RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE PRACTICES OF TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE USING LOCAL CULTURAL CONTENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at assessing the practices of English language teaching using local cultural contents in Bako and Tibe secondary schools, in West Showa Zone, in Ethiopia. The study attempted to answer the following two basic questions: (1) how do teachers perceive the importance of using students' local culture in teaching English as a foreign language? (2) What do teachers teaching practices look like with respect to the use of learners' local culture in their English classes? Pertinent data was collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The collected data was analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis. Thus, the findings of the study indicated that teachers have good perception about the importance of including local cultural contents in EFL classrooms in terms of engaging learners in learning the target language. However the teachers made attempts to incorporate local cultural contents in their lessons, their instructional practices lacked basic features that might enhance the learners' engagement in the language learning process. So, curriculum designers, higher learning institutions and English language teachers need to consider the real context and purpose of teaching English in terms of the authenticity of the culture and contents in organizing materials for teaching the language.

Key words: EFL teaching, teachers' practices, perception, local culture, learners' engagement

INTRODUCTION

Background of the study

English is taught in formal ELT classrooms to various types of learners across the world in different cultural contexts. It is taught to its native speakers (in America, UK and Australia), non-native speakers as a second language (in Canada, India and Nigeria) or as a foreign language in the remaining but to a larger number of countries including Ethiopia. As culture is a key component of language teaching, cultural components of ELT curriculum vary according to the goal of learning the language. Basically, there are three types of cultural contents that can be included in English language teaching classrooms. These are the culture of the target language which refers to the American or English cultural practices, the culture of the non-English speaking community (local /home culture of EFL learners) and international cultural practices (cultural contents that do not specifically refer to the target or the local cultural practices).

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Scholars argue on the inclusion of local cultural contents beside the target language culture in ELT classrooms based on learning it as a second or as a foreign language. Mackay and Kachru (2003) argue that the cultural contents of English language teaching should be determined by the purpose of learning the language and the context in which it is learnt. In the classroom where English is taught with the purpose of integrating learners with the native speaking community outside the classroom, the culture of the target language shall be emphasized. However, English as a foreign language is taught with the absence of the target language community outside the classroom, and hence EFL, in Ethiopian schools is not taught with the purpose of integrating learners to the target language community.

Likewise, localizing contents in Ethiopian English language teaching context is addressing the needs, interests, and social values of learners that would enhance better learning and sense of engagement in learning (Hedge, 2000: p.219). Besides, the Cultural Policy of Ethiopia (1997) aims to promoting the use of local cultures and develops them in harmony with modern education.

Statement of the Problem

In Ethiopian secondary schools, EFL classrooms are devoted to using the culture of Americans, British or other African countries which gave little or no opportunity to practice the language in culturally familiar context. The target language culture is over-emphasized. This does not mean that the English language teaching classrooms should be devoid of the target language cultural contents. However, these cultural contents turn up explicitly in the lessons, not implicitly. On the other hand, the culture of the target language should be systematically embedded in the syllabus/curriculum and offered to learners rather than incorporating them explicitly which hinder learners active engagement in the teaching and learning of the language. In connection to this, Post and Rathet (1996: pp.12-17) argue that target language cultural content is implicit in many languages' syntax, vocabulary and other features and such intrinsic cultural flavor cannot and should not be avoided.

The Basic research questions

1. How do teachers perceive the importance of using students' local culture in teaching English as a foreign language?
2. What do teachers teaching practices look like with respect to the use of learners' local culture in their English classes?

Review of Literature

Culture and English language teaching

Culture and language teaching are inseparable. In learning a language, a learner must know the culture of the target language community. According to Mckay (2000: pp.7-11), teachers use cultural contents in the classroom for its role to foster learners' motivation to learn and understand the language. Changes in linguistic and learning theory suggest that culture can be used as an important element in language classrooms, but many students say that they do not want to learn about the culture of the target language. This might be because of the fear of assimilation into what they perceived unusual to them. Also, misrepresenting cultures by reinforcing popular stereotypes and constructing these cultures as monolithic, static 'Others', rather than as dynamic, fluid entities might result in failure in making cultural content an effective element in language learning and teaching. Cultural content is a key to effective teaching and learning a language provided that problems arising from introducing culture into EFL classroom are dealt effectively, and teaching strategies and materials are chosen appropriately.

In connection to the choice of materials, McKay (2000: pp. 9-10) identifies three types of cultural materials: target culture materials, learners' own culture materials and international target culture materials. For her, the best one is international target language materials, which supposedly covers a variety of knowledge from different cultures all over the world using the target language Thus, it allows students to have comprehensive knowledge and skill about both their own and others culture.

Culturally responsive instruction

Teachers should be aware about the distinctive cultural backgrounds of their students. This would help them to effectively use cultural phenomena as input to target language learning.

