Break the Wall: Intercultural Challenges in the Middle East to Teach Spanish as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

This paper investigates the needs of teachers of Spanish have while teaching the language while maintaining and emphasizing the sociocultural, intercultural and religious components. The research will attempt to shed light on offering a performance guide with materials and examples of different nature (songs, videos, textbooks, literary fragments). The paper will also provide a comparison between how to work with similar factors from different perspectives while taking into account the religious and emotional aspects. In order to achieve these aims the method used is based on a synergy of experiences, shared knowledge, culture clash and double perspective the European and the Middle Eastern perspectives. There is an increasing demand for Spanish language instructors' in the Middle East. This increase together with beneficial work conditions for foreigners make The Middle East an attractive land to spread linguistics knowledge as a language instructor. However, there is an observable lack of cultural information, in terms of what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in such a conservative culture, in addition to lack of knowledge of the social protocols in the Middle East. The absence of such essential information may result in misunderstandings and even complaints from both parties in this exchange. It is imperative that senior academics offer a sort of "lifeline" for the upcoming teachers, mainly European or Asian, who might consider working in this area. In a nutshell, in a classroom where the instructor is non-Muslim, what needs to be taken into account in order not to offend the cultural sensitivity of the students? How can the Spanish language instructor create a learning environment where the students do not feel culturally attacked?

Keywords: interculturality, teaching, spanish, cultural sensitivity, Middle East

1. Introduction

Working in the Middle East as a foreign Language instructor is not an easy job. Many foreigners, Europeans, Americans and Asians are hired in this region. As such when a professor obtains a position in the Middle East, s/he begins the process of research about the area, culture, traditions and religion. This research process could be considered as the beginning of an intercultural relationship between two different cultures. Thus, interculturality is one of the competences that foreign language instructors work with in the classroom. Furthermore, the task of teaching a foreign language vary in difficulty depending on the origin of the instructor as well as the origin of students and ultimately where the lessons take place.

During the last decades, many publications about "Teaching Spanish as a Foreign Language" were released. However, these studies were primarily from intercultural and sociocultural perspectives. Spanish for English speakers and Spanish for Chinese speakers are two areas that are heavily investigated. The research conducted in these areas helped not only the development of the field but also helped shaping instructor training. However, Spanish language instructors do not have access to updated publications relating to teaching in the Middle East. Furthermore, the existing publications do not investigate social and emotional concerns or cultural factors.

Thus, this paper will attempt to shed light on how to develop the intercultural competence while teaching Spanish in the Middle East, specifically in Qatar. The researcher does not pretend to offer a training agenda, rather it is a broadening of the horizons. This paper aspires to fill in a gap in the field and highlight a reality that is relegated.

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2. Literature Review

Nowadays, Spanish language instructors are emigrating more than ever for different reasons. The reasons may vary, for example seeking better working conditions, or because of lack of jobs in some areas. Instructors have to adapt to the new contexts that foreign territories offer, and the cultural differences. Teaching a foreign language can associated with many cultural factors. Foreign teachers must abandon ethnocentric perspective, enhance their cultural knowledge and improve their cultural exchange skills. Ultimately, these enhancements will provide not only intercultural education but also develop the intercultural competence.

According to UNESCO, interculturality can be defined as the construction of equitable relationship between people, communities, countries and cultures […] and it is necessary to work with it from a perspective that includes historical, social, cultural, political and educational elements. This definition is arguably generic. Nonetheless, it is helpful to think about the education system and language teaching system together since both systems promote an exchange. Furthermore, the concept of *interculturality* is understood as another competence that must be included in foreign language teaching. *Interculturality* is part of the *Plan Curricular del Instituto Cervantes* (2006). PCIC argues that "the development of this dimension […] requires knowledge, abilities and attitudes that settle the intercultural competence" (PCIC, 2016).

