



Journal of English Teaching and Applied Linguistic

<http://jurnal.stkipgribl.ac.id/index.php/jeta>

print ISSN 2722-3388

online ISSN 2722-3396

CULTURE AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING: THE MISSING FORMULA OF YEMENI ENGLISH TEACHERS/LEARNERS

MOHAMMED HEJASH

Ph.D. Scholar, University of Lucknow, India

Lecturer, AlBaidha University, Yemen

peace1man@gmail.com

Abstract: The study is not only designed to measure up the degree of cultural awareness while learning/ teaching the English language, but it also helps in finding out how mother tongue culture can severely affect our everyday acquired language in the context of Yemen. The researcher has used the pragmatic approach tools to highlight all the cultural impacts and elaborated the importance of making Yemeni teachers aware of this approach. Culture could really play an important role in the quality of English one ought to learn and teach so the researcher has attempted to find out remedial methods to get rid of all the confusion that culture causes and help teachers identify such a learning/teaching fallacy.

Keywords: Pragmalinguistic, Sociopragmatic, Yemeni ELT, and Cultural Impact.

INTRODUCTION

In Yemen, culture can affect the way one is learning a foreign language. Such impact is caused by some linguistic and cultural interference. An amount of interest in this research is given to the obstacles that Yemeni teachers

encounter whenever indulged in a foreign language teaching. These obstacles can be seen in teacher students talking time through dialogues and language translation which bring contrasts between the mother language and the target

language. Different categories of pragmatic errors are the main criteria through which the researcher will implement on teachers to find out the degree of awareness among them of cultural and linguistic differences. These pragmatic errors include pragmalinguistic failures and sociopragmatic ones.

Wei (55) assumes that language has a dual character: both as a means of communication and a carrier of culture. Language without culture is unthinkable, so is human culture without language. A particular language is a mirror of a particular culture. So, culture plays an important role in English Language Teaching (ELT). Students with a rich cultural heritage suffer the most when leaning a foreign language; their culture stands as a barrier before them. Johnson (139) states that 'Language is best learned by a native speaker teacher', a statement which does not hold much credibility nowadays. It can be credible when it comes to students travelling to that foreign country and acquire the language from the native speakers themselves but when one wants to

learn a foreign language in his/her country the best teacher is someone who knows the difference between the students' culture and the target language culture.

Arabic native teachers of English need to be aware of how culture impacts the process of learning a foreign language so they need to extra care about the wrongly used cultural situations which lead to imposing something silly on someone with different cultural background.

Pragmatic Approach

Riley (231) defines pragmatic errors as:

Pragmatic errors are the result of an interactant's imposing the social rules of one culture on his communicative behaviour in a situation where the social rules of another culture would be more appropriate.

The concept of imposing the social rules is not intentionally committed by the foreign language teachers but rather a shortage in the teaching background of teachers. He/she brings those cultural and

linguistic interferences unintentionally. The most important problem that Riley tried to solve is the appropriation of describing the cultural statements as wrong ones. Who gives the right to teacher to decide which is wrong from right? Is it the job of the teacher to transform students into German or English? While there are two categories of pragmatic errors that Thomas (91) distinguishes between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic errors as:

Pragmalinguistic failure ... occurs when the pragmatic force mapped by S onto a given utterance is systematically different from the force most frequently assigned to it by native speakers of the target language, or when speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred from L1 to L2. Sociopragmatic failure...refers to the social conditions placed on language in use...while pragmalinguistic failure is basically a linguistic problem, caused by differences in the linguistic encoding of pragmatic force, sociopragmatic failure stems from cross culturally different

perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour.

Riley (235) says that:

This is an important and insightful distinction, and one which reflects an opposition between those rules and norms which are language specific and those which are culture specific. However, as language is itself, of course, extremely highly acculturated, the distinction often becomes very fuzzy indeed. It is obviously best, as Thomas pointed out, to see those terms as referring to the poles of a cline, rather than as discrete categories. At the pragmalinguistic end we are dealing with (mistaken) beliefs about the language and at the sociopragmatic end with (mistaken) beliefs about the society. Pragmalinguistic error results from a failure to identify or express meanings correctly, sociopragmatic error is the result of a failure to identify the situation correctly. Pragmalinguistic error refers, therefore, to a dysfunction in discourse processing and production; sociopragmatic error refers to a failure to perceive, categorise and evaluate social

reality in accordance with a particular set of cultural norms. Both result in inappropriate language use.

