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Rationale Paper

Introduction

Teaching a critical language like Arabic is a complicated and challenging process. (A critical language is one which the United States government has considered strategically important for reasons of diplomacy, trade and national security). I once had a student who worked for the U.S Department of Labor. He came one day with a newspaper article in hand. The article described that Harvard students were using a depressing stereotyped Arabic book to learn from. This event motivated me to create my own curriculum and deconstruct biases by presenting more diverse and less biased perspectives of Arabic-Speaking countries for my students. My goal was, and still is, to show the beauty and the rich history of the Middle East with a focus on Lebanon, my country of origin.

Firstly, I realized that being a native speaker of the language I teach may impact my students because they would see the culture through my lens instead of relying only on what they see in the media and what they read about in the news. So how can I use my experiences to benefit and empower my students? Although teachers teach who they are, they must carefully select the materials they aim to use and be careful when sharing their insights and beliefs, so they are not inadvertently imposing them on their students. Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2001) explain that many of our thoughts and beliefs have been formed by our own experiences,

therefore, it is very important to be aware of them as they guide our actions when we teach and interact with our students.

Secondly, Arabic teachers face many challenges when planning for their lessons because of the lack of non-biased materials in the market. Teachers of other languages may also face such challenges. Moreover, if language teachers want what Masuhara (2011) wants a course book that is engaging, inspiring, flexible, and effective, teachers then need to work on modifying what they already have and design interactive lessons which suit their students' needs and make the learning experience richer. To teach the whole person, teachers need to cultivate vision, emphasize real-life application, interact with a positive attitude, develop critical awareness, and contribute to building students' resilience. Therefore, the aim should not just be to expand their knowledge and acquisition of the language.

The idea of designing a curriculum that combines language and culture is intriguing. Teachers of Arabic need to remind themselves about the diversity of the Arab world and the importance of teaching language and culture(s) together. In addition, Arabic teachers have the responsibility to explain to their students with an open mind and answer the following questions before they start their course: What does it mean to be an Arab? Is being an Arab different from being an Arabic speaker? Are there any differences between the Arabic countries and the Middle East region? What is the connection between being a Muslim and speaking Arabic? Does this mean all Arabs are Muslims? What thoughts and values do these words/questions bring with them? Does sharing the same language mean sharing the same culture?

For all these reasons and to answer these questions, I decided to create teachers' materials and design an online Arabic course directed for students for my EM project.

Literature Review

Although teachers have a distinctive role in knitting the fabric of the target language and culture that is being created continually with their students within and beyond the classroom (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013) students also bring their personal experiences and interpretations to the classroom. However, do these interpretations project a static view or a dynamic view of culture? How do language teachers construct the ‘images of culture’ in an innovative way? What effective and efficient approach(es) should they use to teach both language and culture at the same time? What tools can enhance the language learning experience for students? And what affordances come with these tools?

To find answers to some of these questions, I had to investigate and explore many technological tools to see which of their affordances may leverage my students’ learning and help them achieve their communicative goals.

There are a few helpful resources which assist teachers in discovering more about intercultural competence and how they can incorporate ICC into their teaching. To learn more about the theories, teachers may want to check the following: *Developing the Intercultural Dimension in Language Teaching*, Byram & Grybkova (2002); *A Practical Introduction for Teachers*, Deardoff (2006); *Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internationalization*, Liddicoat & Scarino’s (2013); *Intercultural Language Activities*, Corbett (2010). These are informative and valuable resources which support teachers

in teaching intercultural competencies (ICC) and help them understand the importance of moving from cultural teaching to intercultural teaching.

This final Experiential Module project is divided into two main sections:

Section I- Learning Experience for Teachers

Three workshops are designed for language teachers around three major topics for language learning. These workshops are aimed to encourage teachers to move from theory to practice and prompt them of the importance of teaching critical thinking through task-based language teaching approach while building their students intercultural and communicative competencies.

Workshop 1- Intercultural Competence

Introducing language and culture together by using an intercultural perspective is invaluable because our ultimate goal as teachers is to help our students to become critical language users rather than language learners only. However, Holliday, Hyde, and Kullman (2017) contend that, “culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society” (p. 68). Thus, how can we teach culture in an effective way with all its complexity?

Intercultural teaching allows teachers to dig deeper in the culture instead of staying on the surface with the cultural national attributes. In fact, Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) outline four views of culture that impact our intercultural perspectives: National attributes, societal norms, symbolic systems, and practices. Culture as a national attribute “does not make reference to what

culture is, but rather where culture is found” (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 18). Easily resulting in stereotypes, culture as societal norms limits culture to static practices and values, whereas culture as symbolic systems lend itself to a more dynamic understanding of people’s actions within their shared meanings. However, culture as social practices further extend the definition to include the active inner workings of culture that cause it to both stabilize and shift (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002) argue that the cornerstone of intercultural competence is an attitude of openness and a “readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own” (p. 12). This means being open-minded and ready to be receptive to changing your own images of others, to suspend the “othering” and be ready to understand why people do what they do and what the meaning is behind what they do. Doing this will help with deconstructing stereotypes, because “ethnic stereotypes are especially harmful in the absence of positive ethnic images” (Wingfield & Karaman, 2002).

