

## Enhancing EFL College Students' Language Proficiency through Sociocultural Competence

Inst. Dr. SUNDUS ABDULJABBAR KAMIL

The Institute for Training Teachers

Baghdad, Iraq

### Abstract:

*Sociocultural competence can be defined as the ability to behave appropriately in the specific situations, to choose the appropriate form of social etiquette, to decode the social code of the partner, to use different vocabulary, to understand the meanings of the words in the definite context. It is the students' ability to accomplish proper cross-cultural communication. Achieving sociocultural competence requires that one lowers his/her defenses, takes risks, and practices behaviors that may feel unfamiliar and uncomfortable. It requires a flexible mind, an open heart, and a willingness to accept alternative perspectives. Nowadays a great attention is given to sociocultural component in teaching a foreign language which is a requirement for the appropriate use of a foreign language in specific cultural situations.*

*Sociocultural knowledge has been proved to contribute highly to help foreign language teaching achieve a greater understanding of the nature of language, as well as its manifestations, along with the understanding of the nature of society. The aim of this study is to shed the light on sociocultural competence and to assess the EFL college students' knowledge of it in a way to support their target language proficiency. This research is an experimental one where a sample of (30) students at the fourth stage for the academic year 2015-2016 at the College of Education /Ibn-Rushd /University of Baghdad are randomly chosen to respond to the online test adapted by the researcher to assess college students' knowledge of sociocultural*

*competence. The test was validated by being reviewed and adjusted according to the remarks provided by a number of experts in the field at the University of Baghdad and the College of Education/IbnRushd. The students' responses have been statistically analyzed and rejected positively the null hypothesis to capture the importance of students' knowledge of sociocultural competence in favour of better language proficiency on the students' part.*

**Key words:** EFL college students' language proficiency, sociocultural competence, cross-cultural communication,

## **1. INTRODUCTION:**

Sociocultural competence can be defined as the students' ability to accomplish proper cross-cultural communication. Juan C (2006) describes a person with some degree of sociocultural competence as someone, who is able to see relationships between different cultures and is able to mediate, that is to interpret each in terms of the other, either for themselves or for other people. It is also someone who has a critical or analytical understanding of their own and other cultures, someone who is conscious of their own perspective, of the way in which their thinking is culturally determined, rather than believing that their understanding and perspective is natural. Native speakers of English know how to execute their talk appropriately in a given communicative setting, such as how to do turn-taking naturally when talking to a friend or how to ask someone of a higher status to do something for them. These interactional skills are difficult for students to learn because in many cases they are not taught explicitly in the classroom. Besides the pronunciation of words, the grammatical construction of sentences, and the use of vocabulary that learners are presented and learned. That is why, it's highly recommended through reviewing research to highlight social functions of the language. According to (Hudson: 2001) the

social functions of language are the ways in which we use language to give our view of our relationships to other people. We can do this directly, for instance, by saying things like **'Listen, I'm the manager here!'**. Or can do it indirectly, by our choice of words when talking about other things: **'Hi Bob, what's up?'**.

## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND:**

Sociocultural competence refers to the speaker's knowledge of how to express messages appropriately within the overall social and cultural context of communication, in accordance with the pragmatic factors related to variation in language use. These factors are complex and interrelated, which stem from the fact that language is not simply a communication coding system but also an integral part of the individual's identity and the most important channel of social organization, embedded in the culture of the communities where it is used. As Nunan (1992) states, "Only by studying language in its social and cultural contexts, will we come to appreciate the apparent paradox of language acquisition: that it is at once a deeply personal and yet highly social process. Language learners face this complexity as soon as they first try to apply the L2 knowledge they have learned to real-life communication, and these first attempts can be disastrous: the "culture-free," "out-of-context," and very often even "meaning-free" L2 instruction (Damen, 1987), which is still too typical of foreign language classes around the world, simply does not prepare learners to cope with the complexity of real-life language use efficiently. L2 learners should be made aware of the fact that making a social or cultural blunder is likely to lead to far more serious communication breakdowns than a linguistic error or the lack of a particular word. Raising sociocultural awareness, however, is not an easy task, because sociocultural rules and normative patterns of expected or acceptable behavior have not yet been

adequately analyzed and described (Savignon, 1983; Wolfson, 1989). Even when good descriptions are available, sociocultural rules and norms are so ingrained in our own identity (and that of the learner) that it is difficult to change behavior based on a new set of assumptions. According to the Common European Framework (2005), sociocultural competence involves five elements:

- **Attitudes:** curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own.

