



Influence of Native Culture on Intercultural Communication of Libyan Students Studying in the UK

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Abstract

Libyan students encounter major difficulties in their communication with native speakers of English during their study in the UK. These problems are not so much due to their linguistic incompetence in the target language (English) but rather due their cultural and social incompetence of the target culture. This paper explores the influence of the native culture of Libyans students' on their verbal and non-verbal communication. In so doing, this study looked at real-life examples representing the issues facing some Libyan students during their stay in the UK. The subjects of the study were Libyan students pursuing their higher studies in the UK. The findings show that Libyan students are very much influenced by their native culture and as a result they are facing so many problems in their communications with native speakers. The study believes that cultural literacy in language teaching is need as it helps to overcome significant hardship in communicating meaning to native speakers. The study concludes with some recommendations for the Livyan Ministry of Education and the textbooks designers on how to improve the current situation and it also outlines some suggestions for further research.

Keywords: Native culture, intercultural communication, language, Libya students, miscommunication.

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الملخص

يواجه الكثير من الطلاب الليبيين صعوبات كبيرة في تواصلهم مع الناطقين باللغة الإنجليزية خلال دراستهم في المملكة المتحدة. أغلب هذه المشاكل ليس بسبب ضعف قدراتهم اللغوية في اللغة الأجنبية (الإنجليزية)، بل بسبب عدم معرفتهم الكافية بثقافة هذه اللغة. هذه الدراسة تسلط الضوء على تأثير الثقافة الأم للطلاب الليبيين على تواصلهم اللفظي وغير اللفظي. ولتحقيق هذا الهدف، نظرت الدراسة في أمثلة حقيقة تمثل بعض المشاكل التي تواجه بعض الطلاب الليبيين أثناء إقامتهم لغرض الدراسة بالمملكة المتحدة. أظهرت النتائج أن الطلاب الليبيين متأثرون جداً بثقافتهم الأم، ونتيجة لذلك يواجهون الكثير من المشاكل وينتج عند ذلك سوء فهم وتفاهم في تواصلهم مع الناطقين بها في كثير من الأحيان. وتخلص الدراسة إلى ضرورة الأهتمام بتدريس الثقافة و اللغة الأجنبية في نفس الوقت لأنها تساعد في التغلب على الصعوبات الكبيرة في نقل المعنى للمتحدثين الأصليين. وتختتم الدراسة ببعض التوصيات لوزارة التربية والتعليم ومصممي الكتب المنهجية حول كيفية تحسين الوضع الحالي، كما تحدد الدراسة وجوة القصور في الدراسة الحالية وتقتراح اجراء المزيد من البحوث لفهم المشكلة بشكل أوسع وادق مستقبلا.

Introduction

Many Libyan students come to the UK in order to study. The majority of those students pursue their higher studies such as MA, MPhil or PhD. The rest come either for short training courses or to learn English. Since the majority of those students come to the UK in order to obtain high degrees, therefore, their level of English is relatively good. However, despite the fact that most Libyan students' English is quite good, many of them face many difficulties in communicating with native speakers. Although some of these problems are due to language incompetence, most of them arise from other sources.

Many think that by mastering a language, people would be able to communicate. For them, language is the only thing one needs in order to communicate with others whom s/he does not share the same language. This is true to a large extent. Language is, undoubtedly, the main medium of communication between humans and it is an important



form of communication. However, what those people seem to ignore is the fact that language does not exist in vacuum. Language exists in a society who has set up, often unstated, its own rules of how, when and where to say what and in what situation. These rules that govern the way people use language to communicate among themselves are part of what is known as culture. Language and culture cannot be separated. They exist together side by side and they help to facilitate communication. Thus, being able to communicate with someone is much more than mastering the rules and vocabularies of that particular language. Being able to master of the rules of a language as well as the rules of its culture is what needed to ensure the smoothness of communication.