According to Thanasoulas (23) a more specifically teaching of culture should make learners aware of speech acts, connotations, etiquette, that is, appropriate or inappropriate behaviour, as well as it should provide them with the opportunity to act out being a member of the target culture. Besides Byram (183) assumes that foreign language teachers should be foreign culture teachers; therefore, they need to have the ability to experience and analyse both the home and target cultures knowing the pragmatics of language is one method of the many methods that can give teachers insight about differences of the two cultures. Taylor & Donna (9) believe that Schools need teachers who can create and manage rigorous learning environments that maximize learners' opportunities to learn. That is, schools need teachers who can make school learning relevant and effective for all learners by using students' cultural knowledge, frames of

reference, life experiences, language experiences, and language varieties as resources. People used to believe that language is only best learned by native speakers of the target language but now the element of culture is playing a significant role in the process of teaching language.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. Provide a practical overview on how culture can strongly impact language teaching.
2. Establish a rationale for the importance of implementing this study in language departments.
3. Review the research regarding the preparation of teachers for cultural and bilingual contexts, that is, the extent to which teacher education programs are preparing teachers to become fully aware of the cultural impact which may create confusion when teaching language.
4. Provide practical supports for professional development and mentoring of teachers to implement a cultural pedagogy, including an observation methodology that can be used by teachers, teacher

educators, administrators, or staff developers

RESEARCH METHOD

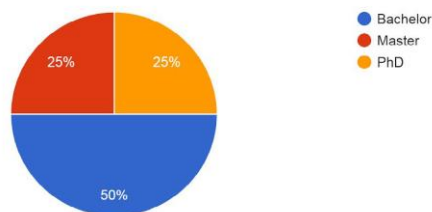
The present study has taken a pragmatic approach to test and measure the cultural awareness among learners/teachers in the language departments in Yemen. The study has focused on two important aspects: the first aspect is the degree/level of cultural awareness in speech acts and written structures used by Yemeni English language teachers which probably create confusion when encountering speakers of English from another different cultural background. It measured the knowledge/skill of L2 speakers/teachers to find out the degree of cultural awareness in everyday conversations. The main focus in this aspect is on examining how similar or different the two cultures specially when expressing gratitude, inviting people, doing favours, giving Advice, giving an opinion, agreeing and disagreeing, clarification, and interruption. And the second aspect of this study is an attempt to measure the degree of cultural impact as shared by teachers

on different perspectives that may affect the teaching of a foreign language. The two tools in which the researcher used to examine the existence of such cultural failures are pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic.

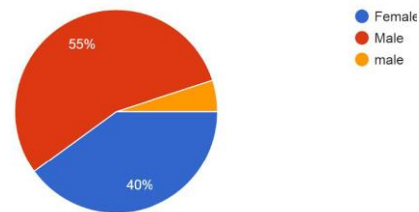
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A questionnaire was designed to measure up the degree of cultural awareness while learning and teaching a foreign language (English) in the context of Yemen. It also tested the degree of cultural impact imposed by L1 on L2 while teaching and learning English. The participants (English Language Teachers) were requested to help by responding to the enquires. Their responses were used to identify areas in which cultural awareness can occur and improve. To start with the participants who were a group of 20 Yemeni English teachers varying from one qualification into another. Almost half of the participants were Bachelor degree teachers and two quarters between PhD degree and Master degree teachers.