Including intercultural competence elements such as interpreting and relating, comparing, contrasting, showing knowledge, and reflecting can be done through the online discussions on Canvas. For example, asking open-ended questions to elicit deeper thinking and to have students investigate the representations of both Arabic and North American culture. Many examples are shared in this workshop and throughout the three units in learning experiences for learners’ section.

Workshop 2- Critical Thinking

Educators have emphasized the importance of developing higher-order thinking skills in foreign language classrooms. Critical thinking is one of the most important 21st century skills. However, how can we teach students to be critical thinkers and problem solvers? And how can we incorporate these 21st century skills in our teaching?

Elder & Paul (1994) define critical thinking as the ability of individuals to take charge of their own thinking and develop appropriate criteria and standards for analyzing their own thinking. In other words, teaching, and scaffolding students to take charge of their own thinking and having them reflect on their production of ideas and their processes of learning may help them to overcome the challenges of an L2/FL journey. By exposing my students to real-life situations and asking them to analyze and evaluate discussed topics, express their opinion, and to solve problems, I help with expanding their learning beyond the classroom where they can find the learning meaningful. My experiences as a learner and teacher have led me to the following beliefs: students need to communicate the language in a meaningful way and use most of their class time in collaborating within small group settings or in pairs. Students are developing their cognitive and metacognitive language skills by following a disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information. This is achieved through project-based learning, action-oriented tasks, classroom activities, student reflections and teacher's one on one conversations. Furthermore, critical thinking skills and open-mindedness are consistently valued through teaching methods and higher order questioning. It is a constant and organic part of the languages learning process.

Although factual mastery and skill development are the focus of all introductory level classes, critical thinking skills should be central to lessons. At higher level language courses, students are required to employ critical thinking skills more frequently through functions and authentic situations.

In workshop two, I included some examples of how to incorporate critical thinking into language teaching and referred teachers to using the Bloom Taxonomy. For example, the interpretive reading questions include comparing and analyzing, problem solving, making cultural comparisons. The presentational writing questions include 'evaluate' and 'give an opinion' etc. The presentational speaking questions include 'create', 'critique' etc... Moreover, teachers may include some key words in questioning/assignments: Retell the story, explain your reasoning, compare, identify the main information etc. Furthermore, Kabilan (2000) argues that even communicative language teaching, which emphasizes the use of language as a communication tool, does not really help students to become proficient in the target language. He suggests that for learners to be proficient in a language, they need to be able to think creatively and critically when using the target language.

Workshop 3- Task-Based Language Teaching and Communicative Competence

Being able to communicate requires more than linguistic competence; it requires communicative competence (Hymes, 1971). Communicative language teaching encompasses many pedagogical approaches including TBLT and CBI which I am using in my teaching. Nevertheless, students are learning to communicate and to become language users, therefore, our activities should then be authentic and meaningful. Speaking to interact, negotiating for meaning,

giving feedback are all examples of communicative tasks. More details can be found in this workshop along with examples of tasks.

Some of TBLT elements are: Focusing on form instead of forms, having learners use the language to convey meaning, and exposing learners to real-world situations. Therefore, the teacher must have clear language objectives, although the learners should be focused on the goal of completing the task.

a- Focus on form:

Focus on form is divided into explicit and implicit categories. Input enhancement, and input flooding are examples of implicit focus on form. These two methods can be implemented through drawing learners' attention to the target grammatical item so learners can notice it. On the other hand, metalinguistic feedback, input-based instruction Ellis (2006), present, practice, produce (PPP) de la Fuente (2006), output-based instruction Savignon (1991), language related episodes (LREs) Swain and Lapkin (1995), during meaning-focused activities are examples of explicit focus on form and many of these instructions are used in TBLT.

b- Real-world situations:

Authentic and real-world situations are also important aspects of TBLT. According to Tomlinson (2007), an authentic task should engage the students "affectively" and "cognitively". Authentic texts push learners to communicate and to achieve a context-based outcome. Pronunciation instruction and pragmatics instruction are both better when they involve exposing the learners to authentic input. Using authentic materials is not enough, teachers have to design authentic and meaningful tasks as well as develop students' communicative competence. If we

do not use a correct input, we will not receive a correct output. Comprehensible input is needed for both content and context. Authentic contexts reflect real-world situation and motivate learners. Authentic contexts help learners to familiarize with the culture of the country where the target language is spoken. If our goal as language teachers is to develop students' intercultural competence, then we cannot avoid pragmatics. In fact, Liddicoat & Scarino (2013) explain that "the learner is an interpreter working towards achieving understanding. It is this view of learning as interpretive and as requiring the constant movement between languages and cultures in diversity that characterizes learning from an intercultural perspective" (p. 44-45). Some authentic materials that I use in class are reading and evaluating blog posts, watching Arabic advertisements and comparing them with north American ones, virtual collaborations, hosting guest speakers (Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, Qatar, Jordan) and listening to and analyzing audio recordings such as radio podcasts. (These materials can be found in Learning Experience For Learners' section).