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According to Gay (2000), teaching should be culturally responsive to students from diverse individual, racial, ethnic, cultural, and language groups

Making teaching culturally responsive involves strategies such as constructing and designing relevant cultural metaphors and multicultural representations to help bridge the gap between what students already know and appreciate and what they will be taught. Culturally responsive instructional strategies transform information about the home and community into effective classroom practice (Gay, 2000).

The role of local culture in English classes

a) Familiar schema knowledge

Post and Rathet (1996) support the use of student's local culture as cultural content in the English language classroom. One reason for this conviction is schema theory research in which using content familiar to students, rather than unfamiliar content, influences student comprehension of a second language. Alptekin (1993:pp.139-142) also points out that familiarity with both content and formal schemas enables learners to place more emphasis on systemic data, as their cognitive processing is not so much taken by the alien features of the target language background. Systemic knowledge refers to the formal properties of language, comprising its syntactic and semantic aspects.

Moreover, familiar schematic knowledge allows the learners to make efficient use of their top-down processing in helping their bottom-up processing in the handling of various language tasks.

b) Motivation

The students' use of local culture in the language classroom can enhance student motivation. Motivation is commonly thought of as an inner drive, impulse, emotion, or desire that moves one to a particular action (Brown, 1994: pp.142-182). In this respect, use of students' local culture allows for greater sensitivity to students' goals in studying the language. It is easy to figure that success in a task is due simply to the fact that someone is motivated.

Besides, the reason for the use of cultural content in classroom is that it will foster learner motivation (McKay, 2000: pp.7-11). She, like many other experts, believes that there should be a variety of culture in the materials and not only an overload of western culture in ELT classrooms. If the role of the culture in the materials is just to create learner interest towards contents and thus towards language, that is highly desirable. But overuse of cultural material in the language classrooms will constitute problems not for students but also for the teachers and decrease the motivation.

c) Self-expression

The use of content from students' cultures in studying English also increases their ability in self-expression. Post and Rathet (1996: pp.12-17) state that this is especially the case when students need to explore their changing identities in a new linguistic environment. Particularly, if the learners are practicing the language using the familiar culture (their own local culture) besides engaging themselves into the target language learning practice, it opens window to express themselves as a cultural representative learner in the classroom.

Materials and Methods

Qualitative research design has been adopted to describe EFL teachers' teaching practices using local culture in English classrooms. According to Cowan (2007: p. 192) ethnographic research describes and understands phenomena and the meaning underlying phenomena in its natural environment.

Four senior English teachers of grades 9 and 10 in Bako and Tibe secondary schools in West Whowa zone were selected purposively on the basis of their work experience. In line with this, Kerlinger (1964: p.192) indicates that purposive sampling is characterized by the use of judgment and a deliberate effort to obtain representative samples by including presumably typical areas of groups in the sample. Semi-structured interview was made with these teachers followed by classroom observation. A total of eight successive observations were made focusing on their practice using local cultural contents. Classroom observation was undergone twice for each teacher followed by the researcher filling an observation checklist. The main use of observations for collecting data is for examining a phenomenon on a behavior while it is going on (Cowan, 2007).

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The data gathered through interview and classroom observations was organized through coding and thematic categorization in order to facilitate meaning making process. According to Bodgan and Biklen (1992), data analysis in qualitative study basically involves word argumentations than numerical explanations. Then, the data gathered in both the instruments were presented and analyzed holistically. Thus, qualitative thematic analysis method was used to interpret the meaning out of the data using words to describe and narrate the phenomena and the findings in response to the research questions set.

Results and Discussion

The Importance of Incorporating Local Cultural Contents in EFL Classes

This study begins with gathering data about the teachers' and learners' perception regarding the importance of including local cultural contents in EFL classrooms with particular reference to the selected secondary schools.

The data gathered through interviews indicated that EFL teachers have good perception about the importance of teaching EFL using the local culture as content. Incorporating contents that are authentic and familiar to the learners' real environment is perceived as important and appropriate tool to engage learners in the language learning process. Teachers believed that including cultural contents familiar to the learners created conducive learning environment for them as it enabled them to be more interested and motivated, and practiced the language with less anxiety in language teaching and learning.

For instance, one teacher respondent raised his idea saying,

> The more the learners are familiar to the cultural contents included in EFL classrooms the more they become motivated to engage themselves in the language learning process. This is because, unlike practicing the language in the culture of the target language which is unfamiliar and difficult for them to understand, talking or writing about what the learners are familiar with creates opportunity of practicing the language in less anxiety manner.

