Culture as Barrier to the Acquisition of Language and Translation Skills

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In the global age of the contemporary human society, the question of translating from one language to another becomes a focal concern for researchers and scholars. The outstanding interest in this topic is seemingly attended by a debate about the role played by culture in the acquisition of language and translation skills, especially in dealing with a foreign second language. This study is based on the core premise that the skill of translation is extensively affected by the cultural barriers that affect the acquisition of a second language in general. It concentrates on the cultural dimension of language acquisition, with a special reference to the acquisition of English as a second language. It reflects the belief that translation takes place across cultural patterns that either enhance or hinder the skills of the translator.

The recognition that language and culture are two faces of the same coin, and that the objective of learning one language cannot be realized if the cultural context is excluded raises important questions like: Can the acquisition of the skills of translation be improved by identifying the cultural patterns involved? The answer of this questions starts by investigating the nature of culture and the particular nature of its relation to language and the acquisition of its skills. In his book *Culture and Second Language Acquisition*, Christopher Spackman, in this respect, states that:

Culture is to humans what water is to fish—that which surrounds us and that we are only aware of when it is gone. Culture as a process undermines the idea that culture can be learned through superficial aspects like food, costume holidays. It is experienced through language, because language is inseparable from culture. Learning a new language while living in the culture involves coming to terms with the new ocean you are swimming in. This is acculturation which can have two meanings. The general meaning is just the process or act of adjusting to a new culture. (2008, pp.3-4)

In view of this immense and bulky presence of culture in the learning situation of a foreign language, those interested in planning and teaching of translation from or into a foreign language must realize that the cultural background aspects are not less important than the linguistic ones. Without this realization, an important factor will be missing and real satisfactory ends will be illusion. If we accept that the acquisition of a second language is the acquisition of a second culture, we should think of how
this second culture is acquired in the presence of the deeply-rooted beliefs and mechanisms of the culture of the mother tongue. However, studying the interlocking of language and culture and its consequences in the acquisition of the skills of translation starts with understanding the nature of culture.

The word “culture” is an umbrella term which has innumerable meanings and definitions. Culture is constantly changing and its connotations in the minds of people vary according to many social, economic, intellectual, geographical, philosophical, religious, psychological and historical considerations. Its meaning differs for anthropologists, biologists, historians, sociologists, philosophers, politicians and ordinary people. This shows the very nature of culture as a complex and diverse constituent. This nature appears in the scene where one culture has some subordinate cultures. In The United States of America, for example, different groups of American people claim a common ancestry like Afro-Americans, Arab-Americans, German-Americans and Irish-Americans. Although all these groups identify themselves as Americans first, they remain to some extent parts of some other cultural mainstream. Manifestations of this sub-cultural categorization find their way to the food habits, the costumes, the language and other traditions of each group.

Another important fact about culture is that although each culture develops its own specific ways of expressing itself, all cultures share many common universal traits. These common universal traits of culture, therefore, reveal that culture is the way of life based on shared traditions and expectations. They also show that culture is a complex set of learned patterns of behavior and thought which distinguish a group of people. Language, which is the verbal as well as the written tool of expressing this way of life, necessarily interacts with all the aspects and patterns of culture. Although researchers and scholars have differing views about the extent to which language and culture influence each other, yet today, as Emma Watson believes “most researchers acknowledge that both nature and nurture play a role in language acquisition” (2012, p. 1). The behaviorist B.F. Skinner (1904 – 1990) is one of the prominent exponents of this attitude. This is evident when he writes in his book Are Theories of Learning Necessary? (1989) that “language is acquired through principles of conditioning, including association, imitation and reinforcement” (1989, p.145). Skinner, thus, thinks that the
learners of a particular language acquire words by associating sounds with objects, actions, and events. They also learn words and syntax by imitating others. Children learn language and acquire its skills through contact and interaction with adults of the same culture rather than instinctively and automatically. They acquire it, therefore, in a social and cultural context.