Qualification
20 responses



Gender
20 responses



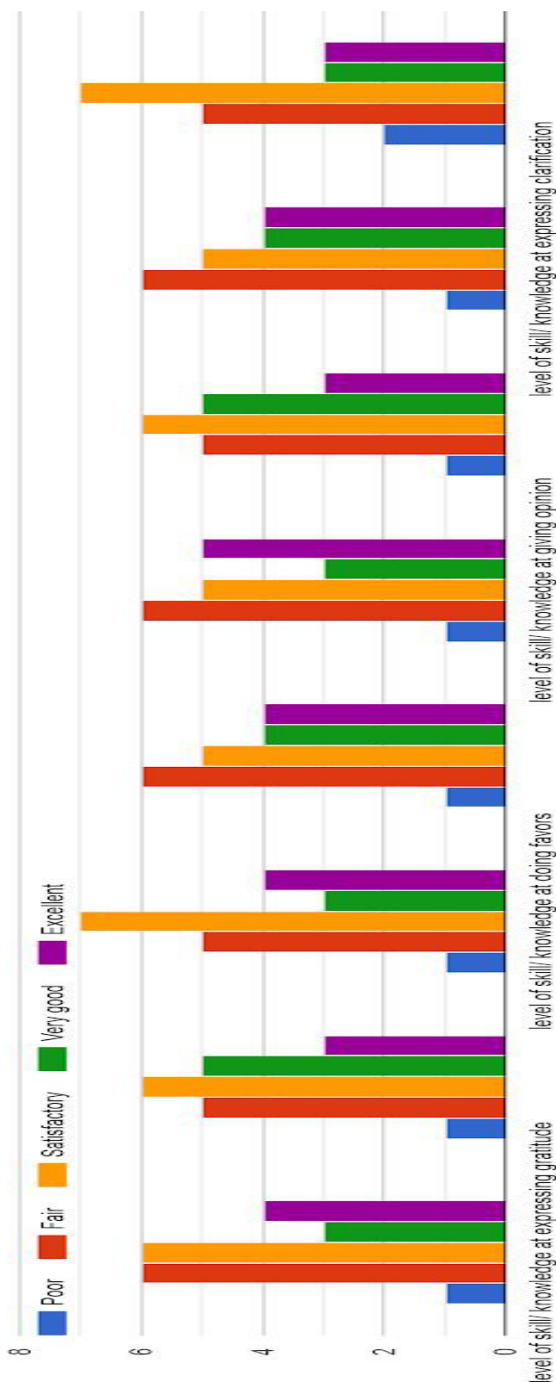
Another important aspect before digging deep into this study is the gender because the level of impact of culture and the cultural awareness varies from one gender to another. The level of awareness of culture and its impact may vary from he-teachers to she-teachers. And in this student the average of female participants were 40% percent. In some of the English language Departments, female teachers are likely considered to be more successful than male teachers due to life responsibly impact on both genders. To the researcher female teachers are less responsible and this gives them time to turn to education and empower themselves.

Cultural Awareness of L2

One of the most essential aspects that the researcher has concentrated on was the concept of Cultural Awareness of L2 which plays a very important role; first equipping teachers with all cultural proper texts in which teachers can be culturally aware of what is the right thing to say in certain situations. The researcher also focused on some of the most important speech acts in which teachers of Yemen misuse due to the false analogy that happens when translating those cultural speech acts such as: expressing gratitude, inviting people, doing favours, giving Advice, giving an opinion, agreeing and disagreeing, clarification, and interruption.

Here is how most of the teachers replied to the question how much do you know about these speech acts in English. The researcher used

the multiple-choice grid to measure up eight situations but here are four measured situations of the level of awareness of L2 culture in the Yemeni context. The figure below shows the cultural awareness of L2 learning.



The cultural speech acts that the researcher wanted to know the level of teachers' awareness were:

1. level of skill/ knowledge at expressing gratitude
2. level of skill/ knowledge at inviting people
3. level of skill/ knowledge at doing favours
4. level of skill/ knowledge at giving advice
5. level of skill/ knowledge at giving opinion
6. level of skill/ knowledge at agreeing and disagreeing
7. level of skill/ knowledge at expressing clarification
8. level of skill/ knowledge at etiquette when interrupting people.

