

Culture Awareness and Learning English as a Second Language (ESL)

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Abstract: Learning English as a second language (ESL) is problematic if it is taking place away from its cultural context. Thus, this study explores the role of being culturally aware in learning ESL in the United States. Through observing and interviewing ten international students, the findings show that learning ESL is difficult or impossible when learners are apart from the English culture. The participants of the study were selected intentionally; five of them were weak users of English, and the other five were good users of English. The findings of the data analysis show that being culturally aware is the clue for learning and using English effectively in authentic situations. Also, the data analysis shows that the main reason of being weak users of English is that the five participants have not been immersed in the English culture, where English is used in its cultural context. This means that language is culture, and any attempt of separating language from its cultural context will, definitely, lead to language learning failure.

Key words: culture awareness, connotative meaning, ESL, culture context

1. Introduction

We are living in the 21st century, the era of technology and globalization. Now, it becomes much easier than any time before for people to contact each other. The most prominent obstacle people might encounter while communication is using a foreign language not understood by either party. Furthermore, people might misunderstand each other because each language associates connotative meanings for words according to its own culture. For example, the word “dog” has a positive connotative attitude in the English culture. So, English people use the sentence “*You are my lucky dog*” to mean “*You are my faithful friend*.” In contrast, the word “dog” has a negative connotative attitude in the Arabic culture. Arabs use dogs for guarding only, and they consider dogs dirty. So, Arabs see the same sentence disgracefully. For that reason, learning English apart from its cultural context leads to failure in interacting with native English speakers in authentic situations.

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2. Literature Review

2.1 Language

It is not an easy task for people to define something abstract and keeps changing overtime, such as “*language*”. The phenomenon called “*language*” has been an ambiguity for scientists and educators for decades. Till now there is no specific definition to that enigmatic phenomenon; that is, there is no absolute agreement upon one specific definition to “*language*”. Some educators believe that “language is a social activity”, others see it as “a system of communication with other people”, and so on. In fact, several definitions of language refer to some functions of language, but they do not provide a precise definition for language and its role in a community.

However, the clear-cut issue that linguists agree on is that “language is a human activity”. People are the only creatures on the Earth that can use language productively and creatively in different ways and in different cultural contexts. Hayakawa and Hayakawa (1990) have presented some facts about “*language*”, saying, “while animals use only a few limited cries, however, human beings use extremely complicated systems of sputtering, hissing, gurgling, clucking, and cooing noises called language” (p. 6), adding that “most of what we call the human characteristics of our species is expressed and developed through our ability to cooperate by means of our systems of making meaningful noises” (p. 7).

Based on Hayakawa and Hayakawa, language is considered language only when the sounds are meaningful to its users. In other words, when receivers have the ability to decode the noises they hear into meaningful sounds or symbols, the interaction or communication takes place, and, hence, these noises form a language. If receivers fail to decode these noises into meaningful symbols, these noises, for those who fail in the process of decoding, are not considered a language. Language forms people’s identities and characters in the community.

Language, accordingly, plays a crucial role in developing characteristics of people in different cultures. On the contrary, people use language as a main channel for patterning their ways of life and shaping their styles of thinking. Children, according to Halliday (1978), acquire their first language not through instructions in schools, but through communication with other people in the community, in which they are living. Different social groups, starting from family, street, peers, and so on have impacts on children’s acquisition to their first language and adoption of different systems of beliefs and traditions, which constitute the culture of that community (p. 9).

It is true, as Chomsky argues, that children are controlled by universal rules in acquiring their first language. Yet children are not guided and controlled by rules and structures that exist in their patterns of speech individually when they speak their first language. Rather, they are guided and controlled by rules that exist in the speech of the community, which includes people who share speaking a particular language (Britain & Matsumoto, 2005, p. 3). Halliday (1978) shows how children acquire and use language as:

A child creates, first his child tongue, then his mother tongue, in interaction with that little coterie of people who constitute his meaning group. In this sense, language is a product of the social process. A child learning language is at the same time learning other things through language — building up a picture of the reality that is around him and inside him. In this process, which is also a social process, the construal of reality is inseparable from the construal of the semantic system in which the reality is encoded. (p. 1)

Though linguists define language as a set of verbal symbols that are primarily auditory and secondarily written, they see that language is a distinctive feature of its culture. Linguists see that language is culture, and words have different meanings in different cultures (Nida, 2001, p. 13). Sapir (1956) explains the idea of different languages in different cultures, as language is:

a guide to social reality and that human beings are at the mercy of the language that has become the medium of expression for their society. Experience is largely determined by the language habits of the community, and each separate structure represents a separate reality. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. (p. 69)

The discussion above about language shows that language is the means by which culture is preserved and transmitted. Cultural pattern, customs and ways of life are expressed in and through language, and culture-specific world views are reflected in language. Language is a unique representation to its own culture and can never exist by isolating itself from its culture framework. Lack of cultural knowledge may result in communication failure even when the speaker has a great deal of knowledge of language.

2.2 Culture

The discussion above about language indicates that learning language requires being immersed in its culture. But what is *culture*? There are a large number of definitions for culture. Pedersen (1999) defines culture as, “the total way of life of a people including their interpersonal relations as well as their attitudes” (p. 7). Arredondo et al. (1996) define culture as, “patterns of learned thinking and behavior of people communicated across generations through traditions, language, and artifacts” (p. 40). Salzmann (1993) defines culture as “the pattern of learned behavior, knowledge, and beliefs transmitted from generation to generation by members of a particular society” (p. 271). Metcalf (2005) defines culture as “all those things that are instilled in a child by elders and peers as he or she grows up, everything from table manners to religion” (p. 2).