- **Knowledge:** of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction.

- **Skills of Interpreting and Relating:** ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and to relate it to documents from one's own.

- **Skills of Discovery and Interaction:** ability to acquire new knowledge of culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes, and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction.

- **Critical Cultural Awareness / Political Education:** an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries. Sociocultural competence consists of the following attitudes and skills:

- observing, identifying and recognizing
- comparing and contrasting
- negotiating meaning
- dealing with or tolerating ambiguity
- efficiently interpreting messages
- limiting the possibility of misinterpretation
- defending one's own point of view while acknowledging the legitimacy of others
- accepting differences

Attaining sociocultural competence requires that one lessens his/her defenses, takes risks, and practices behaviors that may feel unusual and not at ease. It requires an elastic mind, an open heart, and a willingness to accept alternative perspectives. Socio-cultural competence is a complex phenomenon. It includes the following components: -

**Linguistic-cultural** – knowledge of lexical items with the socio-cultural semantics (e.g., greeting, forms of address, and farewell, in oral and written speech);

**Sociolinguistic** – knowledge of the language features of social classes, different generations, genders, social groups;

**Cultural component** – knowledge of cultural peculiarities of English-speaking countries, their habits, traditions, standards of behaviour, etiquette and the ability to understand and use them appropriately in the communication process, while remaining a carrier of another culture.

G. A. Vorobjev (2003) notes "socio-cultural competence is a complex phenomenon and includes a set of components belonging to different categories" .According to R.P. Milrud (2004), "sociocultural competence refers to the activity-component of communicative competence. V.V. Safonova (2001) believes that "didactic description of the objectives of socio-cultural education by means of a foreign language is to be done in terms of socio-cultural competence" .Thus, socio-cultural competence can be understood as the possession of and the ability to apply a set of multicultural knowledge, skills and qualities in the process of intercultural communication in the specific conditions of life and tolerance towards people of other nationalities.

The formation of socio-cultural competence is carried out in three stages; each stage has its own challenges due to its objectives;

The first stage is "motivational", i.e. providing psychological readiness to communicate with all learners. M.I. Dyachenko and L.A. Kandybovich (1976) and other scientists

highlight the problem of readiness at different times and from different positions in their research. Accordingly, readiness is a specific mental state that allows one to perceive a certain situation or act it. The aim of this stage is to interest students in acquiring knowledge about different peoples and their cultures, to show how distinctive both the world is and the people around this world, to obtain a positive attitude towards learning about other cultures and to awaken in them the desire to interact with other cultures. P. P. Stepanov (2001) states that the main objective of a teacher is not only to provide information on different cultures, but to alter trainees' treatment of other cultures. At this stage, the native language is preferably used along with English because the information provided in the native language quickly flashes in mind. Watching feature movies and documentaries handling the way of life, traditions and customs of various nationalities and discussing them seems to be influential. Discussion has a specific place in the field of dialogic communication. The main objective of the discussion is the development of communicative culture in the search for the truth. N.A. Astashova (2003) asserts that skillfully organized discussion is the most important form of the methodical development of tolerance. Within the scope of work with trainees by means of directed reflection common cultural values are converted to values of personal character where tolerant relations occupy their rightful place E.M. Adzhieva (2003) believes that the moral value of the idea of a dialogue is in the objective perception of the diversity of the surrounding people, nations and cultures .In the spotlight is the fact that reasonable people all around the world, regardless of their nationality or religion, show tolerance of and respect for each other and appreciate the cultural heritage of the community. The core values of all peoples are the same. Discussing the films seen helps students to penetrate the essence of the question, and gives them a chance to ask questions and express their opinion. This work

makes it possible to achieve the goal – to prepare a new quality of a person – a willingness to cooperate.