Lack of cultural knowledge in communication can lead to miscommunications. These miscommunications arise from misunderstandings which are often attributed to unaccepted or unexpected behaviour or inappropriate usage of language. Despite its importance and the role it plays in conveying meaning in communication, culture has long been ignored in language teaching. The emphasis is being put on enhancing the learner's linguistics competence at the expense of the cultural competence. This has caused many problems for students in their communication with native speakers. This is because when they try to communicate, they are unaware of the rules they should be preserving in their communication acts. Moreover, this unawareness of the target culture norms and rules of speech and behaviours leave students with no choice but to resort to what would their native culture dedicate them to do in that particular situation. This often leads to miscommunications between students and native speakers. The influence of native culture is one of the problems that arise from students' unawareness and lack of knowledge of the



target culture. It also hinders the communication of students and causes them lots of difficulties in their communication.

This paper, therefore, explores the extent to which the native culture of the Libyan students affects their communications. As far as the present researcher is aware of, there has been no study in the Libyan context which has previously looked at this issue. This study is the first of its kind in Libya to try and explore the problem and try to suggest some solutions on how to overcome it.

Literature Review

Definitions of Culture.

Before defining culture, it is important to note that there is a distinction made by Brooks (1960, P.22) between “Culture with a Capital C” which is used to refer to art, music, literature and politics and “culture with small c” which used to refer to the behavioural patterns and lifestyles of everyday people. This distinction has helped people to change the view that most of them held of culture as merely a representation of art, music and the like (cited in Killick & Poveda, 1997, P.221). For them, the most important part of culture is that which internal and hidden and internal....., but which governs the behaviour they encounter.(ibid). Different scholars in different fields such as anthropology, sociology have defined and explained the term culture in various ways. However, for the purpose of this paper, the focus here is only on the definitions which contain the recurring theme of how culture and communication is linked together. Most scholars seem to agree that culture basically consists of our ways of life, symbols, beliefs, values and patterns which distinguish a group of people from another. Byram (1994, P.3) says that “Culture consists



of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, and on the other as conditioning elements of further action”. Duranti (1997, P.64) defines culture as “something learned, transmitted, passed down from one generation to the next, through human actions and of course through linguistics communication”. Duanti’s definition of culture shows us that, like a language, culture is something that people have to learn (cited in Thanasoulas 2001, P. 8).

Language and Culture.

It is widely recognized that language is part of culture and it plays a pivotal role in it (Bryam 1994, P.8). For some, culture would not have even existed without language. Language is the mirror of the culture and it is shaped and influenced by it (ibid). That means that people can see a culture through its language (Bryam, 1994). In the broadest sense, each language is, symbolically, a representation of a group of people because it includes their historical and cultural backgrounds in addition to the way they live and think (Bryam, 1994). Language and culture are simply not separable and they should always go hand in hand. As Krasnch argue “A language is a part of culture and culture is part of language: the two are intractably interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture” (1993, P.25). Buttjes, (1990) and many others believe that language and culture are from the start inseparably connected



(cited in Lessard-Clouston, 1997, P.132). He argues that the reasons why this should be the case is that that process of language acquisitions is different from one culture to another and it does not follow a universal sequence and that the process of becoming a competent member of a society is realized through exchanges of language in a particular situation (Buttjes, (1990), cited in Lessard-Clouston, 1997, P.132). Every society lays its own rules of how children should participate in a certain situation, and this consequently, affects the form, the function and the content of children utterances: caregiver's primary concern is not with grammatical input, but with the transmission of sociocultural knowledge; the native learner, in addition to language, acquires also the paralinguistic patterns and kinesics of his or her culture (ibid). Buttjes views clearly show the strong relationship between language and culture and any attempt to separate the two is deemed to failure.

Culture and Non-verbal Communication.

When individuals speak, they normally do not confine themselves to the mere emission of words (Jandt 2001, P.99). A great deal of meaning is conveyed by non-verbal means which always accompany oral discourse – intended or not (ibid). In other words, a spoken message is always sent on two levels simultaneously, verbal and non-verbal. Verbal communication requires a language (Jandt, 2001). Language, defined in terms of semantics, is a group of labels used to represent approximations of space-time events and abstractions (ibid). The labels can be conveyed from one entity to another by a variety of means including vocalization, writing, etc. There are many definitions that researchers and scholars use to define non-verbal communication. Non-verbal communication consists of all the messages other than words that are used in communication (Jandt, 2001 P.101).



