On the Teaching and Learning of Culture-Loaded Words: The Case of Moroccan Learners of EFL

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Abstract

This paper sets out to investigate an uncharted research area in the field of applied linguistics concerned with the teaching and learning of culture-loaded words among Moroccan learners of EFL at the university level. Relying on a comparative analysis, this study delineates some problematic areas foreign language students may face as a result of their being unaware of the cultural connotative meanings some words may carry in the target language. The inappropriate use of these words may often lead to gross misunderstandings contributing most of the time to the perpetuation of intercultural confusions and conflicts. EFL teachers may do a great disservice to their students if they leave them fully unaware of the extra cultural meanings some words may convey besides their basic denotation. The last part of the paper suggests some implications on how to develop the teaching and learning of these culturally-loaded words.

1. INTRODUCTION

The advent of the computer, the mobile cell phone, the internet, and electronic mails have all changed the basic facets and the vital core of our human communication. Rather than being separate by geographical boundaries, speech communities are becoming part of a complex social system coined as 'the global village'. A fundamental feature characterizing this age of the 'dot.com' is that speech communities from diverse cultural backgrounds have displayed a substantial need and a pressing concern for intercultural communication.

Central to this is that educationalists, and the community at large, have started to recognize that, for an effective cross-cultural communicative exchange to take place, students learning a foreign language must be taught the syntax, the lexicon, and the conversational patterns of the target language without losing sight of the extra-linguistic features characteristic of its culture (Byram, 1997; Alred et al., 2003; Bentahila and Davies, 1997; Davies, 1992; Mouaid, 1992; Ouakrime, 1992; Sadiqi, 1992; Kerouad, 2001; Benattabou, 2011).

Although past research focused very extensively on the analysis of a number of aspects of intercultural communication, be them verbal and/or nonverbal, other more problematic areas of EFL learning and teaching have been left unaccounted for. Chief among these is the subtle problem of culturally-loaded words. Without students' cross-cultural awareness of the cultural meaning of a host of vocabulary words, communication

and social interaction between members of different speech communities is more likely to be unsuccessful and ineffective.

The major concern of this paper is to unravel some problematic areas foreign language students may face as a result of their being unaware of the multiplicity of cultural loads some of the words in the target language may carry, and 'the mental image' these words may invoke in the mind of their native speakers.

This is indeed another facet of cross-cultural communication breakdown which emanates from the conflicting discrepancies pertaining to the cultural connotative meanings some words may convey in different speech communities. There is; however, a dearth of research in this direction and scant attention has been made to address the potential blunders word connotations, an aspect of culturally-loaded words, may create for foreign language learners.

Students' awareness of the cultural features and the connotations some words may embrace in the target language and culture are fundamental to the success of any trans-cultural communicative exchange. It is my belief that the slightest mistakes foreign language learners are more liable to commit, both as encoders and/or decoders, in the use of these culturally loaded words, may create serious intercultural communication misgivings.

The contention of this paper is that helping EFL students come into grips with the cultural mismatches germane to the production and/or perception of a wide range of culturally-loaded words used among members of different cultural origins may place them in an optimum teaching environment and may render foreign language learning both enjoyable and educationally more rewarding.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1.Defining culture-loaded words

Language is the embodiment of culture as it expresses a wide range of values, beliefs, attitudes and cultural stereotypes; it is the carrier of the cultural heritage of any society as it gives an insight into the social life of its speech community at large. Words are no exception to this rule as they may carry, in addition to their first, literal and denotative meaning a plethora of cultural, emotional and connotative meanings. This second meaning of words is referred to as 'word connotation' or 'culture-loaded words'.

Culture-loaded words are defined as words which are deeply embedded in specific cultures and reflect the cultural and mental images of their speech communities. According to Lado (1972), the term 'culture-loaded words' refers to those "lexical items which have similar primary meaning but widely different connotations in two languages" (p. 285).

Above and beyond the first denotative meaning of a word that is found in dictionaries and may be clear to the EFL learner, the same word may carry other far more cultural and connotative overtones which are not always obvious to a non alerted learner.

Lin and Yang (2015, p.63) extend the meaning of culturally-loaded words to cover not only individual lexical items but also idioms and expressions which are culture-bound and reflect the specific features of the target culture.

Citing the argument of Newmark (1998), Lin and Yang (2015) provide in their own words a more elaborate definition to this concept contending that "Culture-loaded words, whether single-unit lexemes, phrases or collocations are those which are particularly tied to the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression." (Lin and Yang, 2015, p. 64).

In addition to the first vocabulary meaning of a word, or the denotative meaning it has in a dictionary, the same word may evoke in the mind of its native speakers other more cultural and connotative meanings. There is strong evidence from research indicating that words which are appropriate in one culture may sound as queer and culturally unacceptable in another cultural setting (Zhao, 2004; Liu, 2014).

An interesting example cited by Zhao (2004) and Zhu (2011) pertains to the differential cultural connotations of the word 'old' both in English and Chinese. Whilst the use of the word 'old' as a form of address is culturally offensive in the English-speaking community, the same word may carry positive overtones as a form of address in Chinese. In the English culture, and this is almost true in nearly all western cultures, the use of the expression "old + surname" (e.g. Old Mary) may sound something like "useless" and "out-of-date" (Zhu, 2011). By contrast, the use of such expressions as "old + surname" or "surname + old" as forms of address among the Chinese speech community indicates respect and familiarity to the person being addressed.