Interculturality has its origin in culture and sociocultural studies. Interculturality is an exchange that requires "comprehension, acceptance and integration" (Alarcón and Barros, 2008). Both teacher and student are culture producers and receptors. However, this is not an easy task since "it is necessary to adopt a tolerant and respectful attitude and to eliminate the stereotypes or ethnocentric attitudes while conserving their own identity" (Oliveras Vilaseca, 2014).

Textbooks, for example, are a great ally for teachers and students to exchange information. Notwithstanding, textbooks can be problematic depending on the country where they are being used. Topics like culture, politics or personal relationships can offend the sensitivity of the student while the instructor's purpose is to explain the reality s/he comes from -in case they are native speakers-. This exchange serves a bigger educational purpose as well, that of preparing and broadening the students' horizons on what to expect when they visit any of the countries where the language in question is official.

Countries whose official religion is Islam may present a challenge for instructors in terms of developing intercultural competence. The bilateral factor of interculturality may suffer when it is time to decide what is or is not acceptable. Paricio Tato (2014) claims that "the communicative approach was not as successful because it does not recognize the links between language and culture".

The concept of *thoughtful behavior[1]* (Borgh, 2003) is related to teachers' beliefs because it says that instructors are the ones that begin the reflection process and must be conscious of how their work has to be done. Politics, for example, is a topic that sometimes is better avoided in the classroom, mainly in countries as the ones mentioned previously. The idea of *classroom as culture* from Breen (1986) helps instructors understand how communication and interaction develop in order to establish an intercultural link.

If instructors study the students' culture, prejudices are likely to be eliminated. The perceptions of students and their country are likely to change as well as what strategies may be used in the classroom (Ramos Méndez, 2010). There are many factors that can undermine the teaching/learning process. To mention a few: lack of knowledge of the country or Arab and Islamic cultures; the possibility of culture clashes. In addition to the lack of adapted materials or even fear of offending cultural sensitivities due to possible judgmental opinions. It is only by acknowledging the limits of the interaction and becoming aware of their existence, foreign language instructors can bring down the wall and establish a bridge.

3. Paper Objectives

It is not an easy task to work as a Foreign Language instructor in the Middle East. There are many factors to consider such as culture, society and religion. Work relationships between men and women, Middle Eastern conservatism, and Islam as the official religion of the State are the three main pillars that directly and indirectly impact the academic landscape. This paper has a number of objectives that relate to qualitative and ethnographic methodologies. The paper takes into account

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[1] Borgh, 2003: 81.

the importance of religion and culture as well as the culture clash resulting from these two. The following objectives are a product of experiences of instructors of Spanish as a Foreign Language who live in a country similar to Qatar.

This paper has three objectives. The first one is to expose the problems and difficulties of Teaching Spanish as a Foreign Language as well as Spanish and Hispanic cultures in the Middle East. The second objective is to analyze which factors of the Arab and Islamic culture are to be considered when teaching Spanish as a foreign language. The third and last objective is to survey the relevant cultural and religious aspects that directly influence teaching together with what needs to be taken into account in order not to offend the students' sensitivity.

4. Methodology

As mentioned previously, the methodology of this paper is qualitative and ethnographic. On one hand, the research focuses on a specific group; on the other hand, there is a cultural relationship and exchange. The paper uses data gathered from surveys and personal experiences. Combining the date from these two research tools, the data provides both objective and subjective information since the challenges discussed previously can only be observed from the inside. Therefore, this paper is to be considered as a guideline. The results are not meant to be generalized. Rather, they are meant to map the cultural landscape and to invite future researchers to investigate this area. It is important to state here that the researcher is not only gathering information, but also he is part of it. Thus, the researcher produces the guidelines, collects experiences and processes the information.

The data must not be generalized, rather it is to be considered as a starting point and an invitation to build upon it based on a gap that was observed in the field. It is necessary to shed light on the situation of teaching a foreign language in this territory and deconstruct the previous ideas in order to make a valuable contribution to the world of teaching Spanish as a Foreign Language.