Non-verbal communication can be defined as the messages sent without using words. Burgoon et al define non-verbal communication as those actions and attributes that have socially shared meaning, are intentionally sent or interpreted as intentional, are consciously sent or consciously received, and have the potential for feedback from the receiver (cited in Jandt 2001, P. 103).

Perception

The reason why different people from different cultures usually see and interpret the same event differently is the fact that our perception is affected by our culture (Samovar et al 1998, P.57). How we react to some event or situation is strongly influenced by our learning and cultural conditioning (Samovar et al, 1998, P.58). Our perception is also, though to lesser extent, influenced and shaped by our language. As Hoiijer argues “Far from being a simple techniques of communication, it is itself a way of directing the perception of its speakers and it promotes for them habitual modes of analysing experiences into categories. And to the extent that languages differ markedly from each other, so should we expect to find significant and formidable barriers to cross-cultural communication and understanding” (cited in Jandt, 2001, P.185). The idea that language influences our thoughts and perceptions was first originated by Sapir and Whorfian back in 1920s. Sapir and Whorf believed that our thoughts are greatly determined by the language we speak (P.187). In other words, speakers of a particular language can only see the world in the way that their language allows them to do (Jandt, 2001). Thus, our view and perception of the world around us is, to great extent, predetermined by the language of our culture (ibid,



P.136). Perception is a complex process by which people select, organise, and interpret sensory stimulation into a meaningful picture of the world (Kramsch, 1993, P.13). Human perception is believed to consist of three-step process of selection, organization and interpretation (Samovar et al 1998, P.57). Due to space, I will only be discussing the third step; interpretation. Interpretation has to do with how we decode and understand situation we are faced with. Our culture greatly affects the way we make decisions and it gives us cues in order to make our judgments and decisions about certain situations (Jandt, 2001, P.187). These cues are sometimes culture-specific, and therefore, if we try to apply them to different culture, they may not work (ibid).

Methodology

Research Question:

- To what extent does the native culture affecting the intercultural communications of the Libyan students studying in the United Kingdom?

Subjects

The study's subjects were Libyan students who had scholarships from the Libyan Ministry of Education to do their MAs and PhDs degrees in different majors such as engineering, law, computer and many other fields. However, at the time of the study some of the subjects were still taking English courses as a preparation for their study programs (i.e. MA or PhD).

Research Method



The data was collected through my direct personal contacts with some of the subjects as well as from my informal discussion/talk with friends during my stay in the UK between the years 2006 until 2017.

Data Analysis & Discussion.

This section presents the data which consists of some real-life examples demonstrating different acts of miscommunications between Libyan students and native speakers which all seem to be a result of the influence of native culture on Libyan students.

Example (A)

Sami who was living with an English family was asked to leave the family and find somewhere to live just because he offered a chocolate to their children. He was trying to be kind and nice to the children and he wanted to show the family that he was caring for their children. Such a behaviour, that is offering chocolate or sweets and talking to children in the street, is quite appropriate in the Libyan culture and people always do that either for the children they know or they do not. In fact in Libyan culture it is considered as unacceptable if you, for example, come to somebody's house and know that they have children and you don't bring something for them. However, this is not the case in a culture where kidnapping and child abuse is common or at least it does exist. Talking to children and offering them sweets or chocolate is usually perceived as unacceptable behaviour since it is interpreted as if you are trying to attract children in order to kidnap them or abuse them sexually or otherwise.



