

What are the Socio-cultural Aspects Kuwaiti Undergraduate Students Should Consider Before They Start Studying in the UK?

Introduction

Much research has been conducted into the sociocultural aspects that international students may face in adjusting to daily life and social interactions in the UK, but there has been little discussion on how learning English language can play an important role in the adaptation process for international students. English language is determined by context, and learning English through contexts can help international students to adjust to British lifestyles, and be increase their aware of cross-cultural differences. The move to a new environment may result in a culture shock for students, but learning English through the appropriate context may reduce or eliminate this type of shock.

Therefore, in this paper I intend to examine how learning English through context might help Kuwaiti undergraduate students to adjust to the sociocultural aspects of life in the UK, and help them with their academic studies. Firstly I will give a general overview of sociocultural theory and second language acquisition, I will then discuss learners as individuals and sociocultural adjustment to the UK. Finally, I will focus on cross-cultural factors.

The Sociocultural Theory (SCT)

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (SCT)(Vygotsky, 1978) offered researchers a new theoretical perspective on language learning, namely studying and researching language as a social practice. Researchers in the field of second language learning research have referred to Vygotsky's theory on interaction and dialogue (Ohta, 2000; Swain 2000). Recently, teachers and researchers started to investigate more deeply the idea of language learning as an interaction with others in a sociocultural context. This is a new trend in theories of language learning; instead of considering language

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learning as a cognitive process of acquiring linguistics rules or knowledge Vygotsky's SCT emphasised the need to investigate language learning from a social perspective. It also implicitly suggests that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and researchers should understand the importance of contextualising the learning processes.

The idea behind Vygotsky's theories is that in language learning processes, learners are affected by the events in their environment, and by interaction with others. In other words, the idea is about how people start to organise and use their minds for interacting with others in real-life situations. "The fundamental tenet of SCT holds that sociocultural and mental activity are bound together in a dependent, symbolically mediated, relationship" (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995: p. 109).

SCT and Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

From a sociocultural stance second language acquisition (SLA) should be considered as more than a merely cognitive process of acquiring linguistic knowledge. SCT offers the dialectic interaction of two ways while constructing SLA processes from different perspectives. For example, Artigal (1992) argued that language acquisition processes are situated in the dialogue with others, not located in the head. SCT may encourage researchers to look at SLA from a new perspective. SCT shows that there is no difference between learning and a language acquisition; it also shows how language learning can emerge from dialogue.

"It is important to underscore from the outset that Vygotsky's fundamental theoretical insight is that higher forms of human mental activity are always, and everywhere. Mediated by symbolic means." (Lantolf, 1994: p. 418), humans mediate their interactions with the world of objects by using physical tools. Mediation is considered to be a link between humans and the world of objects or mental behaviour (Lantolf, 1994). Vygotsky (1978) also noted that the two processes, the biological and the sociocultural, interact in mental development.

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Previous studies have investigated how sociocultural factors can affect learners' learning when language learning is considered as a social activity in a social context, influenced by other people and activities. There is a reason behind every social activity, and this is how learners' knowledge is constructed, which is referred to as 'community of practice' by Lave and Wenger (1991). This describes how learners can develop as "participants in cultural communities" (Rogoff, 2003: p. 3-4). SCT also argued that learners' knowledge is developed when they engage in specific social activities. It offers a way of looking at individuals' social activities and how they develop their knowledge, and then understanding the language learning process (Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978). Learning is a progressive process by which skills and knowledge are acquired; this progressive process includes a movement from external social activities to the internal activities of individuals, and "their development can be understood only in light of the cultural practices and circumstances of their communities – which also change" (Rogoff 2003: p. 3-4).

Learners as individuals

In the classroom some teachers tend to focus on learners as one group with the same proficiency level, rather than individuals. One of the main reasons for this neglect of the individuality of learners is probably the 'universal' considerations that target only one common factor shared by learners of a second language, namely acquiring a second or foreign language. However, researchers in the English language teaching (ELT) field should focus more on learners as individuals (Hall, 2011). Learners are different from each other in various ways, such as personality, gender, age, and attitudes. Also, ELT teachers should be aware of what is appropriate and what is not within EFL and ESL learners' context, and "the moment we realise that a class is composed of individuals (rather than being some kind of unified whole), we have to start thinking about how to respond to these students individually so that while we may frequently teach the group as whole, we will also, in different ways, pay attention to the different identities we are faced with" (Harmer, 2007: p. 85). Hall (2011) added that SLA was "to some extent, the acquisition of second identity" (Hall, 2011: p.167) it also "implies some degree of learning a second culture" (Brown, 2007: p. 193).

