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اللغة ، الثقافة والأدب في العصر الحديث: مراجع الثقافة الشعبية في الأدب

Language, Culture and Literature in the Modern Era: Pop-Culture References in Literature

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CHERAIFIA Djihed شرايفية جهاد1، BOUHASSOUN Azzedine بوحسون عز الدين2

،M'hamed Boughuerra university, Boumerdes, d.cheraifi@univ-boumerdes.dz 1

جامعة أمحد بوقرة، بومرداس

، Centre Universitaire Belhadj Bouchaib, Ain Temouchent, azzeddinebouhassoun@gmail.com 2

المركز الجامعي بلحاج بوشعيب، عين تيموشنت

Corresponding author: cheraifia Djihed, d.cheraifi@univ-boumerdes.dz

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ملخص:

عند تدريس اللغة الأجنبية، من المتوقع أن يكون المتعلم على دراية بالجانب الثقافي للغة وخاصة الثقافة الشعبية على وجه التحديد. تعد الثقافة الشعبية واحدة من أصعب الموضوعات التي يجب على متعلمي اللغة الأجنبية التعامل معها و خاصة في العصر الحديث الذي يتميز بوجود رموز لغوية جديدة مثل "الميمز"، تلاعبات اللغة ،"فاينز" ، مراجع الثقافة الشعبية والتعبيرات التي يستخدمها الشباب.

وجدت هذه اللغة الرمزية طريقها إلى الأدب الحديث حيث يستخدمها كثير من المؤلفون مثل ربك ريوردان لجذب الشباب الى كتاباته. يهدف هذا البحث إلى إبراز الصعوبات التي تنشأ عند التعامل مع مثل هذه النصوص الأدبية وشرح كيفية التعامل معها . كما يهدف أيضًا إلى توفير الحلول الممكنة التي ستجعل هنه العملية أسهل و خاصة في العصر الحديث.

كلمات مفتاحية: الأدب ، تدريس اللغة الأجنبية ،الثقافة الشعبية ، الصعوبات.

Abstract :

In a language classroom, the learner is expected to be familiar with the cultural aspect of the language. Pop-culture, specifically, is one of the most difficult subjects for language-learners to deal with especially in the modern era with the introduction of new symbolic forms of language such as memes, puns, vines, pop-culture references and expressions used by the youth .

This symbolic language has found its way to literature where authors, such as Rick Riordan, use it to appeal to the youth. This paper aims to highlight the difficulties that arise when dealing with such literary texts and to explain these difficulties using illustrations. It also aims to provide possible solutions that will make the learning process a lot easier.

Keywords: literature, language-learning, pop-culture, difficulties

1. INTRODUCTION

Culture is one of the most important elements of language learning. It does not only help language learners acquire new information and learn a particular language, but also places the language in its appropriate context. For this reason, language learners are expected to be familiar with the culture that belongs to the intended language. Most linguists and language theorists are aware of the importance of culture and a lot of researches, questionnaires and experiments were conducted to show the importance of culture

in the field of foreign languages. To accomplish an understanding of culture for foreign language learners, culture is taught both explicitly and implicitly in most English language departments through implementing history, civilization and literature in its curriculum.

Literature considered a rich source of culture. It captures the cultural essence of a given society and presents it in a form that appeals to learners and teaches them implicitly while enhancing their linguistic skills as well . This is why, teaching literature as a source of culture in a language department is considered one of the most essential steps toward accomplishing a cultural awareness for the learners that will make their acquisition of the language within its context a lot easier (Inguez et al 129). In this perspective, literature provides a source that is rich with cultural references which illustrate and present the culture of a given society.

However, in the modern world, communication is no longer verbal and direct and clear but also non-verbal, decoded within new forms of communication and imbedded within the cultural scope. Popular culture or Pop-culture is especially hard to understand with the introduction of memes, vines, pop-culture references and idioms or expressions that are mainly used by the youth. These new forms have found its way to literature with writers such as Rick Riordan who use these expressions to appeal to the younger generation. When dealing with this kind of literary texts that contain such forms of communication in a language class, literature can still serve as a source of

both culture and pop-culture. However, simply reading these literary texts is no longer sufficient to fully grasp the cultural meaning of the text or to learn the culture. The problem lies in the complexity of these forms of communication that require a certain amount of cultural awareness and an up-to-the-minute informed teachers/learners that allow the uncovering of these forms and thus understanding their cultural significance.