The explanation of the word 'old' is but only a single example among so many. Just like the word 'old', the red color invokes different connotative meanings in the English and Chinese cultures. The color term 'red' is associated in the mind of the English speaking community with blood, death, violence, and an uncontrolled state of fervor. In Asian cultures, of which China forms an integral part, 'red' is an auspicious color term as it evokes in the mind of its population positive overtones being associated with health, wealth and prosperity; hence the reason why brides are often dressed in red, but never in white, during their wedding ceremonies(Lin and Yang, 2015).

Another more insightful example is borrowed from Guan and Zhao (2016) comparing and contrasting the cultural meanings associated with the use of the word 'dragon' in both cultures. The term dragon in the Chinese culture takes positive meanings as it stands for power and strength being referred to as 'the imperial power or majesty'. In the English speaking community; however, the same word is seen as a symbol of sin and is often portrayed as 'a ferocious monster with the ability to breathe fire' (Guan and Zhao, 2016, p. 41).

To explain the extent to which different cultures may shape the cultural meaning of vocabulary words and which substantiates by far the close interconnectedness between language and culture, Tao Yan-hua (2010) contends that "the connotations of (…) words in one language do not necessarily coincide with those in another because of geographical environment, convention, history and religion in different cultures" (p. 62). Owing to these different life styles and dissimilar mindsets, cultures may undoubtedly attach different cultural meanings to the same word.

The assumption which follows from here is that if foreign language learners are not made aware of the cultural discrepancies each culture assigns to the connotative meaning of words, they will be prone to commit, both as encoders and/or decoders, more communication breakdowns. Without this awareness, word connotation will surely remain a problematic area of vocabulary learning as foreign language learners will continue "to transfer the L1 connotation into L2" (Laufer, 1990, p.582).

3. THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Vocabulary learning is a fundamental constituent of language proficiency as it reflects learners' abilities of word meanings and permeates the four basic skills, including listening, speaking, reading and writing (Richards, 1976; Schmitt, 2000; Nation, 2001). This implies that vocabulary learning is so important that it should lie at the core of foreign language teaching (Zimmerman, 1997; Lei, 2018). To elucidate the centrality of vocabulary in language learning and teaching, Wilkins (1972) cogently comments in one often-cited quotation that "while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (pp. 211-212).

Lessard-Clouston (2012) shares the same contention explaining that "language learning usually involves a large number of different literacy activities and practices, and without some breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge these are difficult to grasp/do!" (p. 1).

Despite the fact that there is some truth in this, learning foreign languages is by no means limited merely to the learning and the possession of a great number of vocabulary words, but it warrants other far more important issues. By the same token, foreign language learners' knowledge of vocabulary hinges not only on their skillful abilities of learning about the conceptual meaning of new vocabulary words, but goes beyond that to cover other far more subtle aspects of language which pertain to their cultural connotative implications.

Although foreign language students certainly learn the conceptual meaning of new words through the implementation of a number of teaching activities, their learning of the cultural connotative meanings of these words leaves much to be desired. Learning word meaning can in no way mean only the learning of its general dictionary definitions. Rather, it entails also knowledge of other more cultural and connotative meanings deeply-rooted and entrenched in the target language/culture (Chandra, 2017).

The implicit corollary of this is that teaching vocabulary is by no means just instructing language learners about new words and about their usage, but entails also presenting them with the cultural loads that they may carry and communicate across languages. According to Lei (2018), to develop language learners' intercultural communicative competence, the cultural connotative meaning of words should take a fundamental place in foreign vocabulary teaching.

Liu and Zhong (1999) delineate the status quo of foreign language vocabulary teaching stating that:

"Although vocabulary learning has begun to gain due attention in L2

acquisition research, studies have been scarce on 12 acquisition of

culturally loaded words—those that are similar in primary meaning

but different in connotation between LI and L2." (p.177).

The issue at stake is that there is a general tendency among foreign language learners to place more emphasis on words' vocabulary definitions along with their synonyms and antonyms, but tend to overlook their cultural and connotative overtones. Lei (2018) elaborates more on the issue arguing that "it is the connotative, affective, and associative meanings that determine the real meaning of a word, which is often neglected by English learners" (p. 181).

There is; however, a burgeoning research interest in the study of culture-loaded words as they carry multiple cultural and connotative meanings across languages which may cause gross communication breakdown among interlocutors of different cultural backgrounds. Although EFL learners may be knowledgeable of the denotative meaning of words, they are reported to face a number of problems when it comes to culture-loaded words.

In the last ten years, there has been enough evidence from research indicating that EFL teachers spend more time explaining the denotative meaning of vocabulary words in texts and fail to consider their cultural and connotative nuances (Liu, 2014). Accordingly, most EFL learners are unaware of the cultural dimensions some words may transmit which leads to serious cross-cultural frustrations and uncertainties.

Research conducted in this area of vocabulary teaching has also indicated that EFL learners do still face a number of problems in the learning and understanding of culturally-loaded words. While most of these students find no problem understanding and using the denotative meaning of words, they are found to lack the adequate skills to recognize the cultural connotative meanings these words tend to convey.