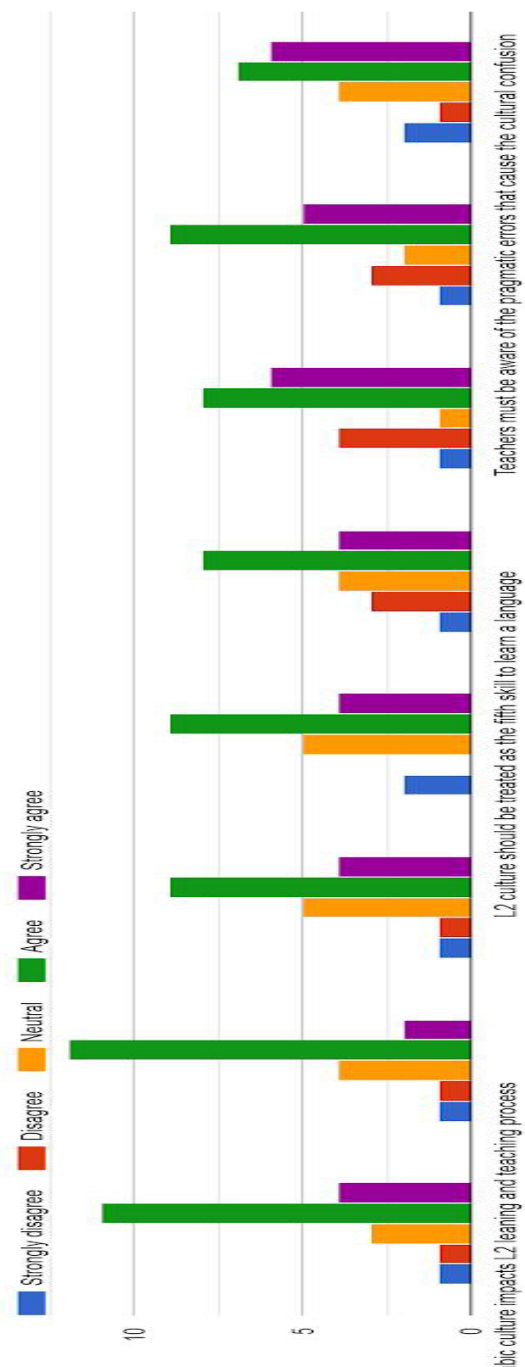
The results of the multiple-choice grid have shown that most of the Yemen teachers are merely possessing a satisfactory or fair level of skill in making speech acts and this level is not an adequate level to help teachers spreading awareness of cultural speech acts which may confuse most of the English language speakers and users in Yemen. There are a group of participants who answered that they

possess a very good level of skill when it comes to making speech acts and they are fully aware of the cultural speech acts that may cause the confusion when translating from L1 to L2. To the researcher, the more you possess a very good level of skill in making speech acts of L2 the more you are likely not to fall into making a cultural confusion act. The researcher recommends a great deal of courses that will help the Yemeni English teachers equip with necessary knowledge to get rid of the cultural impact that causes the confusion.

Cultural Impact on L2 Teaching

Another necessary aspect the researcher wanted to explore is how does culture really impact language? And do teachers agree to this claim or not? So, the researcher uses a tool to measure up the different perspectives of Yemeni teachers on how culture can impact Language Learning and Teaching. The researcher brought different assumptions which were said and negotiated with teachers as main reasons behind causing this cultural confusion. The researcher has designed

this opinion scale in order to find out whether teachers agree to these certain assumptions which according to him cause the problem. The figure below shows the cultural impact on L2 teaching.



There are eight assumptions that the researcher thought are the main reasons for this cultural clash when teaching and learning a foreign language. These assumptions are:

1. Arabic culture impacts L2 leaning and teaching process.
2. There are cultural similarities between L1 culture and L2 Culture.
3. Teachers' role is to clarify the cultural differences while teaching.
4. L2 culture should be treated as the fifth skill to learn a language.
5. Teachers are not supposed to transform students into English, German or French.
6. Language is best learned through teachers of the same cultural background.
7. Teachers must be aware of the pragmatic errors that cause the cultural confusion.
8. There are problems related to the curricula.

Most of the questionnaire participants just agreed to all those assumptions as real problems that slow down the process of learning a foreign language. Although there were many participants who strongly agreed to those assumptions there were a few

participants who remained neutral and did not disagree to those statements. To the researcher, this neutral choice showed that some of the participants were not probably aware of the problem itself.