Foley (1997) sees that culture is “the cognitive organization of material and social phenomena” (p. 19). Culture is, also, perceived as a body of imaginative network, which includes high ethical values and reject of industrialism, materialism, and philistinism. (Lefever, 1992, p. xi). Culture, in this context, is a social identity to the people who live in a particular community. Culture constitutes the peoples’ assembly of beliefs and ways of thinking, which have been inherited from generation to generation and shape the texture of people’s lives and ways of speaking. These socially inherited assemblages of cultural patterns may, as Lado (1964, p. 12) classifies, be:

- Static Units: boy, girl, cat, rabbit, frog, engineer, barber, car, building, and the like;
- Processes: to speak, to learn, to walk, to watch, to study, to read, to speak, and the like; and
- Qualities: clever, sick, warm, cold, quick, clear, moral, and the like.

People who live in a specific culture are able to identify these categories in a particular cultural context in a specific period of time. This indicates that each culture includes all aspects of life shared by people who live in the community. For those, who do not belong to that community, it is difficult for them to penetrate these ethnocentric layers unless they become part of that cultural setting. Accordingly, Johnson (2000) emphasizes that “much of what we know and believe to be real has no concrete manifestation at all but is made concrete only through its applications in everyday life . . . Even material cultural products can only be understood based on abstract meanings. The clothes we wear, the food we eat, the pictures we look at in magazines all depend on abstract cultural meanings” (p. 48).

2.3 Language and Culture

In the above discussion about language and culture, it is now clear that language is not only a main part of culture, but it is culture itself. Thus, each language is a good reflection to its culture. For example, Chinese and

Welsh see “*dragons*” as protective, so these animals have a positive connotative attitude in these two cultures. The English and the Arabic cultures see “*dragons*” as threatening creatures; thus, these animals have a negative connotative attitude. The “*red*” color is a symbol of happiness in the Chinese culture, and it is a symbol of dread and blood in the English culture. Arabs see “*the sun*” as oppressive, namely in summer, and the English see “*the sun*” as lovely (Newmark, 1991, pp. 73–74).

Language can only exist only when it is immersed in the context of its culture. Similarly, culture can exist only when language centers its texture. Language, consequently, is the heart that the body, which constitutes the existing of the culture. The interaction between language and culture is what results in the continuation of human being life. Language and culture are strongly intertwined that it seems impossible to recognize one apart from the other (Bloomfield, 1994, p. 165). Human societies depend on and shaped by the languages used by people who live in these communities. Language is used to reveal people’s personal identities, backgrounds, characters, and ways of thinking in a particular cultural setting. Language is a tool used to shape and link all aspects of cultural backgrounds.

However, the meaning of words is determined by the cultural context, in which these words are used. For example, an Arab speaker will seem vague when he chats with an Eskimo, saying “*It is snowing.*” For the Eskimo, his language provides him with various kinds of “*snowing*” according to time, thickness, severity, and other features to snow. Arabs do not know “*snow*”, so their language provides them with only one name. It is important mentioning that Arabs use the same name for “*snow*” and “*ice*” though “*snow*” and “*ice*” have different semantic features. In this regard, Wierzbicka (1997) said, “There is a very close link between the life of a society and the lexicon of the language spoken by it” (p. 1).

Language is the heart of culture, and each language reflects its culture and is influenced and shaped by the system of values and beliefs which constitute that culture. No culture does exist out of the frame of its language. The relationship between language and culture, as Jiang (2000) visualizes, is such as an iceberg, in which language is the visible part in the iceberg, and culture is the invisible part (p. 328).

Philosophers believe that language and culture complement each other and can be symbolized as a living organism, in which language constitutes the flesh, and culture constitutes the blood. Of course, language (the flesh) would be dead without culture (blood), and culture (blood) would lose its shape without language (the flesh). Communicative views look at communication in general as swimming, where language represents the swimming skill, and culture represents water. Thus, swimming (communication) would face barriers due to lack of swimming skill (language), and swimming skill (language) would never take place if there was no water (culture). Pragmatists view communication as transportation, where language symbolizes the vehicle and culture is traffic lights. Language (the vehicle) facilitates the process of communication (transportation), and culture (traffic lights) regulate and promote communication (transportation) (Jiang, 2000, pp. 328–329).

People use language as a reflection of distinctive features of their culture. Language shows beliefs, thoughts, and social practices of a society. Accordingly, words and ideas have no particular meanings unless they are associated with their cultural backgrounds (Nida, 2001, p. 13). For example, the proverb “*Save for a rainy day!*” is meaningful in the English culture and meaningless in the Arabic culture. English people use this proverb to urge people to save something for urgent cases, so they use “*rain*”. In the English culture “*rain*” has a negative cultural attitude because it causes flooding. In the contrast, “*rain*” has a positive cultural attitude in the Arabic culture. Arabs like rain and wait for it eagerly to water the dry land. Thus, the cultural attitude of the same word has different connotative meanings in different cultures.

As language is described as a mode of human behavior and culture as patterned behavior, it is clear that each language is a vital constituent of its culture. Most of the cultural backgrounds, which are rooted in native speakers, are reflected and expressed in their speech patterns. Native speakers bring cultural background of knowledge in their language when they speak. The language of native speakers is the offspring of their culture, which is shaped by the way native speakers view language. In this regard, Salzmann (1993) said, "People must use language to accomplish a wide variety of culture-specific goals. In order for societies to function smoothly, their members must have not only linguistic competence but also communicative competence — the knowledge of what is and what is not appropriate to say in any specific cultural context" (p. 193).

2.4 Learning English as a Second Language

The discussion above shows that the process of learning English can never be simplified as a process of memorizing vocabulary and constructing grammatical patterns in English. Rather, it involves that English language learners (ELLs) be immersed in the English culture and think of English as native English speakers do, not as ELLs themselves do. Although there is a slight link between language and culture, this link is central in learning foreign languages. Any attempt for separating English from its cultural content results in ignoring the important communicative nature of language and leads to failure in learning a language.