Two research tools were used for this purpose: teacher's diary[1] and surveys[2]. These methods provide not only the instructor's view and personal experience but also, the collective and accumulative teaching experiences from an intrapersonal perspective. The suggested approach also provides the views and experiences from the survey respondents. Both the diary and the surveys aim to allow us to rethink and restructure our conscience. In other words, the researcher here attempts to break the intercultural wall to construct a bridge. In order to achieve this vision it is important to know and understand the opinion of other instructors.

4.1. Teacher's diary

The teacher's diary used for this research takes into account the purpose of organizing problems, complaints and comments. This is because it focused on intercultural aspects as opposed to daily notes. Using the diary method helps in developing an auto-analysis introspectively in a subjective way. While at the same time leading the reflection process to the judgment of the researcher's work. The aim of this process was to compare and contrast the researcher's data to that of the respondents and ultimately fulfil the objectives of this paper.

4.2. Surveys

The respondents were 12 Language instructors, Culture and Literature. The respondents were working in the academic field in Qatar during the data collection. The respondents also worked in different countries in and outside the Middle East.

The surveys were based on Google Forms and presented the following questions:

Multiple-choice questions:

Q1: Gender

Q2: Nationality

Q3: Age: with a 10 years range per option (20 to 30 years, 30 to 40 years…)

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[1] For the duration of a year.
[2] Survey repondents were working in Qatar.

Q4: Working area: Linguistics or Literature

Q5: Campus where they work: Female or Male campus (some universities in the Middle East can be segregated, like in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait…)

Open questions:

Q6: Have you ever adapted materials to respect the cultural sensitivity of the students and their religion? Can you describe it?

Q7: If you answered "yes" in the previous question, do you think that you would have had this problem in non-Islamic countries?

Q8: Have you ever had to avoid certain topics in your lessons? Which ones?

All these questions were analyzed holistically and analytically. Multiple-choice questions served to guide the researcher in understanding the profile of the respondent. On the other hand, open questions provided answers to the research questions and the objectives that were proposed in advance.

5. Data study, presentation and discussion

The purpose of this analysis is to explore the issues and challenges of teaching Spanish language and Hispanic and Spanish cultures in Qatar. Furthermore, the analysis aims to gather the factors of a conservative culture that may impact teaching. Finally, the analysis would serve to show how to approach the students with resources like songs, textbooks, literature etc.

5.1. Answers from multiple-choice questions:

Q1: Gender: 8 male instructors and 4 female instructors

Q2: Nationality: 3 American, 2 British, 1 Greek, 1 Kuwait, 4 Spanish, 1 Syrian/Argentinian.

Q3: Age: 2 between 20 and 30, 3 between 40 and 50, 7 between 30 and 40 years old

Q4: Working Area: 11 belong to the Linguistics Area and 1 to the Literature Area

Q5: Campus where they work: 1 at Male campus, 2 at Not segregated and 9 at Female Campus

5.2. Answers from open questions[1]:

Q6: Have you ever adapted materials to respect the cultural sensitivity of the students and their religion? May you describe it?

A1: Many times. Especially when using authentic material referring to love, relationships (not married), expressions or cultural elements referring to religion.

A2: Yes. I removed sensitive words and/or images.

A3: Yes, we always have to adapt anything that goes against Islam's values

A4: I have avoided discussion of religion (Islam) and if encountering Christian writers or themes in texts, made sure to emphasize the relative values and beliefs of this group, so as to avoid the chances of coming across as evangelicizing. Not difficult, since I am atheist. It's actually more problematic dealing with texts/philosophers that are avowedly non-religious. In these cases again, it's important to emphasize that these views are opinions, not facts. Such issues can crop up in unexpected places, such as science fiction classes when discussing the history of science as subversive to religion.

A5: All the time but this has nothing to do with gender and all too do with culture. I always check to make sure nothing is risque and that it avoids pork, alcohol, religion, and Western romantic relationships.

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[1]Answers are copied and pasted from the surveys.

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A6: I always make sure to take out any references to dating or drinking alcohol.