In an earlier study, Zhao (2004) discusses the vital role of teaching the cultural connotation of words across languages. According to this research, the explicit instruction of the cultural connotation of some words in English has improved the competence of Chinese students of EFL in judging the appropriate use of certain English words. The findings demonstrate that subjects in the experimental group who received an explicit instruction of the cultural meaning of words benefited from having their attention drawn to these cultural aspects of word meanings and helped them outperform those in the control group.

Similar results buttressing the educational importance of integrating the teaching of the cultural meaning of connotative vocabulary words have been echoed in Wu and Tongpei's (2011) study. According to the findings of this research, it has been reported that the transfer of the cultural connotation of vocabulary is found to be less recurrent among EFL Chinese students with high intercultural awareness than with students having low intercultural awareness.

According to these two studies, among others, it is most important for EFL teachers to incorporate cross-language connotations as an integral part of the teaching course of reading comprehension and of translation studies (Zhao, 2004; Mekheimer and Al-Dosari, 2012; Liu, 2014; Lin and Yang, 2015). Students must be made aware of the cultural implications some words may conceal beneath their denotative meanings otherwise a number of communicative misconceptions may arise.

What follows from Zhao's (2004) research is that explicit teaching of culturally-loaded words may surely make EFL learners on their guard against any inter-cultural miscomprehensions or conflicts. It is the responsibility of language teachers, therefore, to increase their students' chances to learn and understand not only the meaning of new vocabulary lexical items but also their cultural connotative overtones as well.

Additional evidence in support of the importance of raising students' awareness about the cultural loads some words may carry beyond their first meanings comes from Tao Yan-hua (2010). In this study comparing and contrasting the cultural connotation of some animal terms as used by the Chinese and English speaking communities, it has been observed that the two cultures tend to attach different cultural meanings to the same words, thereby creating more intercultural confusions.

With respect to the educational system in Saudi Arabia, Mekheimer and Al-Dosari (2012) conducted a study among Saudi learners of EFL to assess the extent to which the teaching of culture-laden texts will promote their cultural translation abilities from English into Arabic. As opposed to the control group who was traditionally taught the course of translation, the experimental group was helped through the implementation of a course entitled 'cultural translation' during which students were assisted to pay meticulous attention to the cultural metaphors as used in the original text and see how these could be rendered into Arabic.

The findings of this study provide further credence to the view that an explicit exposure and awareness among foreign language learners of the target culture along with its linguistic and cultural nuances are essential in the understanding of the target text which may surely be conducible to its better and accurate translation. Accordingly, the overall comprehension and cultural translation test scores of the experimental group were much better than those attained by the control group.

On a par with this, Altakhaineh and Zibin (2014) conducted a study analyzing students' understanding of culture-loaded words among Jordanian EFL learners studying at the University of Jordan in Amman. The objective of this investigation is to see whether Jordanian students' knowledge of the cultural load of some target language words approximates that of target language speakers. They were asked about the appropriate use of seven culture-loaded words in context-sensitive sentences. The findings of this study indicate that although the judgment ratings of the advanced language students were slightly superior in comparison with their intermediate counterparts, both groups displayed unsatisfactory awareness and less understanding of English culturally loaded words.

Lin and Yang's (2015) examination of Chinese vocational college English majors' comprehension and understanding of culture-loaded words is in concordance with the aforementioned arguments. It has been shown that, except for 7.86 % who passed the test, the overwhelming majority of the Chinese subjects displayed a poor command of culture-loaded words. Based on these findings, it has been recommended that to improve cross-cultural communication, EFL teachers, and learners alike, should develop their awareness and their understanding of culture-loaded words and to broaden their knowledge of the target culture.

Guan and Zhao's (2016) study investigated the understanding of culturally-loaded words among non-English majors in Baoding University in China. The results unmistakably prove that EFL learners have great problems in understanding the cultural connotation of a number of words and expressions in English. These subjects were asked about the cultural meaning of ten animal words in Chinese and English. It has been found that they are unaware of the cultural meaning of some animal words in the two cultures which may prompt more confusions and miscomprehensions.

As a matter of fact, if foreign language learners are not assisted to recognize the differences in the cultural meanings some words may carry beneath their surface, they are far more likely to confuse and transfer their connotative meanings from L1 into L2 which may give rise to serious communication problems or conflicts (Laufer, 1990; Zhu, 2011; Liu, 2014). The problem is deemed to be even worse particularly when a positive or a neutral word in L1 creates negative mental images and has derogatory or more offensive meanings in L2 and vice-versa (Zhao, 2004).

3.1.Some problematic areas of culture-loaded words

That cross-cultural communication misunderstandings arise when different cultures assign different cultural connotative meanings to the same words can hardly be disputed. Some words may have both denotative and connotative meanings. The denotative meaning of a vocabulary word is its literal meaning that students are most often familiar with in dictionaries.

I am talking here about reference meaning, the meaning of which is explained in terms of the concrete objects such words may refer to in the outside world. Therefore, the denotative meaning of the word 'flea', for instance, is "a very small jumping insect that feeds on the blood of animals and humans"; and the owl's meaning is "a bird with a flat face and large eyes that hunts small mammals at night" (Cambridge Dictionary of English).