The researcher has recommended those who set and prepare the curriculum of English language in Yemen to consider all those assumptions as real problems that cause learners of the language troubles when learning a foreign language. He has also concentrated on how to solve these problems in this study and that is by testing if the participants were aware of what they were talking about. The approach that the researcher has used to test the level of cultural awareness when learning a foreign language is pragmatic. There are a lot of pragmatic failures or errors that learners are not aware of. These errors have been discussed in more details in the previous sections of this study. There are two pragmatic errors that learners make due to the cultural impact.

According to (Thomas 99) Pragmalinguistic failure happens:

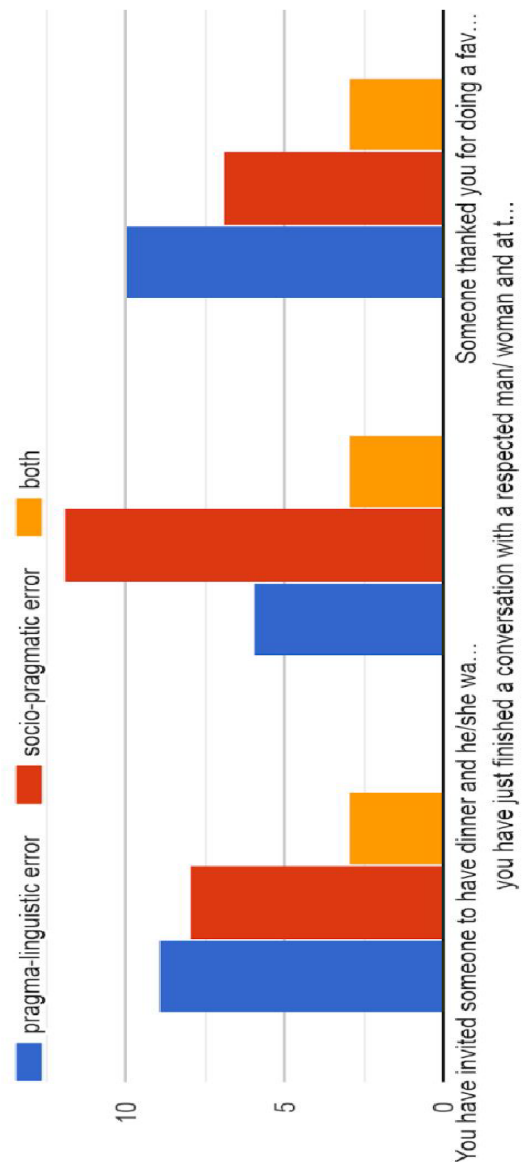
“when the pragmatic sentence structure is systematically different from that normally assigned to it by native speakers of L2 while Sociopragmatic failure is caused by the need to adjust the systems and beliefs of L1 speakers to the culture of the language being learned”

The researcher has tested/examined whether the Yemeni English teachers are aware of these two important culture scales in which problems of culture can be avoided by having adequate knowledge about them. The researcher has put just three examples to examine the knowledge of teachers about these pragmatic errors. These examples are as follows:

Situation 1:

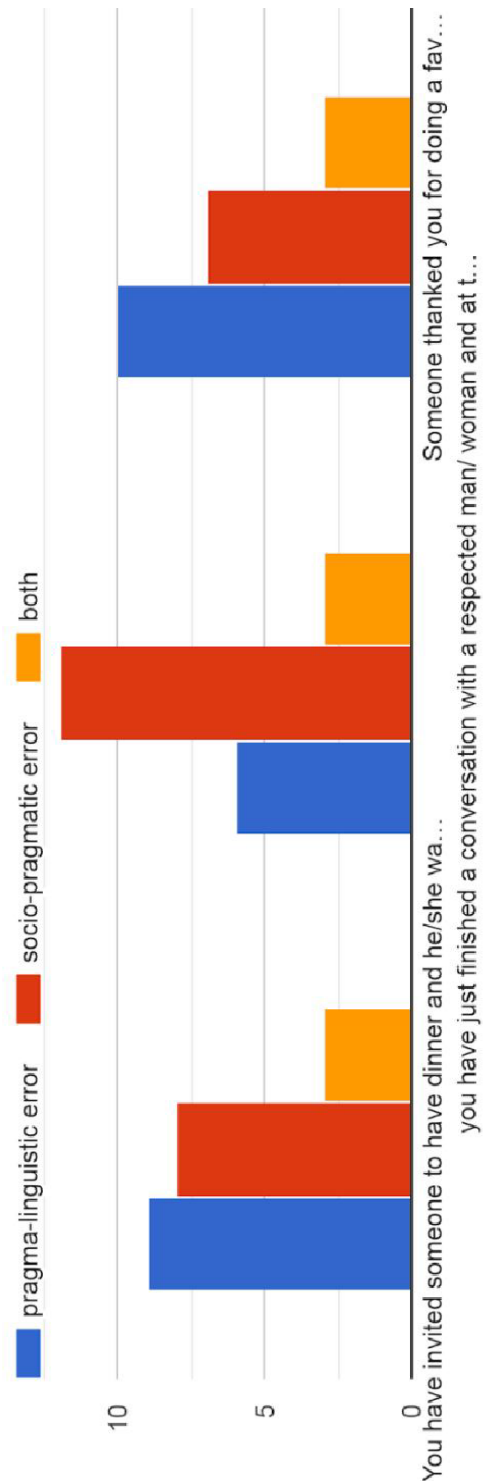
“You have invited someone to have dinner and he/she wanted to pay for the food served. You said the food is on my account.” If we just pay attention to the response, we find that the man/woman has made an error that native speakers never use in their utterances. Instead of using “I’ll pay this time.” or “It’s all on me” the respondent has made