A7: Yes, it is very difficult using textbooks because you need to modify of avoid many topics. There was an activity about dating that I avoided or pictures with parties where people are drinking alcohol.

A8: Yes, I have. I still made it obvious for them that the materials had been adapted because I thought that they needed to know that they were common topics and aspects of the Hispanic culture. I did not want them to have a distorted image of Spain, and then visit it and be surprised. I believe that one cannot separate a language from its culture, so whilst I did respect their religion and culture, I always tried to explain them those cultural differences to avoid misunderstandings.

A9: I had to adapt material because of political issues in the region, and more often than not, I find I also have to be careful with words I use (homonyms).

A10: all the time, but with my more adult students (17--18 years old) I have decided not to adapt or cut them anymore but explain, culture and traditions are part of a language and they need to learn, experience and get know this part too.

A11: Yes. I checked "read" and "watched" material for nudity, explicit sexual scenes or offensive terminology. One time, I had to cancel a text book order because it included poems that were culturally inappropriate and were reported by some students and parents.

A12: Yes. I have occasionally removed pages from the students' reading materials because I perceived them as potentially problematic (as long as they don't constitute essential reading for the subject I am teaching). I also moderate classroom discussions, wherever possible, to avoid references to subjects that may be considered inappropriate by the more conservative students in my class.

Q7: If you answered "yes" in the previous question, do you think that you would have had this problem in non-Islamic countries?

A1: No.

A2: Yes.

A3: No, but same problems could arise in any country with strong religious beliefs

A4: Of course- every culture has taboo topics that are not only defined by religion but by history. In South Korea, you have to be sensitive to attitudes toward North Korea.

A5: I teach ESL which means even in the US many of my students are from Islamic countries. However, we usually made a point of leaving the "secular" references in the textbook in order to better prepare them for American society.

A6: No, not at all.

A7: Yes, of course.

A8: I wouldn't, I taught in a European country and these issue did not exist.

A9: Yes, maybe in other cultural content but of course, always.

A10: Probably not to the same extent. However, most universities adhere to a certain standard of political correctness that dictates what can and cannot be said in the classroom.

A11: No I don't think so.

A12: N/A

Q8: Have you ever had to avoid certain topics in your lessons? Which ones?

A1: Love and relationships outside of marriage, eating and drinking as part of social culture, the importance and impact of religion in everyday life in Spain.

A2: In certain cases, topics such as religion or politics.

A3: Yes. Dating, politics, food (pork), etc.

A4: Religion, sex, homosexuality.

A5: Sex, drugs, romantic relationships (ex boyfriend and girlfriend), politics, music, alcohol, parties, homosexuality and religion.

A6: Dating, drinking alcohol, religion, political issues.

A7: Yes: politics, sexuality, nudity, prostitution... But in the end I try to go to the limit: I make it up, I do not say explicitly but students understand.

A8: Sex, eroticism, gender, or some aspects of equality.

A9: Religion, Islamic religious diversity, sex, politics, and race.

A10: Usually related to alcohols, pork and relationships topic, what most of the time is even contrary to the IB program I teach, but....still sometimes I have to do it.

A11: Yes. Sexual related topics mainly.

A12: Certainly. However, sometimes it is more a question of HOW you approach a topic, rather than the topic itself. Generally speaking, as long as it isn't strictly relevant to the course content, I prefer to only make a passing reference to issues concerning regional politics, religion and sex. If it is related to the topic at hand, I address issues as impartially as possible, allowing students to express their opinions, and never imposing my own.

5.3. Discussion of the survey's result

According to the multiple-choice questions, it can be argued that the diversity of profiles offered in this research present a multicultural approach as well as different backgrounds and experiences. The diversity can also be observed in the variety of answers provided by the open questions:

Q5: The answer of this question was unanimous: all the survey respondents modified or adapted material or speeches in the classroom. The topics that were repeated more frequently are topics related to love, relationships, religion, dates, alcohol, politics, nudity, and offensive words.