Due to the urgent need for communicating in English with people from different countries, a large number of people all over the world are trying hard to learn English. Though there are a large number of institutes for teaching and learning English everywhere in the world, ELLs, in general, are not satisfied of their performance as good users of English in authentic situations. Generally speaking, ELLs have a big store of vocabulary and grammar rules, but they fail to interact with native English speakers in authentic situations. Most ELLs read and write in English perfectly, but they find themselves helpless to speak simple sentences or understand what native English speakers say.

Weaver (1994) explained the situation of learning a second language in schools as "we memorized vocabulary, studied grammar, translated passages, perhaps rehearsed conversational phrases; in short, we studied the language, but we may never have achieved much facility in listening to or speaking the language, or in reading or writing it for any authentic purposes outside of class" (p. 65).

Weaver's thought shows that the problem that ELLs encounter is not related to English as a language, but the problem is in the methods of teaching and learning English in schools and English language institutes. The process of learning and teaching English in schools and English language institutes entails knowing about English, not knowing how to use English in authentic situations. Based on Salzmann (1993), learning a foreign language is a difficult task for adults even when they spend much time in learning that language. The difficulties in learning a foreign language is attributed to isolating language from its cultural context. Children, in fact, acquire their first language in communities before they go to school. Thus, learning a foreign language need to be the same, in its cultural context (p. 32).

Of course, language use is governed by universal rules. Thus, it is a requirement that learners learn and acquire these rules through their cultural context. Keeping in memory a great stock of ready-made sentences, vocabulary, and rules is not the same as knowing how that language is used in its cultural context (Chomsky, 1966, p. 46). Similarly, Johnson (2000) believes that language is formed by the use of words in sentences governed by rules, but these words carry varieties of cultural meanings in different situations (p. 24). Salzmann (1993) explained this idea, saying, "One does not inherit a particular language genetically; children learn language from

parents or others who speak to and with them. Speaking a particular language is therefore a part of one's overall cultural behavior, that is, behavior acquired through learning" (p. 23).

Learning a foreign language is not a mechanical process; instead, it is a mental process. Learning a foreign language is based on the knowledge of that language in its cultural context. However, language use rather than language knowledge is what emphasized by Alexander (1982) who stated, "Learning a language is not a matter of acquiring a set of rules and building a large vocabulary. The teacher's efforts should not be directed at informing his students about language, but at enabling them to use it. A student's mastery of a language is ultimately measured by how well he can use it, not how much he knows about it" (p. vii).

Learning the English culture requires that ELLs be immersed in the English community. ELLs need to share native English speakers their ways of thinking and styles of life. When an English man says, "*It is a piece of cake!*" or "*It is not my cup of tea!*" only those who know about the English culture can understand the meaning of these expressions. It is not a matter of knowing about words that makes ELLs understand the meaning of these sentences, but it is a matter of being aware of the English culture. ELLs can learn English only when they have a full understanding of the English cultural settings. In this regard, Johnson (2000) said, "Humans learn through the cultures in which they are reared, gaining competence as they mature and often possessing passionate loyalty to their cultural origins" (p. 53).

3. Problem of the Study

When we (the researchers of this paper) were teaching English as a foreign language in our country, Libya, we used to hear a large number of ELLs say, "We know much about English, but we are not able to communicate in English with native English speakers." Others say, "We can read and write in English perfectly, but we cannot speak in English or understand what native English speakers say." When the researchers came to the United States, they notice the same situation with international students. Most of international students encounter difficulties when speaking English in authentic situations with native English speakers though they spend several years learning English as a second language (ESL) in the United States.

The researchers believe that the main purpose of learning English is to use it in authentic situations, not to keep it as knowledge in mind. Based on Silva, "the major aim of foreign-language learning is to develop the learner's competence to communicate creatively and purposively through the foreign language" (p. 344). The researchers believe that being immersed in the English culture is the clue in learning English. ELLs need to see how native English speakers think, behave, and use English in authentic situation because, as Lee (1992) explains, "language is a social phenomenon and is best acquired, at least in its spoken form, socially and meaningfully, through interaction in some interesting way with others" (p. 9).

Several studies and research reveal that most ELLs, who are apart from English culture, often encounter difficulties in using English with native English speakers in reality. Baumgardner (2006) believes that "cultural gaps pose problems to learners of English, particularly where the social, political, or religious differences are great" (p. 464). Dissimilar, being aware of English cultural attitudes enables ELLs to interact effectively with native English speakers in authentic situations. The use of language in the community is both a persona and an identity.

Through their stay in the United States, it becomes evident for the researchers of this paper that most ELLs often encounter difficulties in using English in reality, even after spending many years in the United States. This failure in using English communicatively is attributed to the cultural gaps between the ELLs' cultures and English

culture. Being unaware of English cultural attitudes hinders ELLs to interact positively with native English speakers in authentic situations. For that reason, the researchers of this paper see that learning English in English-speaking countries might fail if learners keep away from the English community.

4. Research Questions

Based on studies and the participants' experiences in learning ESL in the United States, it seems that learning ESL is still problematic for some learners. Some ELLs spend much money, effort, and time in learning ESL in the United States, yet they still find difficulties in using English effectively in reality. Though some ELLs memorize a large number of vocabulary and grammar rules, they find challenges to use that competence in reality. Thus, the main question of this study is:

What is the role of being culturally aware in increasing ELLs' performance in using English in reality?

To shed lights on the roots of the main research question, the following questions have been set to be answered:

What problems ELLs encounter while learning ESL in the United States?

Why can ELLs not interact effectively with native English speakers in reality?

What are the benefits of being culturally aware in increasing ELLs' performance in using English in reality?

5. Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to explore the relationship between English culture awareness and ELLs' performance in using English in reality. This study focuses on carrying out a thorough investigation on the reasons that cause ELLs' failure in using English in reality. Also this study tries to explore the problems that ELLs encounter while learning English away from its cultural context. Findings of this study are used in proposing remedies.

5.1 Scope and Limits of the Study

The scope of this study is limited to identifying the importance of being culturally aware while learning ESL. The study is directed to investigate the problems that ELLs encounter while learning ESL in English-speaking countries. Then the study tries to propose suitable ways of tackling these problems in an attempt to improve the approach of learning and teaching ESL. The study was conducted in Columbia, Missouri and Denver, Colorado in the United States. The study took six months from May 2013 to November 2013.

6. Methodology of the Study

To fulfill the purposes of this study, we conducted the qualitative research method, which is defined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as "any kind of research that produces findings that are not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (p. 17) and by Anderson (1987) as "a research paradigm which emphasizes inductive, interpretive methods applied to the everyday world which is seen as subjective and socially created" (p. 384).

According to Saldana (2011), qualitative research is an umbrella that covers varieties of inquiries researchers use to help them understand and interpret the meaning of the issue of the study (p. 3), and this is what we did to get through this type of research. We conducted qualitative research method to understand the main questions of

this study from the participants' perception and how they would see the world around them. Meaning and interpretation of the reality were embedded in the participants' experiences, and our role, as researchers, was to get these meanings through our interpretations to the data obtained.

In this qualitative research study, we used educational criticism method. We interviewed ten international students in Columbia, Missouri and Denver, Colorado as a primary resource. We interviewed the participants face-to-face, using English as the medium for interviews with the participants. We transcribed the participants' interviews and coded them into categories according to their relevance. Later, we analyzed the coded data based on our own interpretations and perceptions to the topic of the study. We reached findings through analyzing the participants' interviews and presented recommendations based on the findings obtained.

This study tends to obtain findings through dialogue, where the researchers' own interpretations are presented while analyzing the data obtained. The participants were interviewed and asked questions related to learning English and the role of culture in using English in reality. The goal of the interviews was to find the relationship between being culturally aware and the ELLs' performance in using English in reality.

7. Paradigm of the Study

Hatch (2002) defines a paradigm as a way "of thinking about how the world is or is not ordered, what counts as knowledge, and how and if knowledge can be gained" (p. 19). Merriam (1998) perceives interpretive paradigm essential in qualitative research because it helps researchers select the most appropriate method or technique used for collecting and analyzing the data to reach findings and recommendations (p. 1). Interpretive paradigm is effective in qualitative studies because it shows the researcher's subjective decisions and opinions about the phenomenon (Potter, 1996, p. 162). In this study, we used the interpretive paradigm to reach the findings, implications, and recommendations.

7.1 Participants of the Study

Selecting the participants of the study is based on the context and the methodology of the study used (Hatch, 2002, p. 50). For this study, the participants are ten international students — seven males and three females — who came to the United States to pursue their undergrad and grad studies at the States University of Missouri in Columbia, MO and the University of Denver, Denver, CO. The participants were selected carefully to serve as the main purpose of this study as they had different language proficiency levels. This diversity in the participants of the study provided us with different perceptions about the same phenomenon (See appendix 1 to know about the participants and interviews).

The participants have almost the same background regarding using English as a foreign language (EFL) in their home countries. The participants have been in the United States from four to ten years and learned ESL in the United States. The participants had already started their academic programs. The participants vary in their English fluency and accuracy. We labeled the participants as: weak, fair, good, very good, and excellent based on our observations to their use of English in reality and on their own evaluation to their English proficiency. We gave pseudo names for the participants for the privacy. The participants were willingly volunteers to conduct this study.

7.2 Data Collection

In this study, we interviewed ten participants. Interviewing, according to Holestein and Gubrium (2002), helps researchers produce empirical data about the phenomenon of the study (p. 112), and most qualitative studies are based on interviews (Saldana, 2011, p. 32). In this study, we interviewed the participants in Columbia, Missouri and Denver, Colorado in the United States. The interviews were completed in almost three months from May 8, 2013 to July 10, 2013. The interviews were face-to-face, and only audio was recorded.

Using interviewing as a technique for getting the primary data of the study was effective because such interviews provided us with the information required about the questions of the study. Through the open-ended questions, the interviewees of the study explained the phenomenon, using their own perceptions about what they could see and know about the phenomenon. Thus, interviewing was a helpful and effective means that worked as a primary source of information in this qualitative study.

Amongst the types of interviews: formal, informal, and standardized, we conducted Formal Interviews, which Hatch (2002) calls “structured”, “semistructured”, and “in-depth” (p. 94). It is “structured” because the whole interview — time, place, and way of questioning — is set by the researchers. It is in-depth because it “seeks knowledge from the respondent’s point of view” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 145). This means that its goal is not to have answers to the questions asked to the interviewees, to test the questions of the study, or to evaluate a method. Rather, its main goal is to understand the participants’ experiences and get meanings from these experiences.

However, through in-depth interview, we could interpret the participants’ experiences and visualize their perceptions of their realities. We could identify how these participants’ experiences interrelate with their social and cultural realities in their home countries and the United States. Accordingly, we could find out the differences and the similarities among these participants’ experiences in learning English as a foreign language in their home countries and as a second language in the United States.

We tended to obtain findings of this study from the participants’ interviews through open-ended questions, which were prepared carefully to be clear, neutral, and related to the objectives of the study. We conducted open-ended questions because such kinds of questions, as Seidman (1998) clarifies, aim at building and finding out how the participants see the phenomenon of the study through their open responses (p. 9). The questions of the interview covered all areas of study (See appendix 2 for more details) and were classified into four main sections as:

(1) The first section is personal information. It inquires about the participant’s backgrounds: home country, qualification, gender, major, and native language.

