Communicative Competence in British Assessing Intercultural Council Algeria

تقييم الكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات في المجلس الثقافي البريطاني بالجزائر

Amal Boukhedenna

Mohammed Seddik Benyahia University, Jijel, Algeria.

amalboukhedenna16@gmail.com

Abstract

Due to globalization and technological advancement, the world has become open and people have unrestricted access to an infinite amount of resources. Computer technology and web-based gadgets are hereby considered imperative for personal, educational, and professional development. Reliance on computer-based instruction has rendered the teaching and the learning processes appealing and rarefied. The result, or the basic outcome, would be individuals able to fit in the ever-changing globalized world and who are able to transcend far beyond content users to content creators. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate what contributions computer assisted language learning (CALL) has on the educational system in general and on students in particular, and how effective teaching and learning can be optimized. Another aim of this research is to recognize how CALL contributes to the behavioral, cognitive, and meta-cognitive development of the learners. British Council is a web-based platform that offers varied instructional contents for learners from across the globe. This paper seeks to show how British Council, as a form of CALL, contributes in developing learners' communicative competence and intercultural skills.

Key words: British Council, Call, Communicative competence, Intercultural communicative skills

الملخص

في ظل العولمة والتقدم التكنولوجي، أصبح العالم أكثر انفتاحا وأصبح بمقدور الناس الوصول إلى الموارد دون قيود. وعليه تعتبر تكنولوجيا الكمبيوتر والأدوات المستندة إلى الويب أمرًا ضروريًا للتطوير الشخصي والتعليمي والمهني. أدى الاعتماد على التعليم القائم على الكمبيوتر إلى جعل عمليات التدريس والتعلم جذابة ومخلخلة. النتيجة الأساسية أن الأفراد سيكونون قادرين على التكيف مع عالم العولمة المتغير باستمرار وقادرين على تجاوز مستخدمي المحتوى إلى منشئي المحتوى. الغرض من هذه الدراسة هو توضيح مساهمات تعلم اللغة بمساعدة الكمبيوتر (CALL) في النظام التعليمي بشكل عام وعلى الطلاب بشكل خاص، وكيف يمكن تحسين التدريس والتعلم الفعال. الهدف الآخر من هذا البحث هو التعرف على كيفية مساهمة CALL في التطور السلوكي والمعرفي وما وراء المعرفي للمتعلمين. المجلس الثقافي البريطاني هو عبارة عن منصة على شبكة الإنترنت تقدم محتويات تعليمية متنوعة للمتعلمين من جميع أنحاء العالم. تسعى هذه الورقة إلى إظهار كيف يساهم المجلس الثقافي البريطاني، كشكل من أشكال CALL ، في تطوير مهارات التواصل والمهارات بين الثقافات لدى المتعلمين.

الكلمات الدالة: المجلس الثقافي البريطاني، الاتصال، الكفاءة التواصلية مهارات التواصل بين الثقافات

1.   Introduction

Learning a second or foreign language has become a must in today's globalized world. Language is essential for conducting exchanges and conversations with people from different backgrounds. The notion of *lingua franca* has gained momentum in the last decades. English is now seen as the world's *lingua franca* as it is spoken by more than 900 million people worldwide. Still, learning English as a foreign language on its own is not enough. As pointed out by Schenker (2012), being a competent speaker of any language is not necessarily enough for communicating successfully with people from different cultural backgrounds. "Today, the goal of the second language (L2) or foreign language (FL) learner is to be an intercultural speaker gaining insight into their own and the other cultures" (Avgousti, 2018, p. 2).

More than any time, the role that technology plays in learning foreign languages has become immensely significant. The contributions of technology have rendered traditional teaching methods futile. Development in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) offers many substitutes to traditional classrooms. Online learning has become a trend. In the light of this, learners of different ages and spheres of the world can sit all together for online lessons on an infinite number of platforms.

British Council, a form of online learning, is an international organization launched by the UK in an attempt to offer educational opportunities for people from outside the UK and to strengthen cultural relations. Working in more than a hundred countries in North Africa, including Algeria, and the Middle East, the council seeks to "create international opportunities for the people of the UK and other countries and build trust between them worldwide" (British Council, 2014, p. 1).