pragmaticlinguistic error. The results of the questionnaire show that there are a number of teachers who recognized such an error but on the other hand we find that there also a number of teachers who could not recognize it. The figure below shows the pragmatic errors or failures that probably cause cultural confusion.



Situation 2:

“You have just finished a conversation with a respected man/ woman and at the end of the conversation you told him “any service?” Here the respondent has been under a great influence by the cultural and social ways of life. He thought that what happens in his society can be used into another society. In the Yemeni context there is a social way of saying goodbye. Instead of just saying “goodbye” or “see you tomorrow” Yemeni people offer favours to those who never ask favours. Some learners when saying “Goodbye” to his foreign teacher who doesn’t speak Arabic fall into this trap by offering favours to those people thinking that this speech act would be easily understood which will certainly cause cultural and social confusion. The results show that there are a good number of teachers who are really aware of this error whereas there a few numbers of teachers who still cannot recognize this kind of social and cultural error. It is called “Sociopragmatic failure”. The figure below shows the pragmatic errors or failures that probably cause cultural confusion.



CONCLUSION

To wrap up this study, the researcher has assumed that there are cultural traits that play an important role in shaping the language of the teachers and learners. These cultural traits cause in a way or another some kind of confusion. To avoid such cultural interference, the researcher tested first the level of skill/knowledge that the Yemeni teachers have when it comes to speaking a foreign language. The results have shown that most of the teachers have a little background about how natives of the language communicate with each other and what are the cultural similarities and dissimilarities between the target language and the mother language. The researcher has recommended that the teachers should self-educate themselves or undergo a cultural course that can help them understand better the nature of those dissimilarities. The cultural impact was tested through a number of assumptions based on different arguments and educational debates. These assumptions helped the researcher decide the main reasons

behind bringing a cultural confusion to the language learners.

REFERENCES

- Byram M., Morgan, C., & Colleagues. Teaching and Learning Language and Culture: Great Britain. WBC. (1994). p 183.
- Johnson, Karen E. "Language teacher education." *The Routledge handbook of English language teaching*. Routledge, 2016. p139.
- Riley, Philip. "Well don't blame me! On the interpretation of pragmatic errors. Wieslaw Oleksy (toim.), Contrastive pragmatics. (1989). p 231.
- Ibid p 235.
- Taylor, Sheryl V. and Donna M. Sobel. *Culturally responsive pedagogy: Teaching like our students' lives matter*. Vol. 4. Brill, 2011. p 9.
- Thanasoulas, Dimitrios. "The importance of teaching culture in the foreign language

classroom." *Radical pedagogy*.
(2001). p 23.

Thomas, Jenny. "Cross-cultural
pragmatic failure." *Applied
linguistics*. (1983). p 91.

Ibid p 99.

Wei, Yun. "Integrating Chinese culture
with TEFL in Chinese
classroom." *Sino-US English
Teaching* (2005). p 55.