Word connotation; on the other hand, is the associative meaning of a term that is culturally loaded. Among the English speaking communities, the word 'flea' has a negative connotation as it denotes a bloodsucking insect linked with very old, dirty and shabby clothes; hence the meaning of 'flea market' where second-hand goods that might be infested with fleas are sold. It is therefore associated with dirtiness. By contrast, the French equivalent of the English word 'flea' (puce), in the statement: 'tu es ma puce' (literally means 'you are my flea'), carries positive meanings and may be used as an expression of endearment to address a female person. It has almost the same meaning as "you're my sweetie/honey" conveying an affectionate image.

The same word in Moroccan Arabic / lberɣut / may invoke in the mind of Moroccan negative images as it stands for a dirty insect that is culturally resented and being associated with dirty dogs, unwashed clothes and sordid places. This word could be used as an insult to denigrate and belittle an addressee.

Surprisingly enough, the statement 'tu es ma puce', that is culturally a desirable expression of love and affection among the French, may, if translated into English ('you are my flea') sound queer and unusual. The same expression in Moroccan Arabic / lberɣuta /(female flea) may be used as an insult as it evokes in the mind of a Moroccan an image of a girl of no social significance being associated with ugliness, dirtiness, and unpleasantness.

Although the word 'flea' carries negative overtones in both English and Moroccan Arabic, the two languages do conflict and contrast in the ways this word is linguistically employed. If the word flea, as referred to earlier, is used to qualify a dirty person in Moroccan Arabic, it may unmistakably be perceived as an insult. By contrast, the same expression, when uttered to address a person in English, would sound unusual, strange and utterly incomprehensible.

Additionally, while the word 'flea' has negative meanings in English and Moroccan Arabic, the same word in French is positively loaded and coveys more favorable expressions of affection and love.

Similarly, the word 'owl' recalls in the mind of members of the English speaking communities 'wisdom' (hence the expression 'as wise as an owl'), while among Moroccans the equivalent word /muka/ connotes death, evil, and bad omen. It is irrefutable then that what is superstitiously considered as a sign of a curse in one culture may be perceived as an auspicious term signifying bliss or something positive in another.

It is highly instructive to note in this connection that both the Moroccan learner and the English speaking interlocutor would not disagree that the word 'owl', for example,

refers literally to a bird flying at night. What the two participants may not share and that is immediately conducive to more cultural misconceptions and 'diplomatic breakdowns', is the metaphorical and mental image the word may conjure up in the minds of the two participants.

What is very intriguing to consider also in this respect is that sometimes the same word may carry different connotative meanings not only for speakers using different languages but even for speakers of varieties of the same language system. The word /ʃixa/ in the Middle-East, as a case in point, refers to a noblewoman, a female member of the aristocracy. The same word; by contrast, refers to a belly dancer in Morocco. While the word /ʃixa/ has positive connotations as an honorific title and stands for nobleness and prestige in the Middle-East, the same word may invoke in the mind of Moroccans negative associations, a 'mental image' which may connote perversion and promiscuousness.

Members of different speech communities do seldom fail to come into grips with the literal and denotative meaning of words. Cultural and metaphorical meanings may be communicatively dangerous and offensive, particularly if used unwittingly in face-to-face interaction. Members of the Middle-East may use with pride and reverence the term / ʃixa/ to refer to a noblewoman in a prestigious position of authority. To Moroccans, however, the same word is derogatory and very offensive as it may conjure up in their minds inauspicious images reminiscent of a promiscuous woman, a belly dancer, or a prostitute.

Such intercultural differences may ineluctably pose more problems of appropriateness when it comes to communication in social intercourse. The French term 'puce', alluded to earlier, will surely connote for the French learner an affectionate and a loving person, and a completely different thing to a student say from the United States, where the same term 'flea' signifies dirtiness, ugliness, and trivial things.

In a similar line, the word 'gazelle', to an English speaking member may mean nothing more than a small antelope and may sound awkward, queer and eccentric if used as a form of address or an adjective to qualify a person. The equivalent of the same word in Moroccan Arabic / ɣzala / signifies beauty and cuteness, and hence could be used among Moroccans as a form of address and an expression of love and endearment. This amounts to saying that what is culturally desirable as a form of address and as an expression of endearment in one speech community, may be culturally undesirable and resented in another.

Another instance of the cultural contrast between English and Moroccan Arabic is in the use of the word /lkebda/ (liver in English). The expression /lekbida djali/ (literally means 'my liver' in English) is by no means the appropriate form of address that a man might say to his wife, girlfriend, or little daughter/son in English. While that might sound a bit too queer and eccentric for members of the Anglo-American culture, it is quite common among the Moroccan speech community to use the same word as a term of endearment showing affection and love. It is commonly used to address those closest to us to indicate that they are too dear to our heart, and we do care a lot about them. Unlike in English, the word /lkebda/ (liver in English) carries positive overtones in Moroccan Arabic and the use of its diminutive form /lekbida/ accentuates the affective nuances of the term and is conventionally employed among romantic couples.

