

Views and Opinions of Kuwaiti EFL Teachers at College of Basic Education towards Teaching Foreign Cultures in Their Classrooms

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the sort of cultural content that is being taught in CBE, Kuwaiti EFL teachers' views and opinions towards teaching a foreign culture in their classrooms at the College of Basic Education, and their strategies when they encounter socially inappropriate subjects or practices in their textbook, *Empower BI+*. Particularly, it tries to explore three research questions: (a) what sort of cultural content is being taught in EFL classrooms in the College of Basic Education? (b) What are the views and opinions of Kuwaiti EFL teachers at the College of Basic Education towards teaching a foreign culture (native or international) in their EFL textbooks with special reference to the cultural content of the textbook *Empower BI+*? (c) What are the strategies used by Kuwaiti EFL teachers when they encounter teaching inappropriate subjects or items?

The data was collected by means of a questionnaire of 7 questions distributed to 25 randomly selected Kuwaiti EFL teachers working in CBE. The questionnaire had a rating scale of three (agree, not sure, and disagree) for all questions except for questions 1 and 4, where participants had to choose the appropriate answer of 3 sentences.

The questionnaire was followed by a semi-structured interview for 10 Kuwaiti EFL teachers to get detailed and in-depth answers for question 3 of the research questions and to further discuss the other two questions.

After the data analyses were carried out, the results revealed that the cultural content being taught in CBE is a mixed culture (native speaker and international cultures). The findings also showed that the vast majority of EFL teachers had positive views and opinions towards the teaching of a foreign culture in their classrooms with the condition of careful selection. In terms of encountering the socially inappropriate texts or items in the textbook *Empower BI+*, the results of the interviews showed that most of the EFL teachers preferred to skip such articles; a few were ready to discuss them, but only in boys' classes.

Keywords: applied linguistics, EFL, ESL, TESOL, language and culture, English language curriculum

1. Introduction

The English language is now widely spoken in most countries across the globe, and, hence, is often referred to as "World English" or "Lingua Franca English." Although it is not the official language in most countries, it is taught as a foreign or second language almost everywhere. According to Graddol (1997), English is no longer considered to be the exclusive cultural property of the native speaking countries but is a language that is absorbing aspects of cultures worldwide as it continues to grow.

Students must somehow be prepared to operate with English in unknown situations, which is characterized by variations in linguistic and cultural behavior. Diversity in the learners' cultural background and the forms of English around the world is a fact.

Some cultures may welcome and encourage foreign language learning as a means of communication. However, they may not be willing to expose their children to cultural values or social practices that may contrast with the students' cultural beliefs and values. As much as they are willing to teach the target language to their children, they are, at the same time, rejecting the inclusion of some practices of the native speaker's culture or other foreign cultures. Besides,

the most obvious reasons behind this inclination toward learning a foreign language can be cultural, religious, or political.

2. Purpose of the Study

Being a part of a very conservative culture (the Kuwaiti), where talking about co-education or male-female relations could be a conflict, according to Mutairi (2013), English is taught and introduced in complete host-cultural content in public government schools. The purpose of this article is to present a study which investigates and examines the current cultural content being taught in EFL classrooms in higher education (College of Basic Education), Kuwaiti EFL teachers' views and opinions towards teaching a foreign culture (native speakers' and international cultures) in their EFL textbooks, and the ways and strategies they use to teach socially inappropriate subjects or words. To conclude, the researcher hopes this study could help in developing the English language curriculum in Kuwait and accordingly improving English language teaching.

3. Research Questions

- What sort of cultural content is being taught in EFL classrooms in the College of Basic Education?
- What are the views and opinions of Kuwaiti EFL teachers at the College of Basic Education towards teaching a foreign cultural content (native speakers' and international cultures) in their EFL textbooks with special reference to the cultural content of the textbook *Empower B1+*?
- What are the ways and strategies used by Kuwaiti EFL teachers for encountering teaching socially inappropriate subjects or items?

4. Methodology

To answer the questions mentioned above, data will be collected by both quantitative and qualitative methods.

4.1 Quantitative Method

Questionnaires were distributed to 25 EFL teachers at the College of Basic Education to examine:

- The sort of cultural content that is currently being taught in EFL classrooms in CBE.
- Kuwaiti EFL teachers' views and opinions and views towards teaching a foreign cultural content (native speakers' & international cultures) to their EFL learners with special reference to textbook *Empower B+1*.

4.2 Qualitative Method

Interviews with 10 EFL teachers were conducted to investigate and discover in-depth how Kuwaiti EFL teachers approach socially inappropriate subjects or words, and to give them a chance to add in detail any contribution regarding the first two research questions.

