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The Effect of Cultural Loadedness on Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition by Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

The present study, through a quasi-experimental design with a sample of 90 Persian-speaking adult EFL learners, investigated the possible effects of cultural loadedness on incidental acquisition and retention of different aspects of vocabulary knowledge. Cultural loadedness was defined in the context of the study as whether or not the target words connote any significantly different cultural information beyond their primary meaning(s) in the learners' L1. The findings indicated that culturally-loaded words could possibly cause extra difficulty in the semantic aspects of vocabulary knowledge such as receptive and productive knowledge of meaning and association. However, no significant difference was found between these words and their culturally-neutral counterparts in other facets of vocabulary knowledge such as knowledge of parts of speech or orthography. Potential reasons for these results as well as pedagogical implications are discussed.

Keywords: Cultural loadedness, Incidental vocabulary acquisition, Vocabulary knowledge, Persian-speaking learners.

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Introduction

Within the perspective of incidental vocabulary acquisition (i.e. learning new words in the context of reading), the researchers were interested to investigate the possible effects of cultural loadedness on successful acquisition and retention of new English vocabulary. To this end, cultural loadedness was defined in the context of this study in terms of significantly different cultural connotations of L2 vocabulary (Qi-min, 2010). That is, culturally-loaded (CL, hereafter) words referred to those English (i.e. L2) words which shared the same primary meaning(s) with their Persian (i.e. L1) counterparts but significantly differed in what they culturally connoted (or implied) in the learners' first language and culture, most often concerning with communicative appropriateness or negative feelings (Liu & Zhong, 1999). The English word 'wine', for example, is readily translatable as 'sharaab' into Persian, encompassing all semantic features of its primary meaning as an alcoholic drink made from grape juice. However, within the Islamic-oriented culture of most Persian speakers (who are mainly Muslims), this word also strongly connotes a religiously (and even legally) prohibited drink which being associated with it, arouse publicly negative feelings, especially, within the Iranian context of this study were the participants were taken from. This cultural difference (or loadedness) between an L2 word and its L1 equivalent, however, needs not be confined to social inappropriateness or religious prohibition but it may be related to what schematic realization a CL word triggers in the learners' mind. The English word, 'wedding' and its Persian equivalent both are associated with feelings of happiness. Nevertheless, since such ceremony is conducted in a totally different way in Western cultures than what is normally practiced in Iran, it requires significantly different semantic presuppositions and associations. While providing a full account of CL words is beyond the limits of the present study, it should be noticed that such words permeate all languages (see Ciornei & Tamaga, 2013; Liu & Zhong, 1999 for related issues). To the best of our knowledge, however, this is the first study to operationally define and address the incidental acquisition of CL words.

CL words, in this study, have placed against culturally neutral (CN, hereafter) words. As their name may suggest, CN words refer to those L2 words that lack the excess cultural connotations exemplified in the above examples. In other words, such words not only cover

MJAL 6:2 Summer 2014 ISSN 0974-8741

the same range of primary meanings but also convey almost the same connotations in comparison with the learners' L1 (here, Persian). Based on this definition, thus, quite a great number of English words fall into this category. It is also worth noting that to decide upon to which category (i.e. CL or CN) an English word could rightly belong was an important phase of the present study which took place through a strict procedure of investigation and validation over a period of six months and with the help of more than 40 volunteers (see the subsection 'target words' for further information).

Background

While the importance of culturally-loaded words has been recognized for a long time (Lado, 1972), there are few studies on culturally-loaded words in general, mainly with a focus on the understanding of these words by EFL learners compared with English native speakers rather than their L2 acquisition (Liu & Zhong, 1999; Zhao, 2004). Therefore, an investigation into possible effects of cultural-loadedness on incidental vocabulary acquisition seems entirely new and promising. In the following lines, the few studies that the researchers have found (to some extent) germane, are briefly mentioned.

Liu and Zhong (1999) in their study, compared Chinese learners of English and native English speakers on their understanding of six culturally-loaded words by rating the appropriateness of each word. It was found that most L2 learners (even advanced ones) demonstrated limited, insufficient understanding of culturally-loaded words in comparison with native speakers. In a somewhat related study, Zhao (2004) explored the effect of enhanced cultural awareness on the performance of 40 advanced Chinese students in evaluating the appropriate usage of 20 culturally-loaded words. The findings, in general, indicated that increasing the participants' awareness of the TWs' cultural connotations could significantly affect their correct judgment of CL words in English texts.