Algerian students in their quest to develop the speaking skill, which are paramount for communication, rely on a number of web-based platforms like British Council. British Council Algeria is a cultural, scientific, technological, and educational initiative meant to increase cultural and educational opportunities in Algeria. This platform offers a myriad of activities, podcasts, video conversations and more for the sake of promoting wider knowledge of the United Kingdom's culture and language. Learners, of all ages, not only use the knowledge offered but help also in creating it.

One of the main aims of this project is to develop language programs that would be helpful for specific (mainly professional) purposes. In this globalized age, the world is in need of intercultural workers who are able to mediate between their native language and culture and the foreign language and culture. More than any time ever, the number of Algerians working in foreign countries in increasing.

Statistics show that there are 10.000 Algerian expatriates in the UAE, 49.110 in Canada, 40.000 in China, 15.000 in America, and 35.000 in England. These Algerians need not only the English language but they also need to be equipped with intercultural skills in order to fit in these countries and their respective cultures.

British Council Algeria, thereby, contributes in a way or another in developing Algerian learners' intercultural communicative awareness and skills. It is not a mere teaching program to promote language acquisition. After having been exposed to podcasts, conversation videos and after having taken an active part in mobilizing knowledge, learners reflect on "their participation in authentic scenarios involving communication with representatives of other cultures" (Marczak & Krajka, 2016, p. 9). They develop sensitivity towards and understanding of the target culture. In this sense, learners' "knowledge, awareness and understanding of the relation (similarities and distinctive differences) between the 'world of origin' and the 'world of the target community' produce an intercultural awareness" (COE, 2001, p. 103) and develop their "ability to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other; [develop their] cultural sensitivity and the ability to identify and use a variety of strategies for contact with those from other cultures; the capacity to fulfill the role of cultural intermediary between one's own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations; [and] the ability to overcome stereotyped relationships" (CEO, 2001, p. 104-105). Subsequently, this new awareness and understanding of the other cuts across issues like racism, stereotypes and misunderstandings. Differences, be they cultural, linguistic, or racial, motivate people to communicate more. The success of communication among people of different cultural backgrounds is attributed to how much *inter-culturally* competent the participants in the communication are. Thus, the current paper looks at the role that British Council Algeria, as a learning platform, can play in developing the Algerian learners' intercultural communicative competence.

2.   Podcasts That Foster Intercultural Skills

British Council Algeria offers both payable and free courses for kids, teens, adults, university students, and for business people. In addition to the payable courses, the platform provides many free downloadable materials and resources. In addition to the four skills, British Council Algeria has grammar, vocabulary tasks and both training in general and business English. Variety in tasks and content is meant to serve one aim; that is, to promote fluency in communication and to produce speakers who are able to fit in the different situations they might encounter. The aim is not only to diffuse knowledge about the language, but about its culture as well and about other skills that would serve learners when

facing different situations. Podcasts can last up to five minutes with a section for the transcript and another section for comprehension tasks. The podcasts, materials and resources available on the platform offer engaging and interesting content on a wide range of topics. Audios of people speaking naturally about different topics, with different characters, accents, and levels address not only comprehension and vocabulary but also arises the learners' interest in the topic bordered creating in them the desire to search more about the topic, backgrounds of the speakers, and the different accents and registers. There is also a myriad of series such as *Starting out*, *Big City Small World, Word of the Street*, *Britain in Great*, *Shakespeare* and so on. Within each series, there is a wide range of topics like art, black-pool, dating, education, indoor sports, jobs, music, Oxford, Paris, social media and more.

3.   Intercultural Communicative Competence

Roughly speaking, competence is the person's knowledge of his/ her language's rules. Competence is seen in opposition to performance which refers to the actual utterances produced as a speaker. Competence is thought of as perfect and idealized while performance may contain flaws, slip of tongues, and mistakes that could be attributed to external factors exerting pressure on the speaker. These factors could be physical, psychological and even social. The notion of competence was initially introduced by Chomsky (1965). After he criticized Chomsky's dichotomy (competence vs. performance), Dell Hymes (1972) introduced the notion of 'communicative competence'. This type of competence is not only about the use of correct grammatical utterances but also about the appropriateness of these utterances to achieve effective communication. Van Ek (1987) developed a model in which he provides the six components of communicative ability. The components of the model are linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, socio-cultural competence, and social competence.