It is worth noting that this comparative analysis of the connotative meaning of words across cultures may have far more teaching implications. With respect to the teaching of the Translation course, and the teaching of 'Reading comprehension' and 'Guided

reading' are no exception, if students are not assisted to make an informed difference between word connotations across languages, they may be prone to produce inappropriate texts/ messages. Without this knowledge, Moroccan learners of EFL are most likely to make use of inappropriate expressions where they may try to translate literally from the English language into Arabic. On the basis of our direct contact with these students in the classroom context, they have been usually observed to produce in their oral or written tasks the following inaccuracies:

a. 'Black sheep of the family: (خروف العائلة الأسود)

While this expression will be perceived as strange and meaning nothing for the Moroccan learner of English, the same statement in English (black sheep) is an idiomatic expression referring to a member of one's family who is disreputable, making bad decisions and is a trouble-maker.

Likewise, the expression 'it's raining cats and dogs', as may be observed from its literal translation below, will be misinterpreted by the Moroccan learner and will be seen as bizarre, weird, and utterly unacceptable displaying an anomaly:

b. 'It's raining cats and dogs':   (إنها تمطر بالقطط والكلاب)

These translations are undoubtedly inaccurate and incorrect and may surely make the English and Moroccan speaking readers or addressees incapable of perceiving the intended meaning of the message.

Other similar examples where foreign language learners may make inaccurate translations is when they may try to translate literally some proverbial expressions from the target language into the source language or vice versa. Let us consider the following example:

c. 'One swallow doesn't make summer': (سنونو واحد لا يعني الصيف)

What is unusual about this attempt to translate literally this proverbial expression from English into Arabic is that 'swallows' are birds frequently associated in the Moroccan context with springtime, while in England such birds are most often linked with summer. This may unavoidably create misunderstanding and confusion among interlocutors belonging to different cultural backgrounds. While summer is an auspicious season among the English speaking communities, the same season in the Arab world is culturally perceived as a period of hot days, hardships and sufferings (for more discussion of this cultural dimension, see below).

Another contrast in the way different cultures may shape the meaning of words can be observed in the following expression in French. When people in the French-speaking community would like to express their positive emotions that they have received good news, the commonly employed formula is: 'Cette nouvelle m'a réchauffé le cœur' (literally means, this news warmed my heart).

This routine formula to express one's joy in French can never be adopted by the Arab speaking community as the same expression is translated into Arabic as:

(ان هدا الخبر قد اثلج صدري), (literally means, this news chilled my heart), and not:

(صدري ادفى ان هذا الخبر قد), (literally means, this news warmed my heart).

This is mainly attributed to the fact that the Arabs used to live in very hot climates which may make them relish their happiness through something that will 'refresh' their heart and not 'warm' it. This implies that 'the warmness of the climate' is a symbol of happiness, health and cheerfulness among the French people. Arabs, by contrast, because of their past experience with very hot climates, are more likely to find pleasure and joy in 'the chilliness of the weather'.

Differences in word connotations may unquestionably bring about misunderstandings, culture shock, and breakdown in intercultural communication among interlocutors of different cultural backgrounds. Another interesting example is evoked by Mekheimer and Al-Dosari (2012) warning us against any translation attempt to transfer a text from its original source language to the target language without any consideration of the cultural associations some words may carry beneath their conceptual meanings.

According to Mekheimer and Al-Dosari's (2012) study, previously referred to in the theoretical part of this paper, the experimental group of Saudi students of EFL who was subject to cultural translation training sessions was found to surpass the control group on comprehension and cultural translation test scores. What is relevant to our discussion here is the sample text the experimental group was exposed to as elicited from the first lines of Shakespeare's Sonnet as indicated below:

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

Thou art more lovely and more temperate:

Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May

And summer's lease hath all too short a date:

Sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines." (Quoted in

Mekheimer and Al-Dosari, 2012, p. 137).

In these poetic lines, Saudi students of EFL were trained to see that there is an explicit metaphorical analogy between the poet's beloved lady and summer. While summer connotes auspicious and more favorable images in the English speaking community, in the Arab world culture, the word summer "is related to unfavorable values and connotations, such as ruthless and cruel weather, long hot daytime, windy sands, droughts, among many other inauspicious elements" (Ibid, p. 138).

Because of such cultural discrepancies between the English and the Arab speech communities, students were made aware that a poet's beloved mistress should never be compared to summer days. The implied beauty conveyed through the original English version of the poem can hardly be construed when converted into Arabic, in which case the beauty of the lines along with their metaphorical images of summer's days will lose their true connotative nuances.

As hinted, this problematic nature of word connotation may also remind us of the cross-cultural barriers translators may face in their attempt "to transfer 'entire messages' from the source text to the target text" (Tan, 2006, p. 52). By the same token, in dealing with the connotative meaning of words problems may emerge as there are cultural aspects embedded in words that cannot be translated. This explains at least partly why translation is

commonly referred to as a "beautiful but unfaithful woman" (Ménage, 1690, cited in Tan, 2006, p. 48), and that the translator is often seen as a traitor/betrayer.

Tan (2006) makes the point clear that "no matter how hard the translator tries to faithfully reproduce the original in translation, he cannot completely avoid 'mingling' the original with his personal impressions" (p. 50). The implication here is that the cultural values connotative words may convey are so subtle that they tend to vary in conformity with the socio-cultural and ideological paradigms in which they operate.