Learners' perception is important for production. Therefore, offering opportunities for interaction in meaningful tasks and having them compare between their own culture and the culture where the target language is spoken is important for building their critical awareness and expanding their pragmatic skills.

Section II- Learning Experience for Students: An Arabic course which includes three main units is designed for students who are in their third level of Arabic and are placed in the advanced low scale of the ACTFL proficiency benchmark. More details can be found on the ACTFL site.(American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2017). This course

promotes critical thinking and critical awareness while developing students' communicative skills through tasks.

The content of my project is fully launched on a web-based learning management system (LMS) which allows teachers to create their courses and post their projects online for their students. This project will be delivered through Canvas.

Using technology

Arnold and Ducate (2019) emphasize that, "the key to success in teaching with digital tools is to integrate them into your classes in a carefully planned manner" (p. 253). In other words, technology offers a wide range of activities for different styles and different perspectives. Some learners are good in writing production and conjugating verbs and others are better in speaking and pronunciation. Teachers must carefully select the necessary tools for their learners to support their needs even if it means shifting their theoretical perspectives. Technology is not only used to develop students' awareness of certain cultural aspects, but to help them become more involved in their learning and to give them a voice and a choice. In addition, computer-assisted language learning (CALL) facilitates language learning because it develops the learner's autonomy, provides authentic contexts and real-life situations, enhances learning through individualized feedback, and offers extensive resources for the teacher to build tasks. Therefore, technology is used as a tool or a medium to bridge the distance between the theory and the practice.

There are many skills that CALL offers for both teachers and learners. My students' course design focuses on two major areas: Social media literacy and multimodal competence.

a- Social media literacy and other genres.

Social media literacy is an important skill to develop among our “digital natives” in addition to learning social media etiquette. “Social media literacies can be equated with the computer literacy needed to use social media tools such as Twitter and other social media platforms, knowing how to curate ones’ profile, how to traverse connections, and how to articulate one’s network” (Arnold & Ducate, 2019, p. 222).

Most of the activities in section 2 (Learning Experience for Students) are combining two or more language skills; speaking is combined with writing, reading with listening, and so forth. The goal is to teach communicatively and to focus on producing tasks rather than only demonstrating a particular language skill. Blake (2016) reminds us that “the practice of computer assisted language learning itself no longer deals with digital writing as separate from reading, nor implements speaking practice in isolation from listening” (p. 137).

In addition, Ferris (2009) indicated that there are needs and challenges that language learners face such as developing their writing fluency following the writing process of drafting, editing, revising, and submitting. In addition, applying writing strategies learned in class to produce accurate and fluent texts is paramount. Often, students in Arabic class struggle with communicating their ideas fluently to convey meaning. Learning a S/FL and improving own literacy in that language is a process and it takes time. It infiltrates students’ academic careers and work environment. Many activities in module 2 include specific genres such as fables, digital story books, Twitter posts and emails. While I include several activities and a variety of instructional materials, one of the most important aspects to develop reading and writing is to

expose learners to lots of input and extensive readings. Learners, then have the autonomy of using their situated discourse and transportable identities because of their chosen genre.

b- Multimodal competence

Although language learners need to develop their multimodal competence while acquiring a second/foreign language, integrating appropriate digital tools to the language tasks is important and makes the learning experience more enjoyable and intriguing for students. For example, listening is one of the four language skills that teachers focus on when working with their learners. For listening, the use of visuals with audio has potentially changed the definition of ‘listening’ to ‘viewing’ (Montero Perez, Peters, & Desmet, 2018; Peters & Webb, 2018 in Arnold & Ducate, 2019, p. 155). Moreover, the multimodal availability is viewed “to be more authentic and construct-relevant (Batty, 2015 in Arnold & Ducate, 2019, p. 159) since it represents a more realistic replication of real-world listening” (Buck, 2001, p. 123 in Arnold & Ducate, 2019, p. 159). For these reasons, I included in most of my lessons, videos, and audio activities to develop students’ multimodal competence. Moreover, these activities support learners with creating and shaping their best L2 self and promoting their critical awareness. It is important to carefully create purposeful and meaningful activities that present identity, conceptions of nationality, and perceived ownership of online spaces (Arnold & Ducate, 2019).

Conclusion

This project will give me the opportunity to support my fellow language teachers with a few resources that they can use to upgrade their teaching methods and materials. It will also help

my students to be engaged and more motivated to enjoy their learning. When learners see their identity tied with successfully using the foreign language and also connected to who they are, they start building a vision of themselves and use the language fluently. Ushioda (2011) explains that “if we wish to enable learners to visualize themselves as competent L2 users in the future... and construct an ideal L2 self, it seems important that they are enabled to engage their current selves and identities in their L2 interactions with people” (p. 203). To do so, we need to take a few steps. First, thinking about our units’ plan, asking if there is room in it to get content from our students. Do we include topics that interest them? Do we develop the learner as a whole person? Second, we have to focus on enhancing group dynamics, creating opportunities for our students to communicate the language in real-life situations, to increase authenticity and to use sociopolitical topics that are related to them. Finally, we should aim on cultivating vision and teaching the whole person, and all of this can be accomplished by engaging our students’ current selves and identities.

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