> (Source of data: an interview with teacher A)

Another teacher respondent also asserts,

> Practicing English using the learners' home culture is using the language to express their own way of life and can lead learners to a more interactive language learning process. This is because talking about the way of life they know well fosters the learners' motivation and involvement in communicating their cultural experiences.
> (Source: an interview with teacher C)

These interview extracts illustrate teaching EFL by localizing the contents is motivating and creates a conducive and anxiety free learning environment for students.

Another teacher respondent emphasized the importance of teaching EFL using local cultural contents in terms of the multicultural nature of the local English language learning classrooms that are populated with students from different local cultural backgrounds. He reflects,

> Teaching English using local cultural contents especially in a multicultural classroom like mine is exploiting the rich resource that the natures of students in our classrooms provide us. Therefore, to create interactive language learning situation in which students from diversified cultural backgrounds can effectively bring their cultural experiences to the lessons, incorporating familiar cultural contents is crucial. (Source of data: an interview with teacher B)

From this teacher's reflection, it is possible to infer that incorporating local cultural contents has an immense contribution to the target language learning, especially in multicultural classrooms like Ethiopia.

Thus, from these views, it can be deduced that EFL teachers have good perception with respect to the significance of incorporating local cultural contents in their English language teaching lessons. Basically, teachers in their responses indicated that incorporating local cultural contents in EFL lessons has motivational input as it creates familiar context of practicing the language. McKay (2000) also claims that including local cultural contents in EFL situation

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provides familiar context that motivates learners to practice the language.

Localizing contents fosters opportunities to interactively practice the language with culturally diversified students through sharing and developing various cultural experiences. Johnson (2005: p.98) also indicates that culturally relevant teaching validates the cultures of students and acknowledges the home communities' diversified ways of life so that the EFL classrooms gain crucial resource that involve learners in the language learning process.

However, teaching English language to non-native speakers by detaching it from the students' home culture is just setting aside the importance mentioned above. Thus, Alptekin (1993:pp.139-142) claims that forcing learners to express a culture they have scarce experience appears to ignore the positive effects of familiar schematic knowledge on foreign language learning.

The practices of teaching EFL using local cultural contents

The practices of teaching EFL in the selected schools with special reference to the sample teachers' practices in the English language teaching classrooms in this study is analyzed on the basis of the data gathered through the classroom observation. Thus, local culture contents that was included in EFL lessons mainly reflected the social problems related to the customs, beliefs, family life and interpersonal relationships in the cultural practices of the local community. Local cultural contents emphasized on the historical phenomena and literary works of the local society. The teachers presented the language items mainly through the sociological and aesthetic aspects of the local culture.

However the contents presented in the EFL classrooms were sociological aspects of the local culture, some teachers included other dimensions as a means to localizing the contents. For instance, in an EFL lesson about 'Days and Weeks' in grade 9 , learners read a passage about the naming of days of a week in English then work in pairs to interrogate each other about the reasons behind naming the days of a week in the culture of Anglo-Saxons. As it can be understood in this task, the semantic sense cultural content of the target language was addressed as a language item. Then, moved on to the activity that learners practice the target language through discussing the beliefs and practices of the local community in the days they label as good or bad. The nature of the content in this task led learners to practice the language on the sociological aspect of cultural knowledge (the beliefs and practices regarding good or bad days) of the local culture.

According to Widdowson (1998: pp.237-248), one way to achieve learners' interactive engagement is to let the students articulate their own cultures in English, making the cultural contents relevant to them. In contrast, many teachers' teaching practice lacked basic engaging features in language learning process. For instance, the tasks in the lessons did not allow learners to express their cultural knowledge effectively and use it to practice the target language. Moreover, the tasks included in local culture content English language lessons rarely involved learners in interactive language learning activities. They rarely engaged learners in group work even when learners are supposed to do in group. The teachers rather chose the easiest ways of presenting the lessons such as questioning and answering.

Thus, teachers play a key role in localizing certain aspects of culture by adopting the target language culture without neglecting local cultural values (Alptekin, 1994: pp.139-142). Therefore, it can be concluded that some teachers were observed localizing cultural contents bridging the cultural gaps appear in the textbooks so that they could maximize learners' involvement in the language learning process. McLeod (1985: p.540) also asserted that it is important for the teacher to understand the values he is passing on and also the values of the students' cultures.

Conclusions

Teachers perceive that teaching English using local cultural contents has an immense contribution for the learning of the target language. For teachers, using learners' home cultural contents in teaching plays a key role in increasing motivation, engagement and interaction among students.

Little attempt was made by English teachers to localize their lessons. They were observed to dominate the lessons through employing language learning activities like whole class discussion that

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deny the learners' interaction. On the contrary, Widdowson (1998: pp.237-248) asserts that one way to achieve learners' communicative engagement is to let the students articulate in their own cultures in English, making the cultural contents relevant to them. Hence, there was no effective utilization of cultural contents enshrined in the teaching practices of English in the respective secondary schools under study.

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