(2) The second section is related to language problems and learning ESL. It inquires about the problems the participants encounter while learning English in their home countries and in the United States.

(3) The third section is about practice English in reality. It inquires about the time spent in practicing English in authentic situations in the United States with native English speakers.

(4) The fourth section is concerned with the participants’ comments and recommendations regarding using English in reality.

7.3 Data Analysis

Babbie (2001) defines qualitative data analysis as: “the non-numerical assessment of observations made through participant observation, content analysis, in-depth interviews, and other qualitative research techniques”

(p. 358). According to Merriam (1998), data analysis is “the process of making sense out of the data” (p. 178). Data analysis is a process for arranging the data according to specific arrangements to help researchers understand the data and present findings accordingly (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 153). Our job in data analysis was to make sense of the data obtained through interpreting what the participants said about the phenomenon of the study, based on the literature review related to the topic of the study.

In this study, which is Educational Criticism, we conducted Imaginative Variation Technique to analyze the data. This technique, as Moustakas (1990) explains, aims “to arrive at structural descriptions of an experience, the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced” (p. 98). To analyze the interviews, we transcribed the interviews, read and coded each question, then labeled the similarities and grouped similar categories into themes (see appendix 3 as a sample from the interviews). The analysis of the interview are presented below.

On Monday, June 3, 2013, I (Youssif, one of the two researchers of this paper) interviewed an undergraduate student from Sudan, who was studying engineering. I am calling him Ali in this interview for the privacy. Ali came as a refugee from South Sudan in August 2004. He was almost 18 when he entered the United States. He lived in several cities in the United States and started learning English since he came. He started his academic studies in engineering at the University of Missouri, Columbia in 2010. Ali’s native language is Arabic, and African language is his second language.

I observed that Ali’s English was weak though he has spent almost nine years learning ESL. I, also, observed that he used Arabic a lot while communicating with me or other Arab people in the Ellis Library at the University of Missouri. I have never heard him speaking in English or seen him contacting American people. I intentionally chose him to make an interview to make sure the role of being separated in English culture on his learning of English. The interview was run in English. After breaking the ice between us and asking basic questions about nationality, first and second language, and other questions, I asked him, “How do you see yourself as a user of English?” He replied, “Um! Sometimes is fine when you speak with people than your home with other people you feel embarrassing especially when people don’t understand you sometimes. Because the accent is difference.”

Through his answer, we can determine that he is afraid of being immersed in the American culture because he is embarrassed that American people cannot understand him. Thus, he prefers to be isolated than to use English with native English speakers. This appears clear in the following questions and his answers:

Researcher: Which language skill do you practice least in your daily life?

Ali: Ah (deep thinking) yes, speaking.

Researcher: Why?

Ali: Because I don’t contact a lot of people who speaking English. I don’t intract a lot. Yes in the classes when I come out of classes I stay focus on reading and writing. I don’t intract, interact a lot of people.

Researcher: How often do you practice English with native English speakers?

Ali: Not a lot! Not a lot! Not a lot! Occasionally in the classes. When I need something you know in the classes just like not occasionally in the class or maybe if I go to eat I want to eat something and I find English speaker I can tell him by English what I need.

Researcher: How do you feel when you interact with native English speakers in authentic situations; for example, in a restaurant, Wal Mart, or shopping?

Ali: Uh sometimes I be very careful in choosing our word when I speak to the native English speaker and uh uhI try to improve my accent when I speak to a native English, so they can speak me or I can understand what I am saying.

Ali's answers reveal that he cannot interact with native English speakers because he is away of the American culture, where English is used authentically. Also, Ali still speaks and thinks in his first language, Arabic. This is shown from these two questions:

Researcher: Which language do you use at home?

Ali: At home? With my friend, I speak Arabic.

Researcher: How often do you contact people from your country?

Ali: Sometimes it depend. Sometimes once every week, twice every weeks, or more.

We notice here that Ali contacts with people from his language minorities weekly, which affects negatively on the progress of learning English.

On the same day, I met another undergraduate student. I named him Sami. He is from Somalia, and he has had a good experience in learning English. He started learning English in Somalia for many years in school as English is the foreign language used in his hometown. Moreover, he spent four years in Kenya, where English is the official language used. He came to the United States in June 2006. Thus, he has been learning English for more than 20 years, yet his English is weak. The reason of that — as it seems from observation and his answers to the question — is that Sami has not engaged in the English culture neither in Kenya nor in the United States. This seems clear by answering my question “How often do you contact people from Somalia in the United States?” He replied, “Like every day because we may, um um you know they may call me; I may call them, so in that calling, we use Somali actually. Probably we use Somali.”

His answer to that question reveals that he is still living in the Somali culture though he is living in the United States. He contacts with people from the same culture everyday and speaks Somali with them. He also contacts people from Somalia most often through the Internet or telephone. Thus, his English is weak comparing to the time spent in learning English. His answers to the questions below show how far he is from the American culture, so his English is weak in authentic situations.

Researcher: How do you see your English progress now comparing to the first time when you came to the United States?

Sami: I see same.

Researcher: Why?

Sami: I don't speak English a lot.

Researcher: How do you see yourself as a user of English?

Sami: very weak. I can't understand speakers. I can't speak good English.

Researcher: Which English skill do you practice most in your daily life?

Sami: reading.

Researcher: Why?

Sami: because I read in school, but I don't speak at all.

Researcher: Which English skill do you practice least in your daily life?

Sami: speaking.

Researcher: Why?

Sami: I don't have friends to speak English.

Azid, Fuji, and Younis do not practice English in reality, so their use of English in reality with native English speakers is weak. They use English only in academic situations. They study in different majors at the University of Denver, Colorado. Salem (the other researcher in this study) interviewed with them. Salem's question “Where

do you practice English?” reveals one of the reasons behind their weak progress in using English in reality. Answering this question, Azid said, “I practice English in class only. Most time, I listen to the teacher and don’t understand what she say.” Fuji said, “Most time I speak Chinese with my Chinese friends. I don’t speak English a lot.” Younis said, “I am afraid to speak English. I speak English little.”