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The Sociocultural Adjustment

Most international students are highly motivated group (Russell et al., 2010) as they are looking forward to the experience of studying overseas. This motivation may ease their adaptation process. For them, it is part of that experience to become more independent and interact with different people from around the world. Some may find it interesting to be introduced to a new culture and participate in it. However, it is known that international students may experience a kind of stress associated with being introduced to a new culture, and they need more support than home students (Sawir et al., 2008). There are two types of adjustment or adaptation: psychological and sociocultural (Ward et al. 2001). Psychological adjustment is concerned with mental health and overall well being, whereas sociocultural adjustment is refers to fitting in the environment. Most research has focused on sociocultural adjustment, not on psychological adjustment.

Swami (2010) considered a number of variables to predict successful sociocultural adjustment, for example education level, prior cross-cultural experience and host language proficiency. Swami also looked at the positive effect of social interaction with host nationals. It is easier for the international students to adapt to a new culture and acquire the necessary skills to adapt to it when they meet with host nationals. When students feel connected with local people levels of culture stress are reduced and there are more effects from the experience overseas (Swami, 2010). Unfortunately, in most cases this is not what happens. In the beginning students feel the cultural distance between their home culture and host culture. This may lead to them feeling stressed and experiencing culture shock. This may be one reason why students start to make contact with co-nationals (other students from same country or region), to establish a new network to help them feel less stressed in the host country. The first period of their new life is sometimes stressful, and this is when students start to suffer from loneliness or culture shock, but this stress decreases with time (Brown & Holloway, 2008). International students probably will not meet students from the host country, because they have to take a one-year foundation course and normally all the students on the foundation course are international students. This can affect their

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social life, and their opportunities to meet new people and make friends, as the classroom in university is the first place they have a chance to do so.

Universities play an important role in helping the new overseas students in their social life in the UK. They want to bring international students into contact with host country students to reduce the feeling of loneliness and reduce culture chock, by providing clubs, societies and even accommodation. This can be seen as part of the process to help the international students to adapt. For example, universities carefully plan how accommodation can help promote good cross-cultural contact for the new students. University societies are important too, and that is why they hold events at the beginning of the university year. This example illustrates how universities are providing support to international students to help them fit in with the new culture and shows the importance of adapting to host culture.

Previous studies (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; Coles & Swami, 2012) investigated the trajectory of international students' psychological and sociocultural adjustments in the UK and the role of university structures, focusing on students' daily life and their social interaction experiences. One of the main aspects of international students' life was the accommodation (university halls), where students can sit, talk, and eat together away from the classrooms in the university. The main issues for most students are loud music and drunken people. It is a serious problem for Kuwaiti students in particular, because Kuwait is one of the few countries where alcohol is prohibited everywhere. For those students, dealing with drunken people is a new experience; it will probably be the first time in their life that they have had to do so. It is also important to consider social interaction, as students need to meet new people and make friendships. Social interactions are a way of using their English and improving their language proficiency. It is also an opportunity to learn more about the host country's culture (British students) and other cultures (international students). Overseas students may find it difficult to interact with British students, because they are taking a foundation year in English language, and there will not be any British students with them in classes. Most of their social interaction will usually will be with other international students and co-nationals, as they have at least one thing in

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common, namely studying abroad or learning English. They will also feel less stressed using English and will interact more amongst themselves whereas because they might be afraid to make language mistakes in front of native speakers.

The Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) was aware of these issues, and made a decision to present some of the sociocultural aspects of the British culture in orientation programmes for the students. Most universities also offer orientation programmes for international students. The support service in every university is responsible for dealing with the issues that overseas students may face; part of its remit is to ease the daily adjustments that the international students need to make to be successful. They are responsible for preparing students to adjust to sociocultural differences, in order to help them succeed. However, to help international students to succeed academically, they also need to be prepared for the language challenges they may face in the UK. It is important for Kuwaiti students to understand how English language is determined by context. Kuwaiti undergraduate students should be aware of the appropriate levels of English language. Students must also be aware of how to use language correctly in a particular context. For example, the language (context) that is used in the university and classrooms is different from the language used in other contexts such as, in airports, restaurants or football stadiums. Hence, so it is essential that Kuwaiti students learn English through contexts, and thus may also help them to learn how the sociocultural factors differ and are determined by the context in the English language.

The Situation in Kuwait and Kuwaiti ESL Learners

Nowadays, English is a *lingua franca*, and is considered to be a global language. Knowing English may improve learners' future academic prospects. The Ministry of Education (MOE) in Kuwait decided three decades ago that learning English should be compulsory in all state schools, and students are taught English from grade 1 (age 6 years) to grade 12 (age 17 or 18 years) in secondary school. This intends to strengthen and lays the basis for learning English in early years. The MOE expects Kuwaiti secondary school graduate students to be able to communicate effectively and confidently in English on different topics in different real life contexts, but these aims

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are somewhat ambitious and may have not been achieved yet, simply due to the limited use of English outside the classroom. The learning environment in Kuwait, where the Arabic language and Kuwaiti dialect are used almost everywhere may hinder language learners' ability to communicate using the target language in different contexts. This is likely to be an issue for most ESL and EFL students in their home country, where it is difficult to learn through day-to-day interaction and problems of this type, relating to the everyday environment can be found in many Arabic speaking countries, and learners may face difficulty in expressing themselves "comfortably and efficiently either when dealing with 'academic topics' or 'common everyday topics'" (Mukattash, 1983: p. 169). Another factor may also be important; some teachers tend to focus more on teaching formal aspects of English language (vocabulary, grammar etc.) rather than skills like listening and speaking (oral communication). Oral communication may be neglected (by both teachers and students because students are tested through written examination).

One of the goals of English language teaching is to develop learners' oral communication skills, to help them to communicate successfully (and spontaneously) in real life situations in the future. A successful communication is one in which the student is able to deliver a comprehensible message using the target language in a contextually appropriate manner. Being able to do this will help Kuwaiti students deal with the shock of arrival in Britain - where everything is in English - and prepare them to use their English in different contexts (airport, train station, halls, university, restaurants etc.).

I am currently an MA TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) student at University of Brighton, and over the last few months I met a group of Kuwaiti undergraduate students in the university. Four students were taking a first year undergraduate course in engineering, following a foundation year studying English language; the other two students were doing the foundation year. We went out as a group several times and talked a lot about the cultural differences that they faced when they first arrived in the UK. Not surprisingly, the first thing they mentioned was the shock of finding that everything is in English. It was not difficult

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for them to speak English in general because they had all obtained the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) or TOEFL (The Test of English as a Foreign Language) score that is required by the MOHE and the British Universities to study in the UK; rather their difficulties were with day-to-day interactions and the use of English in specific contexts, for example, how to buy a train ticket the first time, talking to the university's registration office and buying groceries. The difficulties they faced in using their English in a context-appropriate manner and making themselves understood led some of them to panic, feel uncomfortable, and fear of making mistakes, especially when communicating with British people. This initial reaction resulted in some of them avoiding interacting with local people. The students, particularly female students, also mentioned feelings such as shame and embarrassment. Some students talked about how they used body language and gestures to make their meaning clear and understood. Hence, their ability to use English was in tense with some level of hesitation in first few months.

Speaking is the skill most used in the early days of international student life, and this skill requires the ability to respond immediately because speaking involves face-to-face interaction. Writing and reading skills are essential for academic success (Cammish, 1997), but oral communication ability may affect students' confidence in other skills. Acquiring speaking skills at the beginning of their academic life in the UK may give students a boost and build confidence and self-esteem, so English should be taught in context to avoid difficulties with oral communication and face-to-face interactions. Teaching English through context will help students to deal with what is expected in the host country. The ability to interact successfully can play an important role in the adjustment process, which illustrates the importance of learning English through context, and also shows how language is determined by context.