The second stage of the formation of socio-cultural competence is "informative". The main goals of this phase are the collecting and processing of learning material, which is the content of training. Depending on the principle that states that the content of education should support understanding and cooperation between peoples and nations, regardless to race, nationality, ethnicity, religion or social origin and take into consideration a variety of philosophical approaches. An interrelation of the activities of teaching (the activity of the teacher) and learning (student activities) is addressed in the material, or in other words, in the content of the subject. The content of education is not only the subject of what you can hear or see in the lesson that is explicitly expressed or clearly represented by a teacher or a student, but also what they think, feel and experience, as well as the mental processes that occur in their "heads" when one opens up and the other develops the world of a different culture. The talking here is about the formation by a trainee of a new consciousness, completely similar to the host consciousness of the target language. The task is to enrich the student's consciousness through initiation into the image of linguistic consciousness of his peers abroad – carriers of other conceptual systems of the world. The perception of any material has a bright personality colour. A preliminary analysis of the materials is stirred up by using one's own experience and available knowledge. Students prepare a monologue speech on the issue, and make up questions. Thus it is not only to get the student familiar with living modern English but also to enrich the vocabulary, broaden the outlook, to immerse in a foreign cultural environment and increase the motivation for learning a foreign language. Training material, as believed, must meet the following criteria: cross-cultural content, modernity, actuality and credibility. The next step is to organize cooperation on the

basis of subject-oriented, motivated communication activities between students themselves on a part and with the teacher on the other. All the complexity of studying a foreign language psychologically speaking is that the attention of the trainee is distributed simultaneously to multiple objects: the definition of the content of statements, selection and fixation of linguistic resources, establishing and keeping in mind a logical sequence of statements, its implementation in the external plan (speaking). During training, the teacher should help the student organize his/her thoughts, clarify the solution to the problem of communication, find ways for its implementation and create the conditions of natural communication in the target language if that language is not an end in itself but a means of communication. Material for communication should not require specialized knowledge, but must arouse interest, inducing the expression of one's own opinion and assessment. Pair or group work creates a situation close to the real conditions of foreign language communication in the classroom. An effective form of group work is gaming technology. The game develops creative thinking, fosters a culture of communication and permits teacher organize spontaneous communication in class when the learning situation becomes natural. V.M. Ustinenko (1980), considering the game as a cultural phenomenon, believes that "the game is one of the ways of learning the world, and self-affirmation of an individual when a person takes on the role (not real but imaginary) and puts himself into a conditional situation" . The game is seen as a means of knowledge and self-knowledge. The right selection of situational roles and themes for the games are of great importance. An unknown subject cannot be the subject of discussion even in their native language, but especially in the foreign language. Minnisa S. Safi na / *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 136 (2014) suggests an independent cognitive activity of students on the given topic or issue. Students learn not only new words but also learn new things



and new ways of doing things. The original idea of this method is to involve students in "learning by doing" activities, which allows them to choose what they want to study and create an end-product based on their activities. The main idea of students' presentations is to reflect the vibrant culture of the people living on different continents. The stage of comprehension, comparing, analyzing and correcting is the most important in the work, as this is exactly where the intellectual growth and development of personality, the disclosure of students' personal potentials and awakening of their interest in knowledge of and familiarity with the foreign culture happens, i.e. the formation of socio-cultural competence. The final stage of the work is the formation of the concept of "socio-cultural competence" together with the students, defining the means of its manifestations in contemporary conditions and its practical consequences. The students make up some possible strategies to oppose prejudice and preconception. Culture learning is a matter of more than overcoming culture shock or getting acquainted with life in a new country. It is the process of personal evolution and transformation. The role of sociocultural competence here is highly emphasized for achieving proficiency in a foreign language. Insufficient knowledge of the target culture, especially of the cultural implications embedded in the target language, very commonly results in breakdowns in communication. Hence, there are strategies for being a good language learner, in addition to certain characteristics that promote successful culture learning. Generally speaking, a good learner of culture thinks that he/she is setting out a journey from a "monoculture point to a large scale world view in which he/she adopts new perspectives, learns new mental, emotional, and behavioral responses. In brief, that person learns to build intercultural bridges and eventually evolves into a new cultural person. Sociocultural competence helps not only to survive but achieve success in an increasingly interdependent global society.