Culture, in this sense, is a hidden force that provides meaning, direction, and mobilization. Creating a positive culture is of great importance to the success of teaching a foreign language and a good translator. This requires the growth of behaviors that develop a constructive culture and discourage ones that would support a defensive culture. Actually, the learners of a second/foreign language may experience what is called “cultural shock.” John Macionis and Linda Gerber define the cultural shock as “the personal disorientation a person may feel when experiencing an unfamiliar way of life due to immigration or a visit to a new country, or to move between social environments.” (2010, p. 54).

They believe that the acquisition of a foreign language passes through different stages. In the learning situation during the honeymoon phase, the learner sees the differences between the native language and the foreign one in a romantic light. He/she appears fascinated by the new language, and associates with those who speak. Yet, differences start to appear giving way to unpleasant feelings of frustration and anger. The learner might even regard the foreign language as strange and offensive to his language and culture. Culture, here, changes into a real barrier which creates a real challenge to both the teacher and the learner. This barrier sometimes leads to behavioral and psychological negative effects. It may, in this sense, cause symptoms difficult to overcome like insomnia, classroom drowsiness, unconscious search for distraction and the tendency to leave the class or not to come at all. The learner can also resort to cultural specific body language and signs. He/she might also develop symptoms of loneliness. The cultural shock may create the feeling of helplessness, irritability, anger, stress reaction, a deep sense of hostility towards language and the instructor and boredom. The cultural barrier, in this respect, does not only affect the student’s acquisition of language but even his lifestyle and his attitude to the instructor of the new language and accordingly to into or from this language.

It is true that some learners can overcome the cultural shock and the cultural barriers, yet, as Laray Barna believes, “there is no true way to entirely prevent culture shock, as individuals in any society are personally affected by cultural contrasts differently.” (2009, p. 14) Similarly, Victoria
Christofi, states that “culture shock has many different effects, time spans and degrees of severity” (2007, 54). John Macionis comments on the negative outcomes of the interference of culture in learning of a foreign language saying: “many people are handicapped by its presence and do not recognize what is bothering them.” (2010, p.56). Gregory Mavarides, also maintains that the cultural barriers give way to feelings of frustration and “may heighten the sense of disconnection from surroundings”. (2009, 28)

The learners of a foreign language and the translator, accordingly, face real difficulties which they cannot overcome. They need the support of other parties. The main interest at this stage should be directed to the goal of encouraging the learners to overcome the effects of cultural barriers, to move them into what may be called an adjustment phase, at which they develop positive psychological and behavioral attitudes towards the target language and begin to accept its cultural aspects. The foreign language, at this phase, is expected to make sense to the learners where their negative reactions and responses are reduced to the minimum. At this time, the learner can be moved to what is called “the mastery phase”, where he/she becomes able to participate fully and comfortably in the new host language and its activities. It should not be understood, however, that a total conversion to the new language and its culture takes place. Learners, who become later on translators, unquestionably, keep many traits from their original language and their culture such as accents and grammatical constructions. The main question, here, is how to restrict the interference of such aspects in the acquisition of the skills of the new language, and to create a state of biculturalism. It is possible even that some learners experience a reverse cultural shock, where they return to the same negative manifestations described above and find it difficult, if not impossible, to accept the new language. The challenge, therefore, is how to motivate the learners to take on parts of the new language while thinking they sacrifice some of the patterns of their original language. It is also how to help them to integrate both languages, and to understand the nature of each language.

The term “acquisition” is a central and pivotal one in the teaching and learning of a foreign language. The capacity to acquire the skills of language is a key aspect that distinguishes humans from other creatures. It is, then, crucial to the use of language as a means of communication to know the meaning of “acquisition”. According to *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, language acquisition is:

The capacity to perceive and comprehend language, as well as to produce and use words and sentences to communicate. Language acquisition usually refers to first language acquisition-
which studies infants acquisition of their native language. This is distinguished from second
language acquisition, which deals with the acquisition (in both children and adults) of
additional languages. (2012, p. 1)