The study

The present study through a quasi-experimental design investigated the possible effects of cultural loadedness on successful incidental vocabulary acquisition and retention of 10 target words (TWs) by 90 Persian-speaking EFL learners. Furthermore, of particular interest to this

study was to know how any observed gain in learners' vocabulary knowledge is retained over time. Therefore, retention (within a three-week span) is also taken into account by a delayed vocabulary posttest. This study was part of a larger project (to be reported in future) which, in addition to cultural loadedness, explored the effects of L1 lexicalization and exposure frequency on incidental vocabulary acquisition and retention. This study aimed at addressing two important research questions:

1. Do Iranian EFL learners have difficulty in learning TWs which are culturally-loaded in comparison with their L1 (i.e. Persian)? Which aspects of vocabulary knowledge are more involved?
2. How will the observed effects of cultural loadedness, if any, differ after a three-week delay? (retention)

Participants

Overall, 90 participants took part in this study. Based on the number of exposures to target words (TWs, hereafter), they were equally classified into three groups (E1, E3 and E7). The participants were all Iranian young adult learners of English at an Iranian university. To choose these participants, first, a group of 128 EFL learners sat for Oxford Placement Test. Then, based on their scores in the test as well as their educational records, 111 were ensured to be at the intermediate level of language proficiency. Afterwards, Vocabulary Levels Test (Nation 1990) was administered to assure the equality of the participants in terms of their current vocabulary knowledge. Finally, out of 98 remaining learners, 90 were chosen as final participants of the study.

Materials and Instruments

Target words (TWs)

There were 10 target words (TWs) which were evenly grouped into two categories: Culturally-loaded (CL) and culturally-neutral (CN). They all together included four verbs, four nouns and two adjectives. To select the target words, following Paribakht (2005), the researchers asked 40 university students who were native speakers of Persian and fluent in English, to voluntarily prepare a list of words from their English readings over a period of 6

MJAL 6:2 Summer 2014 ISSN 0974-8741

months that they thought intuitively had the necessary requirements to fall into one of the two categories of target words (i.e. CL or CN). Frequency of the words was also taken into account through Collins COBUILD English dictionary's (1995) word frequency categorization system (see Paribakht (2005) for further information).

Reading passages

Overall, there were 13 reading passages with almost the same length and difficulty level (average length was 250 words). Seven of these passages each contained all 10 TWs in the study. Whereas, the other six passages did not. The former served as the main reading passages (abbreviated as M) while the latter was actually distracters (abbreviated as D). See Table 1 for the arrangement of main and distracter passages for each experimental group.

Table 1. Distribution of reading passages

Group	Distribution of Main and Distracter passages							exposure
E1	D_1	D_2	D_3	D_4	D_5	D_6	M_7	1
E3	M_1	D_2	D_3	M_4	D_5	D_6	M_7	3
E7	M_1	M_2	M_3	M_4	M_5	M_6	M_7	7

Vocabulary post-test

Following Chen and Truscott (2010) and also Heidari-Shahreza and Tavakoli (2012), a modified version of Webb's (2007) test of vocabulary knowledge was employed (see Table 2). It incorporated seven subtests assessing different aspects of vocabulary knowledge such as knowledge of parts of speech, meaning and form or knowledge of association.

Table 2. Vocabulary knowledge posttest

No.	Knowledge measured	Test type
1	Productive Knowledge of Orthographic Form (PO)	Dictation
2	Receptive Knowledge of Orthographic Form (RO)	Multiple choice
3	Productive Knowledge of Parts of Speech (PP)	Sentence construction
4	Receptive Knowledge of Parts of Speech (RP)	Multiple choice
5	Productive Knowledge of Associations (PA)	Pragmatic association
6	Receptive Knowledge of Associations (RA)	Multiple choice

MJAL 6:2 Summer 2014 **ISSN 0974-8741**

7	Receptive Knowledge of Meaning and Form RMF)	Translation (L2-L1)

Based on the design of the study (i.e. E1, E3 or E7), all participants read seven reading passages. Right after reading the passages, the participants sat for the vocabulary post-test. This test, as mentioned above, consisted of seven subtests each measuring different aspects of receptive and productive knowledge of vocabulary (see Table 3). Three weeks after the administration of the vocabulary post-test, the participants, once again, took the test.