## How to Develop Students' Sociocultural Competence?

New trends nowadays in teaching give a great attention to sociocultural component in teaching a foreign language which is essential for the appropriate use of a foreign language in specific cultural situations. Marianne Celce Murcia (2008) points that culture should be taught as a process. She describes in detail an interactive process that relates target and native languages, cultures, and perceptions. The process incorporates the following eight basic stages, the first five of which are primarily teacher-associated and the final three are student-associated:

1. Identification of a cultural theme
2. Presentation of cultural phenomena
3. Dialogue (target/native cultures)
4. Transition to language learning
5. Language learning
6. Verification of perceptions (target/native culture)
7. Cultural awareness
8. Evaluation of language and cultural proficiency.

She proposes organizing instruction around four basic categories:

-**Convention**, which provides students with information about the common everyday behavior of people;

-**Connotation**, which helps students develop their skills to recognize that the meaning of a word is determined by each individual's frame of reference;

-**Conditioning**, which helps students develop observational and interpretive skills and understand that the actions of individuals reflect an already established cultural frame of reference;

-**Comprehension**, which helps students develop the skills of analysis and hypothesis formation, thereby recognizing that the behavior of one person does not necessarily reflect the behavior of society as a whole.

Chen and Starosta (1998) suggest the following models of intercultural trainings: cognitive (intellectual classroom) model, self-awareness and cultural awareness models, simulation model, and interactional model.

The cognitive (intellectual classroom) training promotes understanding of cultural differences and similarities. It helps participants to get more information about a culture. As the emphasis is laid on cognitive understanding of customs, values, people, geography, and habits of a specific culture, the normally applied methods of teaching are lectures, films, readings, and different kinds of presentations.

This model, however, has its limitations. It only teaches participants "what to learn" but not "how to learn", teaches them to gain knowledge of a culture without knowing how to perform and to adapt behaviorally to it. Overall, this model cannot guarantee success at living or working in a new culture. The self-awareness training helps participants identify attitudes, opinions and biases embedded in their own culture that influence the way they communicate. The emphasis in this model is laid on understanding oneself as a cultural being. Working in groups the participants learn how their own behaviors influence others and what psychological forces operate in groups.

The limitation of this model is its ethnocentric orientation. Although self-awareness is important for being effective in intercultural communication, its focus on the internalized processes of an individual cannot adequately teach participants about factors involved in cultural interaction.

### **3. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS:**

One of the main barriers that encounters a language teacher is how to manage to overcome the problems arisen due to the cultural differences between the learners' native language and the target one, and this of course cannot be tackled apart from

sociocultural competence. So how can the foreign language teacher widen the students' sociocultural competence? An obvious possibility might be to teach culture and sociocultural issues explicitly in the classroom; however, this approach is not an easy matter due to the fact that Culture is hard to master, much or less teaching to students not yet fully competent in the classroom instruction because it is quite difficult and that is why culture is often taught only in the advanced levels classes. In the case of English as a Second Language (ESL), teaching such a sensitive topic as culture to a classroom of students from countries all around the world can be particularly challenging. Another problem is that both culture and sociocultural features are so deeply ingrained within a person that he or she is not even aware of many of these elements on a conscious level, making it hard for teachers to teach their native culture and language to language learners. In response to these difficulties, culture is commonly taught indirectly through literature and facts about the target language country. The development of sociocultural knowledge may not always be effective through these methods alone, and it is beneficial to supplement these methods with approaches that incorporate these topics directly into the teaching syllabus. That is to produce and interpret utterances based on naturalness of language use, or what (Pawley and Syder: 1983) refer to as a native- like way of communication and ability. Hence, students have to be aware of the vast possibilities in which communication is taking place. Learners need to be sensitive to the contexts to which their linguistic knowledge has prepared and readied them; they have to be conscious of the potential contribution they can make by simple using language effectively; and most importantly, they must be intuitive of the ways in which one interaction will take them to a plateau where different interactions will occur. As it can be seen, sociocultural competence goes beyond grammar, connotation, levels of formality, style, register. It is neatly a power that