The acquisition of the skills of a language requires a knowledge of a range of tools that distinguish
this particular language, and create its identity, nature and culture. These include phonology,
morphology, syntax, semantics and an extensive stock of vocabulary. Thus, although there are a few
design features that can be found in all known forms of human language, each language has its own
reality and culture. The acquisition of a foreign language becomes, in this sense, a task that takes both
the instructor and the learner into a complex system that allows for an infinite number of possible
traps and confrontations. So, while many similar forms of communication exist, others differ from
one language to another, due to the cultural variation between groups speaking and using these
languages for communication. The acquisition of a foreign language, then, is the capacity to pick the
design forms of this language from the linguistic input offered to the learner or the translator. By
linguistic input, we mean all the words, contexts and other forms of language structures to which the
learner or the translator is exposed. Unlike the scene of learning the native language, where the
learner, sustained by a cultural orientation, can successfully acquire and understand the grammatical
rules and other aspects of the language, the learner finds himself/herself in a desperate situation in
learning a foreign language, and his/her cognitive skills appear restricted in face of this challenge.

The question of language acquisition has been under the focus of human thought throughout the
different stages of human life. In ancient societies, philosophers and thinkers have shown obvious
interest in how humans produce language and become able to acquire its skills and use to
communicate with other fellow creatures and understand them. Matilal, in this respect, writes in his
book *The Word and The World* that “some early, observations based, ideas about language
acquisition were proposed by Plato, who felt that word—meaning mapping in some forms was innate”
(1990, p. 9).

In the modern context, some empiricists like Hobbes and Locke believe that knowledge and
language emerge from abstract sense impressions. (See: Palmer Kendra, 2012, p. 26). They, in this
sense, lean towards the “nurture” side of the argument— that language is acquired through sensory
experience. In recent years, however, scholars and researchers tend to see the acquisition of language
as essentially a social- psychological process in which the role played by the socio–cultural context should not be marginalized. It is out of question that people do not only acculturate when they confront a new culture, but also when they learn a foreign language. A culture challenge or clash is, accordingly, initiated by the encounter between two autonomous cultures and also two autonomous languages.

Language, then, is not a verbal or written neutral code. It is a product which inherits social and cultural genes. Taking this into consideration means that all the parties interested in the planning and teaching of the curricula of a foreign language and translation universities must adopt a policy that balances between language as a linguistic code and as a socio–cultural offspring. They must go beyond the traditional attitude which sees language as made up of words and series of rules that connect words together, and view language acquisition as the mere learning of vocabulary and the rules of constructing sentences. This understanding of language is very narrow. It sees language as fixed and finite, and does not explore the complexities involved in using language for communication. Language is not merely a thing to be studied, but a way of seeing, understanding and communicating about the culture it belongs to. Each one, accordingly, uses his language differently for purposeful communication. Kramsch, in this sense, regards language “not simply as a body of knowledge to be learnt but as a social practice in which to participate” (2010, p. 19). Language, thus, becomes something that people do in their daily life and something they use to express, create and interpret meanings and to establish and maintain social and interpersonal relations. It becomes a kind of social practice of meaning. It is not enough, then, for language learners, to know grammar and vocabulary. They also need to know that language is used to create and represent meaning and how to communicate with others and to be aware of the significant cultural role of language.

Accepting that language is a cultural and social practice means that learners should engage in tasks of creating and interpreting meaning. Learners and translators essentially make a degree of association between their native language and the new language whose skills they seek to acquire. Instructors should realize that learners might be encountered with unplanned and unpredictable cultural aspects that complicate the learning situation. Culture, in some learning situations, plays a central role in the way meanings are structured and interpreted. The relation between culture and language is one between two dynamic systems and it is attended by variability and diversity. Culture and language are two fundamentally related issues. The way in which we understand culture is the way in which we
understand language. Culture is the extensive frame in which people move and act and communicate shared meanings. Knowledge of culture, accordingly, facilitates the learning of language and using it in communication or translating into or from, an element mostly missing in the learning of a foreign language. One’s culture shapes his / her perception of the world and of how to communicate and deal with others. Both the teachers and the learners, in this sense, must be aware of the fact that in the teaching / learning situation of a foreign language or its translation, they are engaged in an activity of a highly linguistic and cultural diversity. Commenting on the nature of this relationship, researchers like Anthony Liddicoat and Angela Scarino who believe, in their important study entitled Intercultural Language Teaching and Learning (2007), that:

Understanding the nature of the relationship between language and culture is essential to the process of learning another language in actual language use, it is not the case that it is only the forms of language that convey meaning. It is language in its cultural context that creates meaning: creating and interpreting meaning is done within a cultural framework. In language learning classroom learners need to engage with the ways in which context affects what is communicated and has an influence on the ways in which possible meanings are understood. The context is not a single culture as both the target language and culture and the learner’s own language and culture are simultaneously present and can be simultaneously engaged. Learning to communicate in an additional language involves developing an awareness of the ways in which culture interrelates with language whenever it is used. (2007, p. 37)

One of the strategic goals of teaching English as a foreign language, then, is to free the learners from their culture – based assumptions and to develop an intercultural identity that facilitates the acquisition of the skills of a second language that belongs to an additional culture. The borders between self and other are explored to face the problems attending this relationship and to redraw it in a positive way. Concentrating on this intercultural perspective in English language teaching and learning involves more than developing the knowledge of other places and people. It means accepting that human beings are shaped by their cultures and that communicating across cultures involves a possible confrontation of one’s own culturally conditioned nature and that of others.

Effective intercultural learning, thus, only occurs when the learner understands the nature of the relationship between the two cultures that are at play in the English language classroom. Language educators should realize that what they teach in the classroom is inevitably a partial picture of
language and culture, and find innovative teaching methods and ways of acting that develop the intercultural capabilities of the learners. They should make the learners aware of cultural similarities and differences in language. They should teach them how to react to the expected linguistic and cultural diversity, and how to find ways of engaging constructively with such diversity.

Actually, a dynamic relationship between language and culture is always at play in language classrooms. The understanding of cultural interference in language learning requires the application of socio-cultural theories rather than cognitive theories. While cognitive theories challenge behaviorism and rely on the concept of the thinking mind, where learning is a process of active construction of knowledge in the mind, socio-cultural theories maintain that learning happens through social/cultural interaction that mediates the construction of knowledge. Cognitive theories, therefore, highlight thinking as it occurs in the mind of the individual and socio-cultural theories consider the relationship between thinking and the social, cultural, historical and institutional context in which it occurs. James Lantolf and Sterne Thorne, two of the major researchers who have developed a socio-cultural theory in the field of applied linguistics explain socio-cultural theories in their book *Socio-cultural Theory and Second Language Learning*, saying:

Socio-cultural theory holds that specifically human forms of mental activity arise in the interaction we enter into with the specific experiences we have with the artifacts produced by our ancestors and by our contemporaries. Rather than dichotomizing the mental and the social, the theory insists on the seamless and didactic. In other words, not only does our mental activity determine the nature of our social world, but this world of human relationships and artifacts also determine to a large extent how we regulate our mental processes.(2006, p.79)

Learning English as a foreign language should be seen within what Lantolf and Thorne refer to above as a “social process”. The classroom activity, in this sense, changes into a kind of socio-cultural interaction that mediates the construction of knowledge and leads to the student’s development of a framework for making sense of language experience that is congruent with the cultural system in which the learner and learning are located. It is through this act of social and cultural process that students are socialized to communicate using the new language. Individual learning and achievement, in this respect, are mediated by such supportive socio-cultural interaction. The importance of this socio-cultural approach is that it promotes our knowledge, not only of language but also of all patterns of the learning experience. The socio-cultural approach places a premium on learning experiences,
social participation, use of mediating devices and position within various activity and communities of practice. While learning a language, the receivers acquire not only the skills of language, but also ways of interacting, thinking and valuing through the use of this language. Actually, the culture of the new acquired language interacts formidable with the learners’ initial original culture.