Example (B)

Abdulsslaam went to a nightclub with his classmates on his second week of arrival to the UK. He saw a girl whom he liked and started to look at her with a big smile. He kept doing this for sometime until the girl came to him and asked him angrily why he was looking at her like that. He smiled and said to her that because he liked her. The girl shouted at him and asked him not to stare at her again. What Abdulsslaam was thinking is that the girl liked him as well but she was pretending otherwise. So he kept looking at her again and smiling. The girl felt very angry and she told the security guard about what happened and the security guard came and asked Abdusslam to leave the night club. The problem was that Abdulsslaam was acting as would men normally do in his country in order to attract a girl. In Libyan culture, an eye contact and smile is a common way used to attract or initiate a conversation with a woman. If the woman looks back and smiles in return that would mean that she does not mind talking to you. On the other hand, if she turns her face away and does not look back that would mean she is not interested. The cause of miscommunication in this example is a result of Abdulsslaam's unawareness of the cultural norms in that particular situation and the fact that he was applying his native culture norms in that situation which obviously caused him to be misunderstood by the other party.

Example (C)



Mohi was living with an English family for six months. One day after having a dinner, Mohi was asked by the landlady if he wanted a cup of coffee or tea. He said (yes) but he did not say (please). The landlady was unhappy about that and when she brought the tea she said to him that it was impolite not say (please). Mohi felt very angry because he felt that he was insulted because the family was still treating him like a stranger. The problem with Mohi was not that he did not know that he should say (please) when someone offers him something but he just felt that ,after spending six months with the family, he became part of the family and therefore he would not need to say (please) anymore. In Libya, people rarely express their gratitude or indebtedness to their family members because helping each other in this context is perceived only as compliance with one's duties. This is mainly because the structure of the Libyan society is one in which it is based on a kinship-based relationships prevail so determine clearly the rights and obligations of the individuals concerned, even favours done and received are interpreted as within the framework of kinship duties and are consequently not seen acts of free will of individuals (Sifianou, 1992, P.52). In Libyan culture it is considered as inappropriate and insulting when you thank or say (please) to a member of your family or very close friend or to someone whom you know very well just because s/he has done you a favour. What appears to be the problem in this example is that Mohi did not understand that the norms which he was used to in his own culture were different from the target culture. A clear cultural difference between Mohi's culture and the target culture had caused this



miscommunication. If Mohi had known that the norms of the target culture in that situation were different from his, this situation would have not probably happened.

Example (D)

Khaleed was doing a PhD in political sciences. One day, he was invited to his English friend's house for a dinner. Khaleed accepted the invitation and went for the dinner. When he came, Mr Ian introduced him to his partner. Khaleed did not understand what his friend meant by the word a partner. He knew the lexical meaning of the word but he did not understand what it means in reality. Then they went on chatting and they asked him about his study and family in Libya and other things. Mr Khaleed also asked the couples when they got married and they replied that they were not married and that they were only partners. Khaleed was shocked when learnt that they were unmarried and that they even have a child. The family felt offended when Khaleed said to them that their child is illegal and that they should not be together in the same house if they are unmarried. For Khaleed's culture that is perfectly justified. Marriage is the only way for two people from the opposite sexes to live together and have children. Any other way is prohibited and illegal. However, this does not apply for other cultures, and the British culture is one of them, where people from different sexes or nowadays even from the same sex can live together without marriage. This example shows us that Khaleed's communication with the family was greatly influenced by his beliefs and values which are part of his culture.



Example (E)

Sameer found himself in an embarrassing situation when he made a joke which he thought was funny but turned out to be inappropriate. In the class, the teacher asked about a student who had not showed up for few days. Some students said that they had no idea about her but Sameer said, jokingly, that she was may be dead. Every body in the class felt uncomfortable including the teacher who told Sameer that he should never make a joke like that. In the Islamic culture, which Libyan culture is part of, people do not feel uncomfortable talking about death since they believe that their life and death is truly decided by Allah. Therefore, people do not fear talking and thinking and, especially among friends, even joking about death. This is not the case in all cultures. Some cultures see death as something not to talk about and certainly not for a joke. This is also reflected in the language of those cultures. This fear or unpleasantness feelings about death is also reflected in the vocabulary used in the language. For example, in English it is more common for people to say that someone has (passed away) instead of (died). This idea takes us back to what was mentioned earlier in section 2, which is that language widely reflects the way people think and perceive the world. As was discussed in section 2.4, people's differences in perception cause a great deal of miscommunications. Beliefs constitute an important part of forming our perception. They are also an influential factor in intercultural communication



because, as was shown in the previous example, they affect the manner in which we communicate (Samovar et al 1998, P. 59).