stimulates knowledge and empowers learners to co-construct new paradigms through communication. **[www.sociolinguisticslaencyclopediafl0.wikispaces.com](http://www.sociolinguisticslaencyclopediafl0.wikispaces.com)**.

At this point, it is important to question how well students use the knowledge they possess; how prepared they are to approach new knowledge; whether they can be perceptive enough to realize they have come across new knowledge; and whether the language classroom can host the production of such knowledge. The most obvious appreciation one can make is that knowledge will emerge in the environment where its structure is addressed (facts, examples, details, hypothesis or thesis); and since certain language structures can directly promote addressing elements of knowledge structure (second conditional in English can be used to study hypothesis), one can logically think that a language classroom that invites and welcomes reality and information beyond the learners' mother culture and that of the language they are learning, will certainly have scope to help students use language for greater purposes than classroom communication. By using language as a means to communicate while exploring different scenarios, students will observe how meaning occurs, how language changes to cope with new discoveries, how language transforms according to social movements, and how language will always be ready to be a significant tool when innovating. For instance, what (**[www.iteslj.org/Techniques/Cullen-Culture](http://www.iteslj.org/Techniques/Cullen-Culture)**) indicates about how many languages have a word for 'software'? In Spanish for instance, the word is used as it is for there is no official term yet; how has the meaning of the word *gay* changed from Shakespeare's times to the present? And how will one know when using X word is no longer appropriate? Interaction with native speakers might be a reliable tool that will help learners understand the way language is used in a successful manner, experimenting with different situations and with a wide range of information might also help students devise means to use their sociocultural knowledge to fulfill the needs of the situation

they are encountered with. Despite the fact that direct exposure to and immersion in the target language can further enhance learners' skills, it is also the quality of information being addressed what will help construct different learning scenarios. It is important to point out that language classes based on books or with limited explorations are fruitless. It is recognized that teachers encounter several complications and difficulties when attempting to prepare a class architecture that favors the presence of sociocultural elements that will allow students to become linguistically and culturally aware. It is even clear how having a native speaker as a teacher does not guarantee a fully successful exposure to all the societal and linguistic traits that can help learners develop language skills that will render interactions that will handle knowledge. Thus, in order to transform the foreign language class into an environment where students will become acquainted with ideas and information that will enrich their backgrounds and will nurture their linguistic potential, it is important to regard the foreign language class not as the fountain from which students will drink off knowledge, but as the glass of water that will help quench their thirst. In other words, as a simple stage for students still have to test the language skills and the information they have acquired in the real world, in their own significant context, and with the people who are relevant to them. The focus, it is important to note, is that students own their language, their skills and the information they acquire and it is only them who will witness how effective their learning has been.(ibid)

Thus a teacher might benefit from, audio-recorded data which are great exemplars for listening comprehension; printed documents as newspapers, magazines or pamphlets are outstanding reading comprehension; scientific and technological developments recorded in multimedia are great scenarios for oral and written discussions. These examples are clear

illustrations of the way language is used to study, document, question and write about the nature of a certain society.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY:**

The research methodology of the present study is based on the experiment. It is concerned with the teaching period of the course for the experimental group where students' perception about different cultures in the world usually shapes their socio-cultural competence and this competence in return enables them to understand the target language better and easier. Students in this research were asked to increase their information about the target language culture in these ways:

- Surfing Wikipedia (Free Web-based Encyclopedia) and Google (The Most Popular Search Engine on the Internet).
- Watching satellite channels such as: National Geographic, Euro News, BBC and Travel Channels.
- Asking the students who travelled to English speaking countries to share their experiences and real-life situations in addition to videos or photos they have got.
- Reading books, papers, magazines, brochures and any other printed sources of information about target language culture i.e. those handling daily life interests, historic figures, museums, movie stars, fashion, galleries and even trademark restaurants to have more crystal view and perspective of the society where target language is spoken.