Findings

As Table 3 indicates there was a significant difference between the mean scores for CL words compared with CN words for group E7 on the three subtests of Receptive Knowledge of Meaning and Form (RMF), Productive Knowledge of Associations (PA) and Receptive Knowledge of Associations (RA). However, in all other cases, there were no statistically significant differences between CL and CN words.

Table 3. Comparison between CL and CN words in the immediate post-test

Group	E1	E3	E7
Subtest	CL vs. CN	CL vs. CN	CL vs. CN
Productive Knowledge of Orthographic Form	0.145	0.455	0.352
Receptive Knowledge of Orthographic Form	0.645	0.376	0.346
Receptive Knowledge of Meaning and Form	0.431	0.263	0.045*
Productive Knowledge of Parts of Speech	0.134	0.319	0.265
Productive Knowledge of Associations	0.347	0.634	0.026*
Receptive Knowledge of Parts of Speech	0.562	0.296	0.441
Receptive Knowledge of Associations	0.205	0.219	0.033*

Note: * = $p < .05$; CL: culturally-loaded; CN: culturally-neutral

As shown in Table 4, the same significant differences were observed as for the immediate post-test on Receptive Knowledge of Meaning and Form (RMF) and Receptive Knowledge of Associations (RA) for group E7. However, unlike the immediate post-test, the mean score differences between CL and CN words did not reach statistical significance on Productive Knowledge of Associations for group E7.

MJAL 6:2 Summer 2014 **ISSN 0974-8741**

Table 4. Comparison between CL and CN words in the delayed post-test

Group	E1	E3	E7
Subtest	CL vs. CN	CL vs. CN	CL vs. CN
Productive Knowledge of Orthographic Form	0.234	0.359	0.390
Receptive Knowledge of Orthographic Form	0.701	0.541	0.318
Receptive Knowledge of Meaning and Form	0.341	0.357	0.038*
Productive Knowledge of Parts of Speech	0.360	0.274	0.402
Productive Knowledge of Associations	0.195	0.476	0.239
Receptive Knowledge of Parts of Speech	0.632	0.538	0.307
Receptive Knowledge of Associations	0.481	0.520	0.012*

Note: *= $p < .05$; CL: culturally-loaded; CN: culturally-neutral

Discussion

Significant differences in learning between CL and CN words were generally found in the semantic aspects of vocabulary knowledge, particularly meaning and associations. More specifically, the main difference between the results obtained for different aspects of vocabulary knowledge lay in the subtests of Receptive Knowledge of Associations (RA) and Receptive Knowledge of Meaning and Form (RMF). In this regard, for only group E7, the difference between CL and CN words reached statistical significance in the immediate post-test. However, the observed differences again reached statistical significance in the delayed post-test which among other things may reveal different nature of culturally-loaded words

While definitely further research is needed to fully account for such differences between different aspects of vocabulary knowledge, the present literature suggest that learners' L1 lexicon mediate between the initial form-meaning linkage process of an L2 word (Paribakht, 2005). That is to say, an L2 word is first attached to a representation of the corresponding L1 word that already exists in learners' mental lexicon. Therefore, cognitively speaking, L1 is activated during L2 lexical processing and L1 translation plays an important role in the initial form-meaning linkage (Elgort, 2012). As for the acquisition of L2 culturally-loaded words, since these words have excess culturally-different associations related to their L1 (as their name suggests), there is a mismatch between the meaning such words imply in their L2 context (e.g. a reading passage) and the meaning attached to them based on the learners' L1-oriented mental lexicon (see also Zareva & Wolter, 2012). Hence, it might be the case that to

acquire culturally-loaded words, learners benefit less from their L1 in the initial form-meaning link or need more exposure to compensate for any semantic (, cultural) mismatch.

Conclusion

It is recommended that English teachers invest more time and energy in teaching culturally-loaded words, highlighting those semantic (, cultural) aspects of their meaning which may not be readily inferred by the learners as they go along reading different passages. Moreover, although L1-L2 translation has remained a popular (perhaps effective) strategy and technique for EFL learners and teachers respectively (see for example, Yavuz, 2012), it may not be so useful in dealing with culturally-loaded words since L1 equivalents do not sufficiently encompass their semantic features. Thus, explicit instruction and L2 glossing as it usually appears on the margin of reading passages may be more effective techniques to tackle culturally-loaded words in a simple and efficient manner.

This study was, of course, limited in a number of ways. Firstly, only 10 target words were employed in this study. Secondly, its participants were only the adult learners of one single university at the intermediate level of language proficiency. Finally, the study used only quantitative measures of vocabulary knowledge.

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