In trying to conceptualize the intended meaning of the aforementioned idiomatic expressions along with the translated figurative images, the foreign language learner will be at a loss grappling to find equivalent meanings. If not informed about the cultural particularities of each culture, the foreign language learner will surely produce sentences which sound queer, strange and eccentric. Through inaccurate translations, the meanings of these expressions may lose their intended massages and become therefore nonsensical, irrational and entirely incomprehensible.

For further examples of connotative meanings of words that may differ across languages and may prompt more intercultural ambiguities, let us consider the analysis of the following vocabulary items. The cultural meanings of the animal words /qnija / (rabbit), /lkelba/ (dog), and /lefʕa/ (cobra) present striking differences both in Moroccan Arabic and English:

The connotative images these words may carry in Moroccan Arabic are as follows:

a. /qnija/ is a symbol of fertility portraying the image of a woman taking no birth control pills, and is often criticized for her much-wanted pregnancies;

b. /lkelba/ is suggestive of a female person who is 'nasty, dirty, and of no significance'. In most Moroccan expressions, a dog is linked with some derogatory connotations and is commonly used as an insult to denigrate the addressee;

c. /lefʕa/ stands for a female person being 'spiteful, unkind, and treacherous', and its use as a form of address to call a woman or a girl will be perceived as an outright insult.

The connotative meaning of these words in Moroccan Arabic contrast with those in the English language:

a. The animal word 'rabbit' in the English culture is linked with timidity, fear, and agility. The phrase "he is as timid as a rabbit" is commonly used among the English speaking community to refer to somebody who is timid, frightened, and lacking in self-confidence;

b. The word 'dog' carries positive overtones and is often seen as a domestic and friendly pet, hence the common English expression 'an old dog barks not in vain' which is evocative of commendatory associations suggesting that old people have a very long experience that they will never fail;

c. As opposed to Moroccan Arabic where the word 'cobra' is used as an insult, in the English culture the same word is connected with "danger and death" and can never be used in the same context as in Arabic.

A more perplexing and embarrassing incident is the one reported in Liton (2016) portraying a critical situation characteristic of intercultural dialogue between a Chinese girl and her American friend that reads:

"Hey, puppy, you look lovely today!

What? Am I your pet dog?

Oh, I mean baby, please!" (p. 3).

Because of the different cultural meanings associated with the use of the word 'puppy' in both the Chinese and American cultures, the girl feels being utterly offended. While in the American lifestyle the word 'puppy' stands for a pet name and carries an expression of endearment in complete congruence with the intentions of the American friend, in the Chinese culture, the word conveys negative and derogatory overtones. This is indeed a very serious cultural barrier that may be conducive to more frustrating and embarrassing social interactions.

What follows from above is that these words are culture-laden and there are indeed vast cultural discrepancies embedded in their use either in speaking or in writing, and without conscious awareness of their cultural connotative nuances, a lot of unintended messages may be wrongly communicated creating more intercultural conflicts and misunderstandings.

Although some words may have the same denotative meaning referring to the same object, in reality, they may have different cultural meanings in different cultures (Guan and Zhao, 2016). The corollary of this is that failure to recognize the cultural discrepancy shaping the use of these culturally-charged words across cultures may only accentuate the foreign language learners' problem of intercultural communication educationalists have often striven to eradicate.

Interestingly enough, Tao Yan-hua (2010) draws our attention to the fact that although languages and cultures may vary substantially and in different ways, they sometimes may share the same thing in common. In this case, the cultural meanings some words may carry in the learner's L1 seem to coincide in meaning with words in L2, in which case creating positive transfer and no cultural confusion. Tao Yan-hua (2010) provides very interesting examples, namely the word 'fox' and 'donkey' in Chinese and English. The sentences (1) "He is as sly as a fox. He's foxy, and you've got to watch him" and (2) "He is as stubborn as a donkey" may mean the same thing both in Chinese and English as the two cultures assign similar cultural meanings to the words 'fox' and 'donkey', respectively (p. 63).

However, this linguistic phenomenon of words sharing the same connotative meanings across languages causing no problems for foreign language learners is reported to be unusual and very rare.

Moroccan learners of EFL, or English learners of Arabic as a foreign language, as is the case with the American students learning Arabic at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities in Meknes, must be made aware of the cultural loads some specific words may convey, and therefore must be very meticulous both as encoders and/or decoders.

While using language, foreign language learners must be on their guard against any misuse of words' connotative meanings, and should be cognizant of the different associations' members of diverse speech communities may have for different words.

The issue at stake is that sometimes the inappropriate choices of the accurate words may have far more serious implications. This is the case of the use of language in diplomatic encounters, in international meetings or conferences, where political diplomats representative of different language backgrounds may urgently meet to settle down some worldwide political problems.

Without such an awareness of the use of the right words, more diplomatic embarrassments and conflicts might emerge leading in the worst cases to enmity, hostility and wars. Nick (2001), an ex-Croatian ambassador, warns us against the potential threats the inappropriate use of the right words including their cultural nuances may engender contending that "it is correct to say that the real weight of words and terms in diplomatic professional jargon is much stronger than those same words in "normal" everyday speech" (p. 45).