5. Literature Review

Although Stapleton (2000) thinks that there is a shortage of research studies concerning ESL & EFL teachers' views and opinions towards teaching culture in their classrooms, he cited three important studies relating this issue: Lessard-Clouston (1996), Adamowski (as cited in Lessard-Clouston 1996), and Duff and Uchida (1997). He claims that these studies show that most of the participating language teachers support the teaching of a range of representative examples of cultures found internationally in their classroom and are also aware of the important role of culture in ELT. However, these studies claim that many of them lack the experience to teach it and the strategies of introducing it to ESL and EFL learners. At the end of his study, Stapleton (2000) highlights the need for more empirical studies investigating the language teachers' views and opinions on the above-mentioned issue.

In his study in Japan involving twenty-eight university-level EFL teachers who responded to questionnaires providing comments about the extent and nature of the culture they teach, Stapleton (2000) found that the majority of the participants realized the importance of including international cultures in EFL course books and the teaching of culture in EFL. On the other hand, his study showed that most of them need to know the strategies of how to teach international cultures and what to teach. Their need for these strategies is necessary because they randomly selected their cultural content (materials) with no prior planning. He added that this practice of teaching a range of representative examples of

cultures found internationally could lead it to be a secondary role in ELT. Moreover, he discovered that most of the EFL Japanese teachers preferred to teach the overt culture, such as music issues, than covert cultures, such as customs and beliefs. When they were asked about the meaning of the international cultures in their responses, most of them clarified it was a mixture of different cultures: American and British, in addition to other different cultures of different countries and regions in the world like China, Middle East, and Southern Asia.

Lessard-Clouston (1996) conducted a survey in which 16 Chinese EFL teachers were interviewed to investigate their views about teaching culture. He found huge support among teachers for teaching culture but also discovered a need for more understanding of how to introduce culture into the classroom context. Adamowski (as cited in Lessard-Clouston 1996) conveyed a study on eight ESL teachers in Canada to investigate their attitudes towards the teaching of culture and its role in ELT. His study showed that most of the teachers supported teaching a range of representative examples of cultures found internationally because of its importance in ELT. Part of his study was asking them what culture and international cultures mean to them. Almost all of them answered that culture means all aspects of daily life, such as work, transportation, family relationships, and friends.

Also, in this respect, McKay (2003a) conducted a very interesting study in Chile to investigate the EFL teachers' views and opinions towards which cultural content should be introduced in the country. Most of the teachers were in favor of introducing the international cultural content, which contains the host culture in it. The study also showed that the Chilean EFL teachers were very confident to be EFL teachers preferring themselves on native language teachers for being bilingual and more experienced in their own culture.

Furthermore, and regarding EFL teachers' views and opinions towards the importance of culture teaching, Byram and Risager (1999) did a study that lasted for two years from 1992 to 1994. It took place in Denmark at the University of Roskilde and in the UK at the University of Durham. It involved 212 teachers from England and 653 Danish teachers who participated in filling in questionnaires. In addition, 18 teachers from the University of Durham and 30 Danish teachers were interviewed. They explained that the results of their studies showed very clear evidence that EFL teachers are fully aware of the inseparability of language and culture. They also added that EFL teachers believed that any attempt to separate the relationship between culture and language is artificial. In their study, they discovered that the majority of EFL teachers supported the importance of teaching culture. However, they believed that teaching linguistic aspects is more important. They concluded that the findings of their studies were optimistic in that the majority of EFL teachers in Denmark and the UK showed their awareness of the importance of teaching culture.

In contrast to the views mentioned above, we find that some researchers against introducing foreign cultures in EFL may respond extremely and call introducing foreign culture in EFL textbooks as linguistic imperialism, a theory which began nearly at the beginning of 1990 after the publication of Phillipson's (1992) book "Linguistic Imperialism" which has resulted in significant disagreements among researchers about the theory. On the general level, linguistic imperialism could happen when English becomes a gatekeeper to employment, schooling, trade, and business opportunities and popular culture where indigenous languages are marginalized.

6. Results and Discussion

As mentioned above, the first research question is about the sort of cultural content currently being taught in the textbooks at the College of Basic Education. For this reason, question 1 of the questionnaire was designed to answer it. The results showed that the majority of EFL teachers (13, or 52%) teach international cultural content in their classrooms. Eleven teachers, or 44%, teach English with the speakers' culture; few (4, or 16%) teach the host culture in their textbooks. These findings are different from the findings of Mutairi (2013) in public government schools where English is taught and presented according to the host culture. This contradiction could be justified to be due to the shortage of local ESP textbooks in the market, such as English for Electricity, Science, and Interior Design in the College of Basic Education.

