Research Article

THE EFFECT OF CULTURAL/SOCIAL AWARENESS ON MAKING APPROPRIATE DISCOURSE INTERPRETATION OF IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS

Elnaz Shoari, Nader Assadi Aidinlou
Department of ELT, College of Humanities, Ahar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Ahar, Iran

Correspondence should be addressed to Elnaz Shoari

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ABSTRACT

We live and are in touch with the world around us through using language, while talking to each other we don’t use sounds words in isolation, but we exchange message. Thus understanding the intended message is of crucial role in this process. Most of the times we experience serious difficulties in interpreting messages simply as a result of lack of shared information. Discourse analysis or discourse interpretation would be a general term for a number of roads for analyzing “written, spoken, or sign language use, or any significant semiotic occurrence”. In the case of foreign languages, cultural and situational factors are of crucial role in making correct interpretations of the meanings. Thus the current study aimed at examining the effect of cultural/social information on making appropriate interpretations of Iranian EFL learners. Sixty female learners participated in this quasi-experimental study which lasted one academic semester. The results of the study provided strong support for the key role of cultural/ situational information about written discourse in making correct explanations. This can be justified by schema theory, since in the process of understanding having common points is essential.

KEYWORDS: cultural awareness, social awareness, discourse interpretation

INTRODUCTION

The study of message interpretation- communication- is the study of the ways through which meaning is put across (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993). The world is a prosperous and intricate site, overwhelmed with refinements of meaning. People are in charge to make the meaning in the world, through slight points. Meanings are in process since being used differently. Another point is that the context of situations and context of cultures are not predictable and fixed. As said by Vygotsky (1978), knowledge is not characterized exclusively in the mind of speakers/ writers, but is formed through interaction in the world around us.
interpersonal objectives in interactional circumstances. So discourse analysis, studies how certain concerns are constructed on the part of language users and their variability, and discovers the “rhetorical” facets and the functions of utterances in the context of the continuing interactions (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Although discourse is important in all of the contexts which language defines and controls interactions, it gains much more importance when it comes to classroom settings; that is most of the times pupils cannot understand what is said by teachers, since they don’t have access to correct ways of analyzing the produced classroom discourse they fail to learn not because of lack of knowledge but as a result of lack of /misunderstanding. Different background information result in wide range of interpretations of a same utterance. There are different approaches for analyzing the discourse, but language users are not aware of, it is even more challenging when it comes to foreign language learners with their extremely limited exposure to the target language and lack of opportunity for making use of the learnt points in real contexts. In the case of foreign language users there are lots of factors that make the process of mutual understanding more complicated, such as cultural and social/ situational factors.

BACKGROUND

Prior knowledge/ Schema

Notion of schema theory was firstly established in 1932 through the work of British psychologist Frederic Bartlett and was further widened generally in 1970s by American educational psychologist Richard Schema theory explains how knowledge is gained, processed and organized (Bartlett, 1932). Richards and Schmidt (2002, p. 468) consider that schema means “a mental representation, plan or structure. A collection of organized and interrelated ideas, concepts and prior knowledge structures that are abstract representations of objects, events and relationships in the real world”. Schema is used to depict aspects which affect understanding (Al-Issa, 2006). Schema gets more specified by adjustments of learning, but constantly in adding new information, there is an attempt to unite them with prior ones. When people attempt to recall a story, they reconstitute the story in a way they keep it in mind that is; they never memorize the details of an event or of a story in rote manner (Arbib, 2006). Rumelhart (1980, as cited in Shoari & Farrokhi, 2014) deems that “Schema can represent knowledge at all levels from ideologies and cultural truths to knowledge about the meaning of a particular word, to knowledge about what patterns of excitations are associated with what letters of the alphabet. We have schemata to represent all levels of our experience, at all levels of abstraction. Finally, our schemata are our knowledge. All of our generic knowledge is embedded in schemata.” In contrast to Piaget (1970), schema theorists assume that the learners’ knowledge is not in the form of one body, but rather there is a network of information. Accordingly as new information does not fit in to this network, learners would not comprehend new-fangled information (Widemayer, 2007). There are three schema situations: no prior knowledge, some prior knowledge or incorrect prior knowledge. When the incorrect prior knowledge is not recognized by the teacher or learner, it results in very deep problems in process of learning (Duis, 2004). Research demonstrates that there must be instructions which result in meaningful learning and kind of learning process that assists learners to recognize new information in the light of what they already know, rather than rote memorizing them. The meaning is bound in cultural and social context; therefore the learners’ cultural/social schemata should be activated/ should be made. According to Levine and Adelman (1982) cultural disagreements happen as a result of “misinterpretations”, “ethnocentrism”, “stereotypes”, and “prejudice”. Avoiding these kinds of disagreements is to happen through increasing cultural awareness of learners. Kumaravadivelu (2003) states that culture teaching have an essential role in most L2 education. Our world is a social environment, and we are spending nearly all of our time as members of social settings. We mostly use our social skills in all situations. Social skills are about sharing space with others and being able to get along with people in a variety of settings. An entity’s social success is due to the quality of her or his societal interactions. With the purpose of having constructive social interactions, each person needs to be socially experienced and have strong social learning skills. These issues gain more importance while talking about EFL learners. In most of the cases learners don’t make sense of what they read or hear only as a result of social differences and nothing else. This acts as impediment in their attempts to be a successful language user (Hadley, 1993).

Research question and hypothesis

Research Question

Does cultural/social awareness result in making appropriate discourse interpretation of Iranian EFL Learners?