It is evident, then, that much interest is given to culture for the immense role it plays in human life in general and in acquiring the skills of a particular language in particular. It is a role realized by many linguists and many researchers interested in language acquisition. According to Spackman, one culture is to humans what water is to fish – that which surrounds us and that we are only aware of when it is gone. It is the body of ideas, customs, skills, arts and tools that characterize a given group of people in a given period of time. Diaz Richo and Weed, therefore, see culture as:

The explicit and implicit patterns for living, the dynamic system of commonly agreed – upon symbols and meanings, knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, behaviors, traditions, and or habits that are shared and make up the total way of life of people, as negotiated by individuals in the process of constructing a personal identity. (in Spackman, 2008, pp. 232-233)

Culture, as conceived in this study, is the power that shapes the identity of the person and his society. Its components are arts, letters, manners, behaviors, beliefs, knowledge, values and shared tradition which make a society different from other societies and color the action and thought of its members. Different cultures, accordingly, have different attitudes, traditions and upbringing, and what might be perceived in one culture as an adequate personal space might be seen in another culture as another person’s space. Cultural barriers, in this respect, affect the learning experience and the whole atmosphere of the class. An urgent question that comes to the scene of introducing a foreign language to the learners of a different culture is how to avoid or overcome the cultural barrier. A cultural barrier is defined by Masashi Urabe in his study entitled Cultural barriers in Education: A Competitive Study on School Report Cards in Japan and Germany:

A cultural barrier is a framework that unconsciously influences our ways of thinking and feeling since people’s ways of thinking generally depend on their own culture. (2006, p. 274)

The study which shows how the Japanese are culturally imprisoned in their own culture and language can be taken as a good representation of how cultural barriers hinder the acquisition of the skills of
translation. It can also contribute to our understanding of the nature of English as a foreign language in the Saudi context. An important fact about the cultural attitude of the learners towards language and using it in communication is the emotional stance towards structuring sentences and the ways ideas are expressed. Arab people usually express their opinions and ideas modestly and tend to find a common mutual ground of understanding while communicating with each other, even if they have definite opinions. Western people, on the other hand, express their ideas openly regardless of how the other see them.

The Arab learners of English as a foreign language, in this sense, do not tolerate some of the expressed meanings in the texts written in English. This, of course, affects the efforts which aim at getting the learners to speak flawless English or to use these meanings in translation. Instructors spend much time in teaching grammar and in correcting mistakes. Unfortunately, they discover that their attempts fail and some of the learners do not positively respond to the whole experience, and those who manage to cope with the situation retain some bad mistakes. The reason behind this might be, in most cases, that the teachers are not aware of the cultural challenge which represents a real difficulty in the acquisition of the target language.

In their study “Global and Local Mistakes”, Marina Burt and Carol Kiparsky state that “the learning situation demands more than just knowing all the rules and knowing what rules to teach. The rules alone do not help the teacher to anticipate the many kinds of mistakes he will hear”. (in John Schumann, 1974, p. 71). This is, to a great extent, true, for the scene of the acquisition of a foreign language is not similar to that in other branches of human knowledge, especially in physical science. Here, the process is not governed by concrete strict rules and theories that can be scientifically isolated and controlled. Both the instructor and the learner (student) find themselves in a situation where a huge stock of unconscious cultural inheritance exists. This heritage represents a cultural barrier in the study of a foreign language. According to Jack Richards, in his study “Error Analysis and Language Strategies”, the cultural barriers may lead to what he calls “fossilization”, permanent characteristics in the speech of bilinguals irrespective of the age at which the second language is acquired or the amount of instruction or practice in it. He also adds:

Perhaps some of the most apparent examples of fossilizable (sic) items in second language communication are those described as instances of language transfer or interference. This may
be defined as the use of elements from one language while speaking another and may be found at the level of pronunciations, morphology, syntax, vocabulary and meaning. (in Schumann, 1974, p. 36)