It is the responsibility of foreign language teachers of English to increase the sensitiveness of their students with respect to the 'cultural distance' between different speech communities. Any attempts to overlook such discrepancies characterizing the particularity of each culture may constitute a stumbling block for students that may surely be conducive to unnecessary psychological frustration, I may call 'culture shock', they may unavoidably experience in such a context.

Perhaps one of the most frequent mistakes foreign language students, from different cultural backgrounds, tend to make is that they cannot resist the temptation to assess and filter language, in this case, word connotation/ culturally-loaded words, through their specific cultural lenses. This is tantamount to saying that word connotations tend to vary substantially across cultures and that the 'mental images', beliefs, thoughts, and world views these words may conjure up in the mind of different speech communities may cause serious communication misunderstandings. Any potential misuse of these words is often culturally resented, and may sorely be interpreted as impolite, rude, derogatory, or even hostile.

3.2.Some teaching and learning implications

Word meanings are 'culturally laden' conveying very specific aspects of the target language community that are often alien to foreign language learners. With the examples discussed so far in this paper, it becomes evident that students will find too many problems perceiving the conflicting and contradictory cultural nuances these terms may carry across languages. Their slippery nature may present strong resistance for any attempt to understand or translate them, and it becomes too arduous for the language learner to capture with precision their semantic evasiveness.

Mekheimer and Al-Dosari (2012) argue, in this regard, that because of the cultural nuances these words may evoke in some specific cases, some expressions either in simple words, idiomatic expressions, or proverbial expressions where cultural figurative language is used may become utterly untranslatable. If foreign language learners are not well informed about a number of value-systems/aspects pertaining to cross-cultural communication, mutual hostility may unavoidably be established as an outcome of any potential contact with target language speakers.

What follows from above is that foreign language students, if not made aware of the wide differences that the connotative meaning of words may carry across cultures, and if they are not assisted to develop a critical cultural awareness regarding both their language/culture and the target language/culture, more intercultural communication breakdowns are more likely to occur. In what follows, we will try to discuss some strategies which could be implemented in the classroom context to foster foreign language students' sensitivity regarding the appropriate use and perception of the cultural load of words across cultures.

3.3. Cross-cultural comparison analysis

Comparing and contrasting the cultural load of words in the learner's L1 with their equivalents in the target language proves to be more insightful as it helps highlight areas of cross-cultural misunderstandings and false assumptions that may hinder any communication process between member speakers of divergent cultural backgrounds. Although some words may have the same denotative meaning referring to the same object, in reality, they may have different connotative meanings.

EFL teachers can design classroom activities where they may compare and contrast between an English word and its Moroccan Arabic equivalent at the level of their connotative meanings. For example, the word 'owl', referred to earlier, is often misunderstood by Moroccan learners as it carries different cultural meanings. In the English speaking culture, the owl stands for wisdom and evokes positive overtones. Because of this, the English phrase 'an owlish person' refers to somebody who is wise, decent, and experienced. In the Moroccan culture, by contrast, the owl invokes in the mind of its native speakers death and bad omen as the term evokes negative meanings. There is a cultural belief among the Moroccan community that if it happens that the owl growls over a house at night, one member of that family may die. Feeling disgusted towards its voice, people in Morocco imbue the word 'owl' with derogatory connotations as it brings most of the time in their view bad news and bad luck.

Accordingly, without the assistance of language teachers, it would be very difficult for the foreign language learner to figure out 'the mental image' these culturally-loaded words may convey across cultures. With this line of reasoning in mind, Byram (1998) recommends that through comparison and contrast, foreign language learners will be in a better position to perceive and understand that their native language and culture and the target language and culture present two divergent world views, and this knowledge will undoubtedly help them challenge a wide range of "taken-for-granted" values and assumptions.

Elaborating on the same issue, Wang and Ciu (2015) give interesting examples of words which carry different cultural overtones in both English and Chinese. While in Chinese it is customary to use the term 'mouse' to refer to a timid person, in English the most appropriate animal words that can express the same meaning are 'rabbit', 'chicken' and 'pigeon'. The expressions 'as timid as a rabbit', 'don't be scared, chicken', and 'he is pigeon-livered' are used in English to serve this purpose of describing the timidity of any person (Wang and Ciu, 2015, p. 59).

I have in so many occasions observed how enthusiastic and thrilled my students turn out to be when discussing such values and beliefs across cultures. Rather than experiencing the feeling of culture shock and frustration, such a discussion renders these cultural differences regarding the use of word connotation enjoyable and worth studying. It

would perhaps be a good opportunity to make students feel how tremendous, but very intriguing, the differences between people across the world are.

There is some evidence from research indicating that the inappropriate perception and/or use of culturally-loaded words often leads to gross misunderstandings leading most of the time to cross-cultural communication breakdown (Lado, 1972; Zhao, 2004; Mekheimer and Al-Dosari, 2012; Guan and Zhao, 2016). Accordingly, students must be well-informed of the wide range of conflicting values each culture may attach to a number of culturally-loaded words typical of both the learners' local language/culture and the target language/culture. Any unsuccessful attempt to identify this discrepancy characteristic of both cultures may surely give way to confusion and conflicts, which by implication may lead to the perpetuation of cultural stereotypes. In corroboration of this line of argumentation, Guan and Zhao (2016) succinctly put it, "It has been proved that the contrastive method is one of the widely-used and most effective techniques in cultural teaching. This method refers to teaching students cultural connotations by comparing the native culture and the target culture." (pp: 40-41).