Null Hypothesis

There are no significant differences in the effect of cultural/social awareness result in making appropriate discourse interpretation of Iranian EFL Learners.

METHOD

Design of the study

The design of the study is quasi-experimental. The Independent variable of the study is awareness and dependent variable appropriate written discourse interpretation.

Participants

A total number of 60 language female learners with an age range of 12-15 participated in this study. The subjects were from Turkish background. The participants were selected from 6 classes. Before starting the program, language proficiency test (pre) was conducted in order for assuring their proficiency level of the contributors. A pre-test of discourse interpretation was carried out to the both groups.
for their comparability. Then the researcher has started the investigation.

Context of the Study

The contributors of the study were selected from one of the institutes of Tabriz, Iran. In that organization a course consists of 15 sessions which meet three times a week. In that institute the course provides the students with opportunities for learning new texts and communication. English messages’ interpretation is one of the most important points of L2 teaching in that organization.

Instruments and Materials

For gathering quantifiable data to get the results of the study, the researcher employed the subsequent instruments and materials: with the intention of assuring the uniformity of proficiency level of the participants, a language proficiency test was completed. The PET listening test consists of five sections with 25 questions. The reading and writing are of 5 parts, and there are 40 questions and PET speaking is of four parts. A pre-test was carried out in order to guarantee the comparability of both groups, on their discourse interpretation ability. During the study in both groups the researcher provided the pupils with written form of public discourses that and asked them to interpret. At the end of the sessions, the researcher administered a post-test for determining the efficiency of the treatment.

Procedure

Before starting the investigation for reassure the proficiency level of the participants, one language proficiency test was administered, and 60 participants of approximately same level have been accepted for participating in the study. After that one pre-test on learners’ discourse interpretation was completed then the program was started. In the experimental group the researcher provided learners with general cultural/social explanations in the process of the interpreting the texts. The researcher made a broad image for learners that are since the researcher was not from the target society the explanations and information were at extremely general manner. While in the control group the participants were asked to interpret the same texts without receiving any additional information. At the end of the program one post-test was run to both groups. The collected data has been analyzed by SPSS; given that there were two groups in the study the researcher applied t-test.

RESULTS

Let’s respond the question of the inquiry It should be mentioned that both groups were more or less at the same level of the general discourse interpretation at the beginning of the study it can be deduced from the means of both groups in pre-test for experimental group 12.40 and for control group it was 12.17 while in post-test that of experimental group enhanced to 17.41 with SD of 0.75, while in control group it remained approximately the same that is; 12.25 with SD of .92.

In the next table it is fairly evident that the experimental group unlike control group, high scored in the post-test:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Paired Samples Statistics-Experimental Group</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pair 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Posttest</td>
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<td>Pretest</td>
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<th>Table 2: Paired Samples Statistics-Control Group</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pair 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Posttest</td>
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<td>Pretest</td>
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In the next table it is fairly evident that the experimental group unlike control group, high scored in the post-test:
Table 3: Paired Samples Test-Experimental Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
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<th></th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>Std. Error Mean</td>
<td>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>Upper</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 1</td>
<td>Posttest - Pretest</td>
<td>4.7665</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.00450</td>
<td>.17252</td>
<td>4.11014</td>
<td>4.72234</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 represents that the mean increase in discourse interpretation scores was 4.76 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 4.11 to 4.72. It is also indicated that the mean enhancement in the discourse interpretation posttest was statistically significant ($t = (29) = 26.42$, $p = .000$). Consequently, the Null Hypothesis is rejected and the researcher hypothesis is accepted.

DISCUSSION

Literally speaking there are not studies on the effectiveness of the cultural/social awareness on discourse interpretation, but on other fields like listening comprehension and reading comprehension. It is noteworthy that the listening materials of the most of them were pedagogical oriented. They were just designed for teaching/learning purposes. The findings of the current study provided strong support for the role of the having shared knowledge in the process of language learning. For example the findings are in line with some studies that put emphasis on the constructive effect of culturally familiar content on the participants' performance in a reading comprehension test (Abu-Rabia, 1998; Carrell, 1991; Carson et al., 1990; Chamot, 2004; Davis & Bistodeau, 1993; El-Dib, 2004; Erten & Razi, 2009; Fuhong, 2004&Sasaki, 2000).

CONCLUSION

Since in real situations every small point adds to the meaning of message (like silence, turn taking...) so language learners and particularly foreign language learners need to be familiar with these issues. The root of these issues is at the heart of cultural and social differences of source and target languages. While teaching a foreign language teachers are to provide learners with this kind of information even at a broad level. Learners are to be familiar with real discourse of native users of particular language. Learners should be helped to get about the same sense of target messages. They must be taught to go beyond the sentences, that is; they must know that understanding dictionary meanings of the words and phrases would not help them to speak a language successfully and efficiently. The results of the present study recommend making use of public speech of the native speakers, but since nothing occurs in a vacuum, thus firstly providing learners with cultural and social familiarity is an essential action. Context of culture and context of situation play seriously key role in making sense of oral discourse in particular and all discourse types in general. Like any other work this also is of some limitations of which appear would limit the generalizability of the results. The first one surely was the fact that the researcher was not from target context, thus the type of information which provided by her would be too general and incomplete. The second point is the number of the participants; sixty learners are not adequate for making broad decisions. The gender was female; therefore male learners should be also included in similar studies. The current study was done exclusively on general political discourses, thus some other research studies with diversity of texts are required.

REFERENCES

level, and culture in a hybrid context. Foreign Language Annals, 37(1), 85-95.