In every language there are different levels of formality (or boundary), including English and Arabic languages. There are also levels of formality in Kuwaiti dialect, and these students are aware of them. For example, the language they use in communicating with their parents is different from the language they use with their friends. This also applies to other situations or contexts such as talking to a

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policeman, doctor, or school teacher. There is a set of vocabulary that is used in each context, and it depends on the context, for example, to show respect, being polite, or making a request. Learning English through these contexts may help Kuwait students to distinguish between the different levels of formality in English, instead of learning English as a 'plain' language. For example, a mistake many students make when they do not know the meaning of a word is to look it up in the dictionary and use the first word they find; this might be correct (in translation) and yet not be used in English in that context, and because of the differences between cultures this may lead to embarrassing situations. Both languages, English and Arabic, have a massive number of synonyms, so it is important that students acquire the language through a context, in order to use the rich vocabulary correctly.

Cross-cultural Factors

Another issue that students may face when interacting with British people, in addition to using the language in context, is familiarity with cultural communication factors, including understanding communication patterns in order to have a successful communication, for example appropriate physical contact, facial expressions and the physical distance which should be maintained during a conversation. This sort of understanding may help students to feel less worried about making cultural mistakes or being misinterpreted and causing offence.

Hall (1976) introduced the concept of a distinction between high and low context, as a way of understanding different cultures. This distinction captures how people in a culture are related. Also, It is a way of understanding the differences among cultures. Hence, it is important for Kuwaiti students to understand or at least have some background knowledge of the differences between low-context and high-context cultures, their styles, and how they may influence people. Low-context cultures include English-speaking cultures such as the UK. In low-context cultures the "context carries varying proportions of the meaning" (Hall, 1976: p. 86) and people explicitly say what they want, in a direct way. Conversely in high-context cultures such as Arabic speaking countries (including Kuwait) the main part of the meaning lies in or relies on intuitive understanding of the message (Hall, 1976); meaning also

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depends on style and detailed information. It is said that the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was an example of misunderstanding between low-context and high-context cultures. When the United States ambassador April Glaspie met Saddam Hussein eight days prior the invasion, she told the Iraqi president that the issue between the two countries was regional of no concern to the United States. It was a straightforward answer, but because of the differences between the two cultures, Saddam assumed that U.S. had given him a green light to invade Kuwait, and he did.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait also provides another example of cross-cultural miscommunication, the famous Saddam-Bush war of video-taped speeches. The cross-cultural miscommunication can happen with students, tourists, businessmen, and even presidents. The story began almost a month after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait with Saddam's surprising suggestion to the American president that both of them should record a speech to be broadcast on national television in each other's country. This was intended to let the people, of both countries, judge on the current situation. The American president was astonished by this idea and wondered how to prepare a speech to the Iraqi people, his speech was delivered in English and subtitled in Arabic to make it accessible to all Iraqis via national television. The Iraqi president's speech was presented in the same way. The two speeches failed to communicate their meaning to the people, and did not help the situation at that time simply because of the cross-cultural miscommunication that occurred in both speeches, surprising given that both leaders had high level and experienced advisors. The American president's speech was only eight minutes long, whereas the Iraqi president's speech lasted more than an hour, which is why American television broadcast only some parts of it. The failure of the two speeches resulted from misunderstanding of the respective audiences' cultures (low-context and high context cultures), which resulted in failure to deliver the intended meaning through the appropriate context. The Americans felt that Saddam's speech was boring and too long, whilst the Iraqis were ready to hear Bush's speech, but found it was already over.

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Conclusion

Learning English through context would help Kuwaiti students understand the differences between the two cultures. It might also help them to adapt to the British lifestyle, and be aware of the sociocultural factors that may affect their academic success. Culture shock is a serious issue that may affect on students' adaptation to life in another country and looking at this issue from the perspective of learning English through contexts will help increase students' awareness of cultural differences.

Learning English through contexts can make a contribution to the ELT field, and provides a new perspective on language learning, viewing it as a social practice. My personal experience in the ELT field and my relationships with Kuwaiti undergraduate students in the UK suggests that sociocultural contexts and sociocultural factors associated with life in the UK are of interest to many students, and this can provide a motivation for learning the language that is used in the UK, in addition to the motive they already have, which is to travel and study abroad.

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