The socio-cultural function of language is similarly maintained by Rebecca L. Oxford, who argues that “a second language has social and communicative functions the language serves there. A second language has social and communicative functions within the community where it is learned” (1990, p. 6). Thus, learners’ attitudes and motivation affect their performance in standard programs of English language learning in the governorates of south Riyadh and in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in general. It is difficult to talk about learning and acquisition of the skills of English depending only on learners’ interests and abilities and neglect the cultural aspects. Actually, the teaching and learning of English become inadequate, because there is too much emphasis on linguistic aspects and too little attention to the analysis of the cultural factors associated with this scene. The result is that no one reaches the desirable state of affairs. Focusing on these cultural elements may help in breaching the gap between instructors and learners and help both to realize their aspirations. The instructor must be aware of the cultural barriers before he can act. Ignoring this factor means a sharp departure from the problems of motivation, which makes the learning tasks of no real meaning in terms of life experiences of the learners. The instructor should begin by asking open questions that clarify and develop specific cultural responses which link interests to tasks. If much emphasis is given to class conditional aspects, a similar one must be directed to the analysis of the cultural elements associated with the language learning act. Instructors must know what they ought to do and how to reach their aspirations. Finding solutions to the problems arising from the cultural barriers necessarily leads to a real improvement in the quality of teaching of English as a foreign language. It would simply reduce the gap between intent and action, and causes the shift to be in the direction of more effective teaching and acquisition of the skills of language. Ned Flanders, in this, respect states that:

One of the best understood problems of in service education is how to create an environment for the teacher which not only encourages change, but makes it reasonably probable, assuming that a teacher’s present performance is the product of his current resources and incentives, a substantial change in performance must surely require a substantial change in the “change environment” (1970, p. 10).
The challenge of the current situation in teaching and learning of English as a foreign language in Arab countries, then, is how to secure a cultural environment more powerful than which is available to both instructors and learners. The current state of affairs is not appropriate. The little data available on classroom cultural interactions reveal the negligence of the question of cultural interference and its consequent cultural barriers. The knowledge of the learners’ cultural behavior is either totally absent or surrounded by a shadow of doubts. All interested parties seek all the most effective training strategies except those of analyzing cultural interactions. Thus, they seek to make the English language teaching experience similar to the laboratory experiments, where all conditions are under strict control. The teaching of English becomes like that of a chemistry course, where the student learns and is able to prove that water has two volumes of hydrogen and one volume of oxygen. In a chapter entitled “Applying Direct Strategies to the Four Language Skills” in her book Language Learning Strategies, Rebecca Oxford comments on “Reasoning Deductivity”, one of these strategies, stating that:

This strategy involves deriving hypotheses about the meaning of what is heard by means of general rules the learner already knows. Reasoning deductively is a common and very useful type of logical thinking. (1990, p. 82)

There is no doubt, then, that the systematic classification of cultural barriers and levels would facilitate learners’ acquisition of language rather than impede it. The instructor who manages the classroom should make the cultural dimensions among his priorities as he sees them. The setting of the teaching of language represents what Ned Flanders calls “a jolting or rocking of the self concept, a difficulty, a change in perceived priorities, peer or superior pressure, an outside interaction or a slowly growing conviction that finally reaches the ignition point” (1970, p. 21). It is evident, accordingly, that the cultural barrier can create restlessness in mind and body. The instructor who moves in a high degree of independence concerning cultural factors, commit himself to a high degree of risk, and clings to anticipations which will never be realized. Improvement in English language learning place, is not to flourish in an antagonistic cultural environment. That is why the instructor should inquire into the chain of cultural events affecting the whole process of language learning. Cultural and moral beliefs that color the mentality of the learner and affect his aptitude for English language learning must be admitted. Such cultural, social and moral variables must be isolated and
seriously investigated and learnt in order to create a value system that motivates learners to acquire the skills of English effectively.