Example (F)

Abdallah was doing a pre-session course in Salford University in Manchester. One day, he felt that he was offended by the teacher who did not answer his question. Abdallah asked the question and instead of calling the teacher by her name, he said (teacher please). The teacher answered the question but she felt that Abdallah was a bit rude. Abdallah knew from the way the teacher answered his question and also from her facial expressions that she was uncomfortable with something which he said.

Therefore, after the class finished he came to the teacher and asked her what was wrong and the teacher told him that he should call her by her name and not to say (a teacher). For Abdallah, it is too hard to understand that because for him it is very impolite to call a teacher by his or her name. This example also shows that the main cause of miscommunication was the native culture influence. The problem with Abdallah in this instance is that he acted in the way which would be appropriate in Libyan culture. In Libya, to call a teacher by his or her name would put the student in a serious problem and s/he may face a disciplinary action for being impolite. Moreover, this example also shows that the influence of the native culture on Libyan students affects their communication in all aspects of life and their academic life is no exception. Libyan students face lots of



difficulties in their academic life in the UK because of the different perceptions they had in their home country. Unlike in the UK, the education system in Libya is a teacher- centred. That means that students expect the teacher to tell them to do everything they are supposed to do. Libyan students are not used to most of what they have to do as students in the UK. Things such as writing essays, reading lists, doing presentations, and going to the library are all new to Libyan students. In addition, in Libya; students must keep their relationship with their teacher very formal and always to keep a distance from him or her. As a sign of respect, students in Libya, even at postgraduate level, are not supposed, under any circumstances, to call their teachers by their names since it is considered as rude and very impolite.

All the examples above clearly demonstrate the influence of the native culture on the communication. It is also clearly evident that this has been the main cause of the miscommunications which occurred between the participants. Although the language might have well been a problem for Libyan students in their communication, the native culture influence as well as the ignorance of the target culture seems to be more of problems. In other words, the Libyan students' social and cultural incompetence rather than the language proficiency has affected their communication. The examples given above also indicate that the problem that faces Libyan students is not so much a linguistic one. The problem seems to come from a source which, according to our examples and from my little



experience in teaching in Libya, has not been given any importance in the foreign language curriculum in Libyan schools and universities. It is the lack of cultural competence which seems to be causing most of Libyan students' problems in communication. The Lack of cultural and social knowledge leads to violations of cultural norms which in turn lead to socio-pragmatic failure and miscommunications. Language and culture, as mentioned in section 2, cannot be separated. They ought to go hand in hand. Many scholars, from amongst Byram (1994) and Kramsch (1993), strongly believe that cultural competence, i.e. the cultural knowledge of the conventions, customs, beliefs and systems of meaning of another country, is undoubtedly an integral part of foreign language learning. They also believe that teaching culture should become part of the foreign language curriculum (Thanasoulas, 2001, P. 2). Many studies also show that teaching a language is inaccurate and incomplete without the study of culture (ibid).

Unfortunately, the Ministry of Education and the people in charge of the foreign language curriculum in Libya do not seem to realise this fact. The current foreign language curriculum in Libyan schools and universities puts so much emphasis on achieving the highest possible level of linguistics competence for language learners at the expense of the cultural competence. Language textbooks in Libya are crammed with lots of information about grammar and vocabulary believing that it is the best way to teach a language. Unfortunately, this belief has been challenged and proven to be ineffective in language teaching. Applied



linguists and language teachers have become increasingly aware that a second or foreign language cannot be learned without addressing the culture of the community in which it is used (Hinkel, 1999, P.2).

Pulverness also argues that acquiring a new language means a lot more than the manipulation of syntax and lexicon (2003, P. 23). Looking back at real-examples presented earlier, it is clear that there is a strong need for culture teaching for Libyan students. Culture teaching will help Libyan students to overcome most of the problems that face them in their communication or as Bada (2000, P.101) puts it 'the need for cultural literacy in language teaching arises from the fact that most language learners, not exposed to cultural elements of the society in question, seem to encounter significant hardship in communicating meaning to native speakers'.