In the contrast to Ali, Sami, Azid, Fuji, and Younis, Nuri, Tuan, Malik, Saad, and Shwan speak English perfectly. We interviewed Nuri, Tuan, Malik, Saad, and Shwanto know the reason of their English fluency. I (Youssif) met Nuri Tuesday, July 9, 2013 in a room on the third floor at Ellis Library at the University of Missouri, Columbia. The interview was run in English and lasted almost half an hour, from 1:12 p.m. to 1:40 p.m. We, researchers, have chosen Nuri purposefully because he speaks English as fluently as native English speakers do. In addition to speaking English and Arabic fluently, Nuri speaks Italian and Spanish.

Nuri has been rewarded a scholarship to finish his masters in geology. In the next questions, the researchers are going to lean to the most important parts in the interview related to the topic “Cultural Awareness and Learning English as a Second Language.”

Researcher: Why do you speak English fluently?

Nuri: I lived in the States for quite a while for a number of years, and obviously I integrated into American culture. I got a lot of American friends, and so on. I think going to the university and studying at the university helped a lot.

Nuri’s answer shows clearly that his integration in the American culture and having American friends help him think and behave as Americans do. Nuri emphasizes this point when he mentions in another point that he has had a lot of American, Hispanic, and international friends, and the language used in communication with all these people is English. Studying at the university, where he meets and communicates with native English speakers, improves his speaking English fluently.

As Nuri talked about reading and the importance of reading, so the researcher asked him, “When you read, do you think in Arabic or English?” Nuri answered, “Good question,” and continued, “Ah! Umumumum. I think more in English because I think that English is more precise in the sense of meaning. I just find myself thinking in English because in Arabic there are words that have such broad meanings. You know one word will mean so much while in English it’s very easy to distinguish the meaning of things because English is obviously the scientific language and living in the United States can help to think in English because there are things that are incorporated in the American culture that don’t exist in Libyan culture.” Nuri’s comment emphasizes the role of being culturally aware in learning a second language.

On Tuesday, July 2, 2013, Salem (the researcher) met with Saad, who is undergrad student from Saudi Arabia. Saad came to the United States in May 2009. She was living with her brother in an apartment close to the researcher’s. Saad speaks English well and she is in her last semester to get her bachelor degree in mathematics from the University of Denver. Saad justifies that reading English books helps her speak English because she acquires new vocabulary every day and practices this vocabulary in reality with Americans in street or college. Saad said, “I pick up a book every day, and I try to extend my vocabulary. I think reading is the best way to extend language skills.”

Saad sees that gaining more vocabulary facilitates ELLs to easily communicate with native English speakers in English. So, even when she meets with Saudi friends, she speaks English. She believes that “it is not only gaining more vocabulary that makes people speak English, but it is also being integrated in the English culture while using English vocabulary.” Saad’s comments indicate that it is language use rather than language knowledge

that helps ELLs be effective users of English in authentic situations. This might be shown in the following question:

Researcher: Which language do you use when you are at your apartment?

Saad: When I am here because I live with my brother, we mainly speak English, but sometimes, we speak Arabic.

Because Saad and her brother are living at the same block Salem (the researcher) is living, they sometimes come to his apartment and spend some time with his family. The researcher observes them, namely Saad, while speaking, and he notices that Saad and her brother use English with a little bit of Arabic in their communication. Even when they speak in Arabic, they often integrate some English vocabulary in their speech, which makes their speech as a mixture of English and Arabic. This is very important because learning English requires practice.

Malik, who is from Jordan and doing PhD in computer sciences at the University of Missouri, Columbia, is a good user of English. He speaks English even with Arab people. He came to the United States in September 2004. He spent the first three years in the United States separated from any Arabic community, so that is why he — based on his comments — speaks English almost fluently. Malik believes that English is the language of the era, so he advises others not only learn English, but also to use it in communicative situations. This is shown in his answers to the following questions:

Researcher: What is your attitude towards learning English?

Malik: I would say the benefits you are able to keep up with modern times because obviously using English in the Internet and use English in most work places and even in Jordan when you work a job you have to have some English background because everything international. It is obviously the international language is English. So it is benefited to me because I can speak to everybody in any country because most people's second language is English.

Researcher: What helps you speak English fluently?

Malik: I speak English frequently. I commit mistakes, and I never mind of that. I learn from my mistakes, so I correct myself later.

Analyzing this interesting interview, the researchers got some important information about the role of culture in learning ESL. On the top of the most effective clues in learning English is being integrated in the English culture. Thinking, behaving, and seeing English as native English speakers do is another important clue to gain success in learning English. Practicing English in its cultural context, regardless the mistakes committed while speaking English, is very crucial. Another important element in learning English is increasing the store of English vocabulary by reading English stories and books.

On Friday July 26, 2010 at 2:10 p.m. at the Reflector in Townsend Hall, I (Yousif) interviewed a graduate student from Vietnam, whom I will call Tony. Tony speaks English fluently in addition to his first language Vietnamese. He learned Chinese and Russian in Vietnam when he was in the university. He started learning English seriously when he was in the 12th grade, more than 13 years ago. He spent a year and a half in Australia, doing his masters before coming to the United States in May 2009. I asked Tony, "What are the most difficult things that make you unable to accommodate with the American language and American people?" He answered, "I think it's the difficult that I find when I am here is the way the people speak. American speak so fast, and they use a lot of idiomatic expressions, a lot of slangs, a little bit jargons. Because I mostly have classes, you know, some idiomatic expressions which represent difficulties for international students like me and you."