Unlike other language constructs, socio-cultural factors are rather tangible and it is not very difficult to discover about the culture of a country when you live out of that society, therefore, in doing this research these combined techniques were used. The students were asked to write down whatever they find out or read about the target language in their profile online even photos or shots of daily life of target language society where downloaded with students' comments on each. After a three –month following up of the students' posts by the

researcher, the students were asked to respond to the items of an adapted online test <http://clear.msu.edu/teaching/eopam/> to assess their target language proficiency through sociocultural competence. The test has been validated by being reviewed by a group of experts in the field in the University of Baghdad and the College of Education/Ibn Rushd, Department of English Language and according to their remarks the test was adjusted and administered to the fourth year students at the college of Education/Ibn-Rushd in the second semester to assess their proficiency due to their knowledge of sociocultural competence. The test consists of (12) pictures reflect certain daily life situations .i.e each picture is to express certain situation through the facial expressions or gestures performed by the native speakers. The student is supposed to respond to the right answer among the four options given out of his knowledge of the target language culture. The daily life situations were respectively; (*fast food*), (*weekend planning*), (*flight tickets buying*), (*outdoor party*), (*preparation for the university*), (*policeman and tourist*), (*Math homework*), (*at sport place*), (*at shopping*), (*at home*), (*on the phone*) and (*in the bus station*).

The test was administered to the Experimental Group and Control Group. The two groups consisted of 60 students each (30 of pre-test and 30 for the post-test). At first the pre-test was given to the two groups in the first semester where students are required to choose the right answer among the four options given. After three months of continuous following ups to the profile of the experimental group the researcher was to finalize the empirical study and the teaching period by a post-test for the same two groups and to make a comparison between the results of the pre-test and the results of the post-test of the two groups. In comparing the results of the two groups, it has been turned out that there is a clear difference in the results of the post-test in favour of the experimental group which has been taught the model course. This proves that teaching of the model course for the experimental group was



effective and teaching language through sociocultural competence in collaboration with the latest technological facilities online virtually participates flourishing students' target language proficiency; the matter which eventually have students made an accelerate progress in digesting the target language culture in addition to coping with the outstanding nowadays instructional processes through web in favour of better and more proficient language learners.

## **CONCLUSIONS:**

Modern conception of the foreign languages education is based on the integrated teaching language and culture of the studied language. Thus, in teaching English it is necessary to strengthen its socio-cultural component and to focus on cultural aspect of the target language since culture is enormous and it consists of all human beings behaviours.

Development of students' socio-cultural competence presumes the fact that all people show culturally-conditioned behavior, realizing that social differences like age, sex, social class and environment greatly affect people's speech and behavior, developing tolerant attitude to other cultures, getting familiar with conventional behaviour of different cultures individuals in various situations, developing the ability to recognize cultural connotations and decoding them, teaching students how to identify, distinguish and productively apply cultural codes for the best results of communication, improving students' ability to define how their own socio-cultural belonging influences their behaviour and teaching them to correct their own acts according to situations. Providing learners with exercises that help develop the sense of cultural context and give students background knowledge is of great deal importance, recognizing cultural images and symbols, working with cultural products like souvenirs, money, headlines and poems, exploring values and attitudes, exploring

song lyrics, determining contextual clues all these can participate ultimately enriching learners' sociocultural aspect.

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### **Online Resources:**

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2. [www.iteslj.org/Techniques/Cullen-Culture](http://www.iteslj.org/Techniques/Cullen-Culture)
3. <http://clear.msu.edu/teaching/eopam/>