Q6: Five respondents answered that they would not have had the same problems while four of them mentioned that they would face the same situation in a non-Muslim country. However, two of them did not provide a clear answer although they referred to code of ethics. One of them did not answer.

Q7: All the respondents answered this question. However, this question differed from the previous ones in that the respondents mentioned that instead of adapting topics they simply avoid them. The topics that they avoided were sex, love, religion, alcohol, drugs, parties, homosexuality, politics, eroticism, pork etc.

5.4. Teacher's diary result

First of all, it is necessary to highlight that a teacher's diary can be understood as a subjective research tool, because it relies primarily on reflection. The diary began when the researcher started working in a conservative environment. Despite the fact that there are many parts relating to the topic of this paper, only the relevant ones were selected. This diary was divided into different parts due to the diversity of professional and anecdotic comments: previous comments, culture clashes and activities in the classroom.

Previous comments:

–   There is a proper way of dressing (we sign a dress code document).
–   The campus is segregated.
–   In certain occasions, censorship must be applied to avoid complaints.

Culture clashes:

- When students mention topics such as feminism, religion, maternity or homosexuality and they debate among each other or by themselves.
- During the call, it is not allowed to play music.
- History topics such as absolutism, freedom, monarchy, elections etc.

Activities in the classroom:

- In terms of culture, the students make their own research about topics I cannot address or explain thoroughly because they might be sensitive topics or offensive to some of them. This is interesting because since I cannot talk about certain topics, It sparks the students interest even more and they ask more questions. I justify my reluctance to answer that I cannot "offer" more. Then the students are happy to make their own research and discuss it with me later in private.
- Nowadays, Spanish and Hispanic cultures are widely spread because of music and videos. However, many of these videos contain references to topics I cannot mention in the classroom. I can perhaps edit the films and songs. Another example is Netflix recommendations. I am under certain pressure because I cannot recommend certain TV series or films, but I can mention what I am currently watching.
- Some activities in the textbook and their description may be controversial as well. A number of these activities represent the culture of partying in Spain, references to alcoholic drinks and typical foods offered by Spanish and Hispanic cultures. If the instructor does not pay enough attention to these references, it may cause a problem. A good approach to solve an inappropriate reference is turning it into an anecdote if the students realize that it is an awkward situation.

Conclusions

To conclude this paper it is prudent to mention that the answers of the respondents of the survey, in addition to the compilation of examples from the teacher's diary, provide possible answers to the concerns raised in the beginning of the paper. The analysis of the data also aimed to fulfill the objectives of the paper. At this stage, it is important to reiterate that there is an observable lack of specific and detailed previous research to base this research on. As mentioned previously, little to no research has been done regarding teaching Spanish as a foreign language in the Middle East and Islamic countries.

Instructors of Spanish language and Spanish and Hispanic cultures face a number of challenges in the Middle East when teaching. Even though not all the survey respondents work in the Linguistics field, all of them attest to the fact that there is a need to modify, adapt or even censor certain topics related to Spanish and Hispanic cultures similar to the ones mentioned in the survey. Instructors must be familiar with the culture of the country where they work or are going to work. Similarly, it is important that instructors are familiar with the pillars of the religion and culture. Cultural knowledge will serve in avoiding misunderstandings and establishing an intercultural bridge based on mutual respect and empathy.

Thus, the following question arises: what has to be taken into consideration in order to avoid offending the cultural sensitivity of conservative students? The answers to the survey in this paper as well as the notes from the teacher's diary could be seen as a starting point. In fact, all this information can be seen as a basic action guide for future instructors in the Middle East. The teaching method will depend on the teacher's criteria. However, more research is required in this area and perhaps creating manuals that address the issues raised previously is necessary. It is necessary to listen to the student body, and allow students to share their opinions about the topics discussed in class. Interculturality is a symbiosis and it is bilateral.

Although this paper may not have provided a clear action plan to the proposed challenges, it is hoped that it highlighted the challenges and explained possible actions taken by foreign instructors in bridging the cultural gaps.

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