Tony's answer shows that it is very important that ELLs know idiomatic expressions and the slang language. Of course, idioms and slang language cannot be understood apart from their cultural contexts. People use idioms

and slangs differently according to their own cultures. Learning a language requires learning the culture in which this language is used. Tony clarifies that when I asked, “What is your attitude towards learning English.” He said, “Ah. My learning English. My attitude towards learning English. I think it is very positive because learning a new language is learning a new culture. You know, English is a tool for me to explore a new world. America is such a world, so I have a very positive optimistic view towards learning English. I immerse myself into the English learning community here, so very positive.”

What helps Tony speak English fluently is his immersion in both the Australian and American communities. He said that he used every moment in speaking English in Australia with Australian people. In cases that he is home in the United States, he uses other instruments to be fully assimilated in the American culture. This is shown when I asked, “How often do you watch and listen to American channels?” He said, “Mostly often. I watch TV channels mostly every day. The channels that I like to watch is news channels, CNN, CNBC, some films, movie channels. Ahahah what is it? What is it? What is it? I can’t remember the name of channels, but movies not music not much music because I don’t have much time. But news, movie comedies, comedies a little bit difficult to understand, but I try.”

It seems clear that Tony is completely immersed in the American culture. TV and radio are good means of being open to culture. Thus, Tony watches American channels and listens to American programs. He never watches Vietnamese programs though he sometimes reads Vietnamese newspapers. A very good point Tony mentioned about learning a second language away from its culture appeared from the following question and answer:

Researcher: How many languages do you speak fluently?

Tony: Oh. This is a very good question because English is the second language, but I can speak as I am doing now. Ah and I spent a year and a half during my university in studying the IRP program studying Russian, and I was a fluent speaker at that time. But because I didn’t have the environment to use Russian, so that’s why almost everything swept away from my mind now.

I finished my interview, which lasted about 38 minutes, with Tony by asking him to advise ELLs. He emphasized the role of being culturally aware in learning English. He, also, advised that ELLs practice English in its English community.

Salem had an interview with Shwan, who is from China and doing masters in computer at the University of Denver, Denver. Shwan rarely has connections with Chinese people, as the researcher (Salem) notices. She has many American friends. She speaks only English even with her Chinese friends. Shwan speaks English well. Asking her about the reason for her fluent English speaking, she answered, “I have a lot of American and international friends. I speak only English even with people from China.”

8. Findings of the Study

Analyzing the participants’ interviews reveal some important facts regarding learning ESL and the role of culture awareness in using English in reality with native English speakers. The researchers reach the following findings:

- The data analysis shows that the participants, who are completely immersed in the English community, are good users of English and have no difficulties in understanding native English speakers.
- In contrast, ELLs, who are apart from the English community, are poor users of English and have

several difficulties in understanding native English speakers.

- Through the participants' responses, the data analysis shows that ELLs need to use English as native English speakers do if they seek to be good users of English.
- The study concludes that memorizing English vocabulary and rules can produce good informants about English, but only being immersed in the English culture can produce good users of English.
- Learning English is a must in a world that is becoming a global tent because of globalization. Thanks to technology, namely the Internet, it becomes so easy nowadays to ELLs to contact with native English speakers and practice English in reality.
- Learning English is considered problematic for ELLs, who fail to have conversations with native English speakers in authentic situations. These learners feel embarrassed when they find themselves forced to use English in shopping, asking about a place, and the like.
- The problem of not using English in reality is not related to English as a language, but it is related to the methodology of learning English away from its cultural context.
- ELLs know about English, but they fail to use what they have learned in authentic situations. Practice English in authentic situations helps ELLs be aware how native English speakers speak, behave, and see English.
- Watching English channels and listening to radio enhance ELLs to think of English as native English speakers do.
- Learning English perfectly is done by learning about English culture.

9. Recommendations of the Study

Based on the findings above, the researchers present some recommendations that might help ELLs improve their English progress in reality.

- It is very important that ELLs be involved completely in the English culture.
- It is essential that ELLs know how native English language speakers think and behave. Learning English as a second language requires that ELLs see English as native English speakers see, not as they themselves see it.
- ELLs need to practice the four English language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) as a whole in different situations.
- ELLs need to practice English even when they make mistakes. Everyone makes mistakes; even native speakers make mistakes. Those who do not make mistakes are those who do not learn. Mistakes are crucial in learning English.
- ELLs need to speak English without thinking of Arabic grammar or culture. They need to speak English naturally.
- ELLs need to be aware about English cultural patterns, habits, and ways of life. ELLs need to acquire cultural background knowledge of English in order to communicate and to increase their comprehension in English.
- ELLs need to change in the way of thinking and seeing the world around them. Learners need to change their behavior and their ways of thinking and life, which means that learning involves transformation in cultural patterns in learners' life.

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Appendix 1 Participants of the Study

Name	Country	Native language	Level of education	Major	Coming to the USA	Language proficiency	Sex
Ali	Sudan	Arabic	Undergrad	Engineering	08/2004	Weak	M
Sami	Somalia	Arabic	Undergrad	Nursing	06/2006	Weak	M
Azid	Tajikistan	Tajik	PhD	Social Science	09/2004	Weak	M
Fuji	China	Chinese	Masters	English Education	01/2008	Fair	F
Younis	Libya	Arabic	PhD	Engineering	01/2009	Fair	M
Nuri	Libya	Arabic	Masters	Geology	05/2009	Excellent	M
Tony	Vietnam	Vietnamese	PhD	English Education	06/2009	Excellent	M
Malik	Jordan	Arabic	PhD	Computer science	09/2004	Excellent	M
Saad	Saudi Arabia	Arabic	Undergrad	Mathematics	05/2009	Excellent	F
Shwan	China	Chinese	Masters	Computer	08/2009	Very good	F

Appendix 2 Questions of the Interview

Part I: Personal Questions

- Where are you from?
- What is your major and level of education?
- What is your native language?
- What is the second language used in your country?
- What languages do you speak fluently?
- When did you come to the United States?
- How long have you been learning English?