For Arab learners of English or translators from or into English, the religious and moral variables constitute a considerable share of the mentality of the learners or the translators. Commitment to the native language “Arabic”, the language of the holy Qur’an, creates in some learners conservative attitudes in learning English, that unconsciously turns into cultural taboos and psychological barriers. Unfortunately, many of the instructors of English have no knowledge about this aspect, or their knowledge is incomplete and of questionable validity. They focus on how to be objective and direct their efforts only to rigid technical and cognitive aspects. Understanding of the cultural variables and systematically coding them during classroom interaction are what the instructors of English urgently need to acquire. They should realize that language is an image of culture, and this makes the teaching of a foreign language different from the teaching of many other branches of human knowledge and science. That is why Ned Flanders states that “knowing language and how it is used provides a firm basis for understanding interaction analysis system.” and adds that excluding the cultural dimension in the teaching of a foreign language means that “classroom interaction systems seek to abstract communication by ignoring most of its characteristics”. (1970, p. 29)

In some places, sharp regional and cultural influences which shadow the scene of teaching and learning English as a foreign language. The dialect outstandingly interferes in the acquisition of the skills of English, especially in pronunciation. The residual legitimacy given to the old formal Arabic accents makes them, for some learners, the single unified accents, not liable to be challenged by any new coming accent. The perception of English accent, consequently, faces marked regional characteristics or say barriers. The typical features of Arabic create speech defects, especially when they come to the vowel system. The speakers entirely lack the ability to distinguish between one vowel and another. The learners may strictly adhere to their culture and to the moral values of their community. Language and thought phonemes, and the stereotypical forms of the pronunciation of Arabic may hinder the practice of the new patterns of the target language.

In his important study about culture and foreign language acquisition entitled *Accents of English Beyond the British Isles*, J. C. Wells argues that “there is a great deal of regional and social variation in quality and rounding of open and back vowels.” (1982, 34) This, actually, applies to the situation of learning English in some Arab countries. The regional social / cultural variations referred to by Wells,
are apparent in the quality of the merged vowel which is typical in the way some Arab learners pronounce words. Some fail to distinguish “force” –“north” pairs by vowel quality, and this also applies to words like “hoarse” and “horse”. Some of them who are able to have the distinction, use a vowel somewhere between the typical “o” and the raised “o” in “force”.

According to Rod Ellis, language acquisition is “the way in which people learn language other than their mother tongue, inside or outside of a classroom”.(1998, p. 3). The study of a foreign language, however, should start with the question: What justifications might there be for language study? This question has unquestionable cultural connotations. Learners of English as a foreign language should be given reasonable and convincing justifications for the study of a language that some of them see as representing a cultural challenge to Arabic, the language of the Qur’an. Expert teachers can discover that some learners become passive learners of English out of unconscious hostile cultural attitudes towards the study of this foreign language. It is very important, in this respect, to help learners to overcome such cultural barriers. A special effort and time should be directed to this end. Creative unconventional approaches and techniques must be found and applied to face these problems. Before getting involved in the actual practices of learning English as a foreign language, the learners must be psychologically, mentally and culturally convinced that they are going to begin a fruitful learning experience and to study an important language in their life and futuristic careers. Rod Ellis, in this respect, writes:

The systematic study of how people acquire a second language is a fairly recent phenomenon, belonging to the second half of the twentieth century. Its emergence at that time is perhaps no accident. This has been a time of the “global village” and the ‘world wide web”, when communication between people have had to learn a second language, not just as a pleasing pastime, but often as a means of obtaining an education or securing employment. At such a time, there is an obvious need to discover more about how second languages are learned .(1998 ,p. 3 )

In most English language situations, however, the involved parties focus on the formal features of language, on how learners’ ability to communicate develops, how their accent changes over time, how they memorize grammar rules, how they build up their vocabulary and how they use specific grammatical structures such as plurals or relative clauses. Yet, the practices of both instructors and learners reflect an utter negligence of the external social and cultural milieu in which learning takes
place. They do not realize that the socio-cultural conditions influence the opportunities that learners have to hear and speak the language and the attitudes they develop towards it.