Libyan students have no accesses to the target culture in their country and the language curriculum does not tell them about it either. Culture classes need to be incorporated in the language curriculum in Libya. This will not only be beneficial in raising the learners' awareness of the culture but they will also help them in their language skills (Thanasoulas 2001, P.23). Moreover, teaching the culture as well as the language helps students to decrease the influence of the native culture in using the target culture. As Kramsch (1993, P.238) argues 'learning to use another language for communication means leaving behind the native paradise of native-tongue socialization'. Culture and communication, as mentioned in section 2, are also inseparable and learning about the former helps to



facilitate the latter. As Samovar et al (1981, P.24) argue that culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, or interpreted.... Culture...is the foundation of communication.

Conclusion

This paper aimed at exploring the extent to which is the intercultural communication of Libyan students is influenced by their native culture. It is clear from the examples shown above that the native culture had significant effects on Libyan students' intercultural communication. As was argued in section 2 and throughout this paper that language, culture and communication cannot be separated. They are part of each other and they support each other in communication and any attempt to separate them is deemed to failure. In fact, our examples support this fact and they show that separating the language from its culture may cause many problems in communication. Libyan students' influence of the native culture is due to their unawareness of the target culture rules. As shown in the real examples reported earlier, most miscommunications occurred because of Libyan students lack the cultural and social knowledge which if they had known, it would have helped them to judge on what to say or what not to say and what is appropriate or inappropriate in that situation. In any society, there are rules which govern the way people talk, behave and react in certain situations. For



native speakers, they learn these rules unconsciously. For non-native speakers, they have or they should learn these things as they do with the rules of the language. It seems clear that Libyan students were hardly taught anything about the British culture before they came to the UK. This is, I believe, where the problem lies. Libyan students need to be introduced to the British culture in their language classes. This, as has been argued throughout this paper, will be helpful in not only raising the awareness of the target culture but also of the language skills. There should be a balanced focus on enhancing the linguistics as well as on the social and cultural competence for language learners in the foreign language curriculum in Libya. Moreover, when a language is taught without teaching the culture in which it operates; we are teaching meaningless symbols to which the student attaches the wrong meaning (Gence and Bada, 2005, P.75). The influence of the native culture of Libyan students is affecting their communication and causing them many problems. This paper strongly believes that the way to prevent or decrease the influence of the native culture is by increasing learners' awareness of the target culture. To do this, we would need to teach the language in question alongside its culture. This will allow learners to increase their knowledge of the target culture in terms of people's way of life, values, attitudes and beliefs. In addition, teaching culture should make learners aware of the different speech acts, connotations and etiquettes, that is, appropriate or inappropriate behaviour, as well, as provide them with an opportunity to act out being a member of the target culture. It should be noted, however, that by



emphasizing the significance of culture teaching, does not, by any means, mean that I am suggesting that it will solve all the problems that face Libyan students in their communication. It is only to suggest, however, that it will, certainly, help them to improve their level of communication with native speakers. Moreover, teaching culture within the language also helps to prepare students to embrace a new culture and reduce the cultural shock which most Libyan students suffer from when they arrive to the UK. The Ministry of Education in Libya spends lots of money in sending students abroad for higher studies. It needs to realise that to get the most of them, these students do not only need to learn a foreign language as a medium for their study but they also need to learn about its culture which would facilitate many of the difficulties facing them in their academic as well in their social lives abroad. The influence of the native culture on Libyan students' communication is not only evident in verbal and non-verbal communication. It is also apparent in their written communication. Reading any piece of writing which was written by Libyan students you could easily detect the influence of the native language and culture on their writing in English. This is realised in the style and structure of the sentences they write and also in their logical thinking and the way they organise their ideas and arguments in their writings in English. Each culture has its own ways of doing things. This also applies on writing. Libyan students' unawareness of these differences also causes them great deal of problems and lead to the fact that their writing is also influenced by their native language and culture. Due to space and time, this paper did not deal with the written communication.



Therefore, a further research could be done in this area in order to find out how we might improve the writing of the Libyan students in English.



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