Part II: Language Problems and Learning ESL

- What problems do you encounter while speaking English?
- What are the most difficulties you encounter in speaking English with Americans?
- What are some things that exist in American culture and do not exist in yours?
- What is the role of culture in using English? Give examples.
- How do you learn English?
- How do you see your English progress now comparing to the first time when you came to the United States?
- How do you see yourself as a user of English?
- What is your attitude towards learning of English?

Part III: Practice English in Reality

- Which English skill do you practice most in your daily life? Why?
- Which English skill do you practice least in your daily life? Why?
- Where do you practice English?
- How often do you practice English with English native speakers?
- Why do you practice English with English native speakers?
- How do you feel when you interact with English native speakers in authentic situations?
- How often do you watch and listen to American channels?
- How much time do you speak English a day?

Which language do you use with your friends?
Which language do you use when you are home?
What are the nationalities of your friends in the United States?
How often do you contact people from your country?
How much time do you spend with friends from your hometown a week?

Part IV: Comments and Recommendations

How can ELLs use English effectively in authentic situations with English native speakers?
What is your advice for ELLs to be good users of English?

Appendix 3 Sample of Interview

Researcher: What is your nationality?

Ali: Actually, I am, aaaaaa, I am from Africa. Um! Um! From Sudan.

Researcher: What is the language used in the Sudan?

Ali: The official language is Arabic language. Beside there is some many many of tribal languages beside Arabic language. But the official language, aaaaaa, the official language is Arabic Aaaaaaaa beside many different tribal languages.

Researcher: What is the second language used there?

Ali: Actually the second language for everybody is his tribal language. Second language for everybody is his tribal language. And then we use Arabic as official language. But for everybody the second language is his, his, his tribal language.

Researcher: What other languages do you speak fluently?

Ali: Um Um we just speak Arabic fluently. Plus you are tribal language you speak your tribal language

Researcher: For you, personally what languages do you speak?

Ali: For myself?

Researcher: Yea!

Ali: Myself speak English as a second language.

Researcher: What are other nationalities of your friends in the United States?

Ali: Ah mostly from my country. You know beside the outside relationship different was different nationalities; for example, I have outside relationship with people from the Middle East and Africa.

Researcher: What language do you use when you meet?

Ali: Well! Actually, we speak Arabic.

Researcher: When did you come to the United States?

Ali: August 13, 2004. Almost 2005aaaaaa Almost aaaaa close to nine years.

Researcher: How long have you been learning English?

Ali: Since I came here.

Researcher: How do you learn English?

Ali: First when I came here, we went to English as a second language schools. Then I, I, I went to advanced English classes. Then finally now ended up come to the University of Missouri.

Researcher: What are you studying here in MU?

Ali: I study industrial engineering.

Researcher: How do you see yourself as a user of English?

Ali: Um! Sometimes um is fine when you speak with people than your home with other people you feel embarrassing especially when people don't understand you sometimes. Because the accent is difference.

Researcher: Yea! And what else?

Ali: Um Um that is enough.

Researcher: Which language do you use at home?

Ali: At home? With my friend, I speak Arabic.

Researcher: How often do you contact people from your country?

Ali: Once every week. Sometimes it depend. Sometimes once every week, twice every week, or more. Sometimes we get busy you know with school so it takes sometimes a lot of time to call them because they are busy in schools.

Researcher: What is your attitude towards learning English?

Ali: Toward what?

Researcher: Towards learning English.

Ali: Towards learning English. It's, it's good to learn English. I know that it is probable language now especially for economic opportunities or this kind of stuff if you speak English you will be, you can compete in the job market especially in advanced world right now everything base on technology and most of technology base on English language.

Researcher: Which language skill you practice most in your daily life?

Ali: Probably um Arabic probably.

Researcher: No, I mean the English language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Which one do you use most?

Ali: Probably reading and writing.

Researcher: Yea! Why?

Ali: We study you know when I come, when I come to the classes actually two classes a day but rest of the day, you know, I spend in reading and writing and do some homeworks

Researcher: Which language skill you practice least in your daily life?

Ali: Ah yes, speaking.

Researcher: Why?

Ali: Because I don't contact a lot of people who speaking English I don't interact a lot yes in the classes, when I come out of classes I stay focus on reading and writing I don't interact, interact a lot of people.

Researcher: Where do you practice English?

Ali: Where?

Researcher: Yea!

Ali: Mostly, mostly in the school. Mostly, mostly.

Researcher: How often do you practice English with native English speakers?

Ali: Not a lot! Not a lot! Not a lot! Occasionally in the classes. When I need something you know in the classes just like not occasionally in the class or maybe if I go to eat I want to eat something and I find English speaker I can tell him by English what I need.

Researcher: How do you feel when you interact with native English speakers in authentic situations; for example, in a restaurant, Wal Mart, or shopping?

Ali: Uh! Sometimes I be very careful in choosing our word when I speak to the native English speaker and uh uh I try to improve my accent when I speak to a native English, so they can speak me or I can understand what I am saying.

Researcher: How often do you watch and listen to American channels?

Ali: Not really! Once a week. Sometimes twice a week.

Researcher: How much time?

Ali: Not, thirty minute maybe. Maximum.

Researcher: What is your preferable American program?

Ali: What do you mean?

Researcher: If you like any program in American channels, what is that program?

Ali: (long pause) I said I don't prefer, I don't prefer any program or another, but I sometimes listen to the breaking news to know what is going on, news.

Researcher: How often do you watch and listen to Arabic channels?

Ali: When I go outside and visit friends, and they have Arabic channels that is the time maybe I watch Arabic channels

Researcher: Thank you. I appreciate your help.