With respect to the Moroccan university context, another more insightful technique to resort to, particularly in the teaching of 'Reading comprehension', 'Introduction to literary texts' and 'Translation' is to arouse students' attention to the culturally sensitive dimension of some words across different languages. Foreign language teachers may teach not only the literal/denotative meaning of any new lexical items students are bound to be introduced to, but also their connotative/metaphorical facets which continue to constitute a recurrent problem for foreign language students.

It is very disappointing to note; however, that in the absence of any information regarding cross-cultural communication at the level of culturally-loaded words, it would perhaps be very hard to figure out how messages, including word connotation, would be encoded and/or decoded by foreign language students from widely divergent cultural backgrounds. Unintended verbal messages may ineluctably arise at all levels, and may surely obfuscate the right information contributing to cross-cultural diplomatic conflicts.

3.4. Teachers' professional and academic in-service training

Through in-service training and international conferences, foreign language teachers should develop their critical awareness regarding the appropriate use of culture-loaded words. They should also be given a chance to study in western counties to immerse fully in the target language and culture to have a direct contact with members of the target speech community (Lin and Yang, 2015).

According to Guan and Zhao (2016), it has been recommended that absence of any awareness of EFL teachers of the cultural discrepancies between the learners' native culture and the target culture, a number of cross-cultural misunderstandings may persist, and there is a danger that this may prompt more intercultural conflicts. This view finds true expression in Guan and Zhao's (2016) argument contending that:

" Without teachers' profound knowledge of western and Chinese culture,

there is no way for students to have keen culture awareness. Teachers

should receive professional and academic training for the teaching of

culture. They should also keep a sharp eye on the sparks generated by

the diversity of different cultures." (p.40).

Relying on the comparison and contrast method, teachers need to exploit authentic materials displaying the cultural meaning of words. In addition to the use of classroom textbooks, teachers should design additional teaching materials where the emphasis should be placed on the explicit explanation of this variation in the use of word connotations across cultures. It is only through this way of instruction that EFL learners will be assisted to be in a better position to understand the cross-cultural loads some words may carry in their additional meanings, and to be fully aware of the extent to which this knowledge may help them avoid any intercultural misgivings.

3.5. The implementation of the multicultural curriculum

In cross-cultural communication, the implementation of the multicultural course in the English language teaching syllabus becomes an educational necessity. Immersing language learners in this multicultural teaching and learning program may undoubtedly help them reap a number of benefits. Perceiving the importance of incorporating the multicultural approach, Davitishvili (2017) aptly contends that:

> Multicultural education encourages appreciation and understanding of other cultures as well as one's own. Teaching with this perspective promotes the learner's sense of the uniqueness of their own culture as a positive characteristic and enables them to accept the uniqueness of the cultures of others." (Davitishvili, 2017, p. 553).

There is enough research evidence demonstrating the existence of a multitude of vocabulary words which may have different cultural meanings both in L1 and L2, and if not properly taken into account they may ineluctably cause serious communication misconceptions and conflicts. In the multicultural university course curriculum, special care must be made to assist language learners to make that 'mental leap', or 'cognitive jump' to transcend the confines of the conceptual meaning of words to 'feel, touch and see' their intercultural nuances that lie at the subliminal level of any vocabulary word (Mekheimer and Al-Dosari, 2012).

This awareness of the cultural connotation of words can substantially help them get a better understanding of the cultural dimension of vocabulary words, which would by implication assist them to appreciate and accept the cultural peculiarities pertaining to any language/culture group.

Evidence from research indicates also that students enrolled in foreign language classrooms which incorporate multicultural teaching activities geared to raise awareness of the differential use of word connotative meanings across languages tend to surpass other groups of students for whom there is no explicit reference to this (Zhao, 2004; Mekheimer and Al-Dosari, 2012; Liu, 2014; Lin and Yang, 2015). Lack of any information regarding the issue of the cultural meaning of words will only widen the gap between cultures creating more intercultural stereotypes and conflicts which may sometimes lead even to a complete denial of the other.

4. CONCLUSION

With the fast growth of modern technology and the expansion of social media tools including the internet, 'Facebook', 'Twitter', 'Instagram', and 'Whatsapp groups', among others, the need for intercultural communication becomes a necessity. The teaching of foreign languages at a worldwide level needs to keep pace with this new technological age of information. It is recommended; therefore, that for an effective development of intercultural communicative competence, foreign language learners' awareness of the cultural connotation of words, along with their understanding of other facets of the target language/culture, should find room in the multicultural university course syllabus.

Recognizing the cultural connotations and the conflicting 'mental images' some words may carry, and being cognizant of the cultural distance between different speech communities will unquestionably be the first step towards combating any potential blunders and conflicts between cultures, and may sorely render the teaching and learning of foreign languages rewarding, enjoyable, and presenting a thriving experience.

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