In recent years, focus has shifted from developing competence to be able to communicate in an appropriate manner linguistically, socio-linguistically, and pragmatically in different situations (COE, 2001) to developing 'intercultural communicative competence' which refers to "the ability of a person to behave adequately in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures" (Meyer, 1991, p. 138). Intercultural communicative competence in a simpler sense encompasses communicative competence and enlarges its definition to include intercultural skills.

Although the often stated aim of learning a foreign language is to develop communication skills, the new concept coined by Byram enlarged it to include

intercultural skills. In the light of this new notion, focus is no longer on communicating and exchanging effectively but rather on "the ability to de-centre and take up the other's perspective on their own culture, anticipating and where possible, resolving dysfunctions in communication and behavior" (Byram, 1997, p. 42). In Byram's model (1997) and according to the Council of Europe (2001), competence consists of knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Knowledge or *savoirs* "is understood as knowledge resulting from experience (empirical knowledge) and from more formal learning (academic knowledge)" while attitudes (also known as existential competence or *savoir être*) refers to "the sum of the individual characteristics, personality traits and attitudes which concern, for example, self-image and one's view of others and willingness to engage with other people in social interaction" (COE, 2001, p. 11). On the other hand, skills can be sub-divided into skills of discovery and interaction (also known as *savoir faire*) which "are related to the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes, and skills under the constraints of real-time communication"; skills of interpreting and relating (also known as *savoir comprêndre*) which "mean ability to identify and explain cultural perspectives and mediate between and function in new cultural contexts"; and skills of critical cultural awareness (also known as *savoir engager*) which are "defined as the ability to evaluate critically the perspectives and practices in one's own and other cultures" (Atay et. al., 2009, p. 124).

4.   Rationale behind British Council Algeria

Being home to 18 of the world's 100 top universities (QS World University Rankings), and with some the greatest educational methods and resources, the development of British Council as an organization and British Council Algeria as a learning platform is meant to "create friendly knowledge and understanding between the people of the UK and other countries" (British Council, 2018, p. 4) and to "share lessons and help strengthen international reputation and leadership in cultural relations" (p. 30). The council seeks to achieve a two-edged purpose with this platform, recognizing and highlighting the necessity of bridging the gap between the native and the foreign languages cultural elements.

The approach that British Council Algeria adopts, roughly speaking, is action-oriented. Learners are seen "as 'social agents', i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action" (COE, 2001, p. 9). Accordingly, the use of this platform ensures that:

Language use, embracing language learning, comprises the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of competences, [competences being defined as the sum of knowledge, skills and attitudes] both general and in particular communicative language competences.

They draw on the competences at their disposal in various contexts under various conditions and under various constraints to engage in language activities involving language processes to produce and/or receive texts in relation to themes in specific domains, activating those strategies which seem most appropriate for carrying out the tasks to be accomplished. (COE, 2001, p. 9)

Consequently, British Council Algeria aims at developing learners' knowledge (savoirs) of the language and its culture assuming that successful communication requires a sum of knowledge shared and common among the participants in the act of communication. In Byram's words (1997), communication requires 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" (p. 51). The content and the activities presented on the platform range in level from beginner to intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced. Depending on how much knowledgeable the learner is of the practices, and social acts of his native and the target country, podcasts and conversation videos on British Council Algeria drive learners to be more aware of the existing similarities and differences of everyday living practices, values, beliefs, attitudes body language, gestures, and social conventions.

The platform contributes in developing learners' attitudes (savoir être). Attitudes refer to the sense of curiosity that learners develop about the target language and culture. This curiosity results into a feeling of acceptance and willingness "to see other cultures and the speaker's own without being judgmental" (Byram, 1997, p. 51). In addition to attitudes, British Council contributes in developing the learners' skills of interpreting and relating, discovery and interaction in addition to critical cultural awareness/political education. In other words, British Council presents and seeks to develop five constructs. These are Knowledge, attitudes, skills, awareness and language proficiency (Fantini, 2000).