There is no doubt that when both instructors and learners take the learning situations only to these boundaries of the language technical aspects and distance themselves completely from the cultural milieu, language learning faces difficult challenges and might not even occur. Learners of foreign languages in general, come to English as a foreign language with an enormous amount of knowledge from their culture and their mother language. They lack confidence, and cannot deal independently with the new language, and seek to draw on this knowledge of the native language. This cultural interference of the mother tongue impedes the acquisition of the skills of English. Learners, thus, fail to achieve a considerable success. For a long time, the maximum they can acquire is restricted to the performance of simple structures of English like requests of goods and services, where they already have numerous opportunities to hear and acquire. Thus, they can use simple requests like “give me your pencil”, “can I have your book” and other simple constructions. They can also use fixed direct formulas like “can I have a ….” Or “have you got ….”

Learning of a foreign language, like learning of any other branch of human knowledge, necessarily requires mental abilities. Rod Ellis, in this sense, expounds that the human mind is equipped with a faculty for learning language referred to as “language acquisition device” (1998, p. 32). Yet, it is not enough to focus on how environmental factors shape learning in what is called the role of nurture. The less the socio-cultural distance the more accessible is the foreign language. The cultural distance creates what we may call the psychological distance, a set of psychological traits which lead to a language shock and the loss of motivation. Thus, in setting a futuristic strategy for the teaching of English as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia, in general, and in the governorates of south Riyadh in particular, much attention should be directed to the expected clash between the complex social/cultural identity of the learner and that of the new language. Learners are not computers who process input data, but social/cultural beings whose minds and vision are shaped by the accepted socio-cultural orders.

Learners who belong to the same language understand each other because the language is accompanied by gesture and mimicry, which are manifestations of their social and cultural milieu. Part of their psychic development is that they acquire the ability to mean something when they utter sounds that refer to something objective. Their practices of language, thus, become acts of thought.
The German psychologist and philosopher William Stern, in this respect, states that “at a certain stage of his intellectual development, the human being acquires an ability to infer some objective content when he voices words”. (2010, p.126) “Learning”, as Rod Ellis believes, “takes place as a result of a complex interaction between the linguistic environment and the learner’s internal mechanism” (1998, p.44). While the native language is acquired without a conscious mental effort, the acquisition of the second foreign language is attended by unquestionable mental, social and cultural consciousness. Important scholars (linguists) like Giles, Schumann and Pierce, accordingly, devote much research efforts to the socio-cultural models of second language acquisition which investigate the impact of social/cultural variables on learners relative success or failure in the acquisition of the skills of a foreign language, and through this the rate and possibly the route of inter-language development. It is remarkable here to maintain that the social and cultural factors may not impact directly on what goes on inside the classroom. Rather, they have an indirect effect influencing the communication learners engage in what Ellis calls the impact of the “linguistic environment” on the learner’s “internal mechanism”.

From the argument given above, we can conclude that acquiring the skills of translation is part of the whole process of acquiring the skills of language. In teaching English as a foreign language, a balance must be maintained between the objective linguistic cognitive variables and the subjective social/cultural determinants. In the activities and practices of English as a foreign language, the two poles must be kept in view and nothing to be sacrificed. A learner’s communication without the socio-cultural aspect remains unintelligible. The question of foreign language learning is not only a matter of acquisition of language, but also of thought and habit. Speech has expressive social and cultural tendencies. It is only through this balance that the learners of English as a foreign language the may find the kinds of learning tasks they are asked to do intrinsically motivating, and feel personally involved in learning activities. Language and translation aptitude is not only a natural ability related to general intelligence, but also a personal readiness related to society and culture. This collaboration between language and culture is strongly maintained and advocated by Lev Vygotsky in his important book Thought and Language. He traces the centrality of this collaboration in all theories of language, stating that:
A look at the results of former investigations of thought and language will show that all theories offered from antiquity to our time range between identification, or fusion, of thought and speech on the one hand, and their equally absolute, almost metaphorical disjunction and segregation on the other. We can trace the idea of identity of thought and speech from the speculation of psychological linguistics that thought is speech minus sound, to theories of modern American psychologists who consider thought a reflex inhibited in its motor part. (1998, p. 2)

References