Therefore, dealing with such literary texts is a hard task that requires a huge amount of personal effort to understand these non-verbal forms of communication especially that these forms are updated each single day. This is why, a full grasp of these new forms is almost impossible for both the learners and the teachers. When dealing with modern literary texts that may contain such forms, both the teacher and the learner should be at least aware of the existence of these forms and be familiar with some of them to be able to detect them within the literary text. After being detected, small research online will be more than sufficient to understand the meaning and the cultural significance of these expressions.

This paper tries to highlight the importance of culture in language teaching and the importance of literature as a source of culture. It also aims to highlight the existence of new forms of communications in pop-culture and its existence in modern literature and the difficulty of teaching culture (even using literature) with the existence of these new forms. This paper's goal is to also suggest possible solutions or

methods to deal with this new phenomenon that exist within culture and literature.

2. CULTURAL AWARENESS, LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

In this sense, many researchers suggested different approaches and tools to reach such cultural awareness and cultural competence. Culture can be taught both implicitly or explicitly in a language classroom. Culture can be taught explicitly through teaching it to learners directly while they are made aware of its existence or implicitly by teaching it within other subjects such as literature, civilization history. The tools and approaches to teaching culture in a language classroom vary from one classroom to another depending on the main aim of the classroom. One of the common methods to teach culture in a language classroom is to teach it using literature. In itself, literature can be taught in a language classroom using three different models. The first model is the language model, where the focus is on how the language is used in a literary text. The second model is the cultural model where literature serves as a rich source of culture. The third model is the personal-growth model which tries to create a link between the first and the second model by focusing on the language use in a literary text with a special focus on the cultural signification of the text (Padurean 196).

Through teaching literature, learners learn both the language and its culture i.e. the language in context. Literature is considered a rich source of culture. This is why, teaching literature as a source of culture in a language department, especially when it is taught using the cultural model, is considered one of the most essential steps toward accomplishing a cultural awareness for the learners that will make their acquisition of the language within its context a lot easier

3. POP-CULTURAL REFERENCES IN LITERATURE

In the modern world, communication is no longer verbal and direct and clear but also non-verbal, decoded within new forms of communication and imbedded within the cultural scope of the language. Pop-culture is especially hard to understand with the introduction of memes, vines, pop-culture references and idioms or expressions that are mainly used by the youth

Memes have known a wide-spread in recent years with the age of technology. In her work "the Power of Meme", Susan Blackmore argues that "The notion that memes exist and evolve has been around for almost 25 years, but only recently has it gained attention as a powerful force in human evolution" (1). A meme is defined in Merriam Webster dictionary as "An element of a culture or system of behavior passed from one individual to another by imitation or other non-genetic means, An image, video piece of text…etc". Memes are typically humorous and are usually copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with slight variation.it was Richard Dawkins of the University of Oxford coined the word in 1976 and used it to refer to information that is copied again and again, with

variations and with selection of some variants over others (Blackmore 1). The most famous type of memes online is in the form of a picture. Memes are not static and they change with time and there are new memes every day. A meme could originate from a famous movie, a famous show, a famous video online, and sometimes even edited pictures. No one knows why a certain meme become famous and why it comes into a wide circulation online; However, once a meme becomes famous, many variations of the meme appear with different captions that concern different topics (see figure 1 and figure 2). The topics that a meme may talk about can vary to include everyday events or mundane activities and political or serious topics. Companies and politicians try to appeal to youth using memes (see figure 3). Many resistance movements use memes indirectly to express the feelings of resistance and refusal to follow the system.

Figure 3: The Original meme (taken from a Japanese animation) is called the confused anime guy meme which expresses the situation where even when one is presented with something completely obvious and clear they are still confused (calling a butterfly a pigeon despite the clarity of the matter)

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Figure 4: the same meaning of the original meme however the anime guy is replaced by Christopher Columbus, the butterfly is replaced by America and the pigeon is replaced by "India" showing the obliviousness of Columbus

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Figure 5:

The famous restaurant series McDonald uses Bad Luck Brian meme as a form of advertisement to appeal to the youth.

Rick Riordan, a famous New York Times bestselling author is well known for using memes in his works.

A good example is in the Blood of Olympus: "'What if we promoted, like, Adidas shoes?' Percy wondered. 'Would that make Nike mad enough to show up?'". The quote is from a series talking about Greek mythology and Greek gods in modern times where Percy (the protagonist and a half