Any subscriber to the platform must be in possession of "knowledge of one, or, preferably, more cultures and social identities and has the capacity to discover and relate to new people from other contexts for which they have not been prepared directly" (Byram and Fleming 1998, p. 9). This knowledge of one or more cultures is what is referred to as intercultural communicative competence. The latter can be simply defined "in the wider sense of the word [as] the use of significantly different linguistic codes and contact between people holding significantly different sets of values and models of the world […] Intercultural competence is to a large extent the ability to cope with one's own cultural background in interaction with others" (Beneke, 2000, p. 108-109).

5.   Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence in British Council Algeria

After having accessed the platform on your browser (https://www.britishcouncil.dz/en), choose a category (it could be English for kids and teens, for adults beginner or intermediate, university students, or English for the workplace). Following a successful registration process where you include a username, an e-mail address and a password, you get your own British Council account. Once you have logged in, you choose a particular skill you want to work on. Then, you choose your level (it could be beginner A1, elementary A2, intermediate B1, upper intermediate B2, or advanced C1). If you opt to start with the listening skill for instance, you will get a variety of listening podcasts along with tasks for checking understanding (it could be a true or false task or a fill in the gaps task), downloadable worksheets containing extra tasks, key answers, the transcript, and a forum for discussions and comments. The platform offers many activities apart from the courses and the four skills. You can take exams, or study breaks. The latter involves entertaining activities such as video zone, you-tubers (where you can find an infinite number of videos with subtitles and transcript to help you improve your English) , or photo captions (where they present photos and ask you to write funny comments about them to be shared with the community of learners from all the corners of the world).

Listening podcasts have enticing titles that help learners make associations with the title and try to predict what could be the content of the podcast. Some of the podcasts are entitled *Eating Out*, *Going to the Cinema*, *Free Time*, *Shopping for Clothes*, *Taking Notes, Stop Wasting your Time*, *Using Colors to do Homework*, *Travelling Abroad* and so on. The thumbnail pictures are also attractive and match the titles of the podcasts. The while-listening tasks are meant to develop the learners' listening comprehension, to hear other cultures in an authentic way, to make learners put their imagination to work, to help learners develop their interpretation skills, and make learners think critically and see things from different perspectives. As for videos, variety and interest in content are assured. There are some preparation tasks before watching the video and after-watching tasks. There are YouTube videos where learners can pay attention to the body language and the gestures of the speaker, similarities and differences between different countries, the cultural identity of the speaker, family life, customs, and celebrations. The listener would be driven to find out why does the speaker in the video move or use gestures in a certain manner, try to imagine himself/ herself undergoing the situation or teleport it to his own culture, and develop an opinion about the content of the video.

The forum where learners can leave comment about the content of the video and discussing it with other learners serves as a follow-up task where learners can

criticize, judge, evaluate, and even rate the content of the video. They can even provide brief summaries of the video or sum up the general ideas. The comments space serves as an outlet for learners. The idea of creating a commentary space for subscribers in British Council or any other online learning platform has gained paramount ground as a result of its usefulness. Not only commenting, but learners can exchange ideas and opinions, work together on a particular task and in a way or another practice and assess their ability to communicate. Along with the practice and assessment of communicative competence, learners of different cultures try to find common ground for communication and bridge the gap among one another. These instructional guided videos also push learners to find a way to write about their opinions on the video in the form of a diary, journaling, or even stories of their own to mimic the content of the video. It contributes immensely in developing their creative writing skills.

6.   Conclusion

Krakowian (2016) states that within Byram's framework (1997), there are "three main components of intercultural competence: openness, adaptability and knowledge" (p. 96). Consequently, there are many advantages to using British Council by Algerian learners. They not only develop their linguistic, sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse competences, but they also learn to behave flexibly when faced with content of the target language. In this sense, Algerian learners acquire how to view things from different perspectives, and not only theirs. In a way, it helps them avoid developing stereotypes about the target language and culture, prevents them from falling in the trap of common misunderstandings, and most importantly averts fostering racism (Angelova & Zhao, 2014; Avgousti, 2018; Bray, 2010; CEO, 2001; Chun, 2011; Lee, 2009 and 2011). Despite having the air of idealism, learners would get used to others' cultures and develop respect regardless of the differences. They would also develop curiosity towards other cultures and it would spike their desire to know more. Most importantly, they would develop empathy and seek to put themselves in others' shoes and to see through their lenses.

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