Questions 2, 3, and 4 of the questionnaire were designed to get information for the second research question, which explores Kuwaiti EFL teachers' views and opinions on teaching foreign cultures in their classrooms. The findings showed that all Kuwaiti EFL teachers (25, or 100%) agreed that their EFL students should learn about other cultures to be prepared to use the English language in different cultural settings. Their views and opinions match with Japanese EFL teachers' views in Stapleton's (2000) study in Japan, the Chinese EFL teachers' views in Lessard-Clouston's (1996) study in China, the Chilean EFL teachers' views in McKay's (2003a) study in Chile, and with the Danish EFL teachers' views in Byram and Risager's (1999) study in Denmark.

Regarding question 3 of the questionnaire, it was designed to examine the Kuwaiti EFL teachers' awareness of the

importance of introducing foreign cultures in English language teaching. The vast majority of them (22 or 88%) think that teaching a foreign culture to EFL students is very important. Their views about the importance of teaching culture to EFL learners match with the EFL teachers' views in Stapleton's (2000) and Adamowski's (cited in Lessard-Clouston 1996) studies.

Question 4 of the questionnaire inspects the opinions about the kind of culture they prefer to teach in their classrooms: the native speakers' culture/ international culture. Most of the participants (21:84%) preferred to teach the international culture to their EFL students because it is more useful. Their opinions match with other EFL teachers in the studies of Stapleton (2000), Adamowski (1996), and McKay (2003a). A few, (4:16%) of Kuwaiti EFL teachers preferred to teach the native speakers' cultures: the American and the British cultures.

Question 5 examines their views and opinions about teaching only the native speakers' cultures: that American and British cultures might have a negative impact on college students. (11:44%) of the participants agreed that teaching only the native speakers' culture might have a negative impact on EFL students in CBE. This answer could justify their preference for teaching international culture in the previous question. Only (3:12%) disagreed with the question.

The last question of the questionnaire was about whether EFL teachers in Kuwait should be cautious of exposing EFL students to foreign cultures. The majority (10:40%) agreed that they should not be. (8:32) of participants think that teachers should be cautious when dealing with this issue.

The second research tool was a semi-structured interview following the questionnaire. It was chosen by the researcher because the major advantage of semi-structured interviews is the confidential atmosphere in which participants can share sensitive information and details about their personal experiences, views, and opinions. In this respect, 10 participants were asked about the textbook they are currently teaching (*Empower B1+*) and its cultural content. All the participants agreed that although the textbook is considered one of the best on the market, it contains some inappropriate subjects, practices, and pictures that are not acceptable in a conservative society like Kuwait. Some of the participants were asked to give some examples.

- In unit 1, page 11, there is a discussion exercise required for all students to answer:

“Do you think learning a foreign language is like falling in love?”

- In unit 6, page 74, there is also a discussion exercise required for all students to answer:

“Which of these do you think is the most romantic? Flowers/ Dinner at a restaurant/a handwritten love letter.”

All the interviewees agreed that such questions are not acceptable in Kuwaiti society and should not be taught to their EFL students. But because of the shortage of local designed ESP textbooks, teachers had to use some textbooks designed and printed in the USA or UK. To overcome this problem, some of them used certain strategies. Teacher 1, for example, told the researcher that she always skips such exercises and tells her EFL girl students: “We will skip this exercise because it is not appropriate to our society.” Teacher B also informed the researcher that he prepares the lessons earlier at home, and once he comes across any inappropriate exercise, he immediately sends a message through his students' Whatsapp group to ask them to skip that exercise. He uses this strategy to avoid embarrassment in the class. When the researcher asked the interviewees about their experiences with such embarrassing topics, most of them (8 participants) answered that EFL teachers in CBE do not know how to deal with such taboo issues and expressed their need to learn how to overcome them. Another very important point of view that is worth mentioning is their response to the researcher when he asked them about their attitude towards teaching foreign cultures in their classrooms. They all answered that they would teach foreign cultures because they are very important in ELT, but with careful selection. This response goes with their answers in question 2 and question 3 in the questionnaire, where their answers were (25:100%) for question two, which represents very clear evidence for the reliability of data collected.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

Many researchers think that the relationship between language and culture is inseparable (Byram and Risager 1999), and accordingly, teaching English as a foreign or a second language cannot achieve its goals and objectives without teaching culture. However, in some countries such as Kuwait, English language in government public schools is practiced and introduced through the host culture for social and religious reasons. This study, which takes place in a higher educational institution (College of Basic Education), shows that Kuwaiti EFL teachers support teaching foreign cultures in language education and consider it a very important factor for the success of ELT. For these reasons, the researcher recommends that decision-makers and textbooks designers in Kuwait should redefine and reconsider the EFL curriculum in government schools in the country.

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