. These Islamic centres are required nowadays more than ever before to direct their seasonal programmes to Western citizens in order to extend contacts with them through arranging visits to, and meeting with, Western intellectuals to remove the misconceptions they have about Islam. In fact Islamic centres have numerous responsibilities particularly at this juncture. They are also called upon to organize cultural and educational activities that shed light on some splendid forms and patterns of the Islamic civilization with a view to communicating an indirect message about the supreme and lofty sides of the civilization of Islam”. }9:3[ Th eofficials in charge of these centres must be very carefully recruited considering the huge responsibilities they are supposed to assume. They should not only have a very good command of English but they should also have a very good knowledge of the literature and culture of the communities where they work. They should be well equipped with advanced literacy and communication skills as well as the capacity to analyze and critically examine diverse forms of discourse.

Apart from Islamic centres, there are various other channels through which representatives of Saudi Arabia can reach out to the hearts of many Americans. There are, for instance, diplomatic and trade missions. There are thousands of students who go to the United States and Western Europe to pursue postgraduate studies. These require careful preparation and training in order to provide a living embodiment of the real values of Arab culture and of the genuine spirit of Islamic moderation. Through their study of the foreign language, these students will learn how to effectively interact with the society and groups speaking that language. They will be able to operate in a beneficial way within different linguistic and cultural contexts.

**Promotion of Intercultural awareness**

The study of English at an advanced level in specialized departments affiliated to faculties of arts and education as well as in colleges of languages and translation serves as a gateway through which students can gain access to much that has been written or thought in that language, thus gaining first-hand knowledge of the
cultures, communities and societies where the language is used. Students in these departments typically explore a variety of approaches to these cultures, communities and societies by drawing on methodologies shared with other disciplines, notably, but not exclusively, literary, cultural media and film studies, critical theory, gender studies, history, geography, philosophy, politics, sociology, anthropology, religious studies, visual and performing arts, economics, business studies, and law. The range potentially covers the full spectrum of the humanities and social sciences and extends also to other subjects making use of source materials in the foreign language.

Obviously this type of multi-faceted and interdisciplinary study of English does not obtain in all colleges and departments where English is taught as a first foreign language. Departments of English language and literature in colleges or faculties of arts give more attention to English literature and culture than departments of English in other colleges like the colleges of education or colleges of languages and translation where attention is more constantly devoted to the development of practical skills like the skill of translation and interpretation. This is of course thoroughly justified. Still without intensive and extensive readings in English literature and culture, the student will not be able to acquire sufficient knowledge of the English language. Hence, it is recommended that while concentrating on the promotion of such practical skills, departments of English particularly in colleges of languages and translation should devote at least fifty percent of the study hours to thematic studies which permit access to various bodies of knowledge. "This may involve a study of aspects of the cultures and societies in which the language is used. Much of this knowledge and understanding is embodied in the literature and other cultural products of the target language society" [ibid]. It is through such an approach that the study of language can become a means of access to other societies and cultures. This is an indispensable prerequisite for achieving the objective of intercultural awareness and understanding.

Once this intercultural awareness is created, students of English will be in a better position to compare the view of the world from the perspective of Arabic language and culture with the view of the world envisaged by English language culture. This can be doubly beneficial for both Arabic and English cultures. The analytical skills which students have developed can be used equally well in the study of their own culture and in particular in comparing, contrasting and mediating between the two societies with which they are familiar.

**Concluding remarks**

In short, language and culture are inseparably bound up with one another. They are so closely related that it is impossible to dissociate them. Language is the vehicle which carries ideas and the means through which we transmit culture. Serge Borg quotes the French scholar Professor Robert Galisson as saying: “The
symbiosis game in which language and culture work make them the reciprocal and necessary reflection of the other. Language plays the role of the tool through which culture elaborates and conserves itself.

Departments of English in colleges and institutes of higher education should aim at helping students to develop sensitivity and awareness of the similarities and dissimilarities between English culture and Arabic culture. The more competent students become in English, the more they will develop an appreciation of the internal diversion and transcultural connectedness of cultures.

Howarth et al. refer to a set of skills and attributes students acquire through their studies and contact with the target language and associated culture. The skills and attributes concerned include:
- a critical understanding of a culture and practices other one’s own;
- an appreciation of the uniqueness of the other culture;
- an ability to articulate to others the contribution that the culture has made at a regional and global level;
- an ability and willingness to engage with other cultures;
- an ability to appreciate and critically evaluate one’s own culture.

Just as different countries in the world have different languages, so they have different cultures. But differences in culture do not necessarily involve a clash or conflict. On the contrary such cultural differences can be narrowed down and even harmoniously reconciled through the acquisition of foreign languages and through translation. Throughout the ages, translation has always helped to pull down barriers between peoples, to bring about a positive dialogue and interaction between cultures and facilitate and expedite social, cultural, economic and intellectual development on a global scale. It is a well-known fact that unity can be reached through diversity and that cultures can advantageously benefit from the differences existing between them so that the final aim of achieving the promotion of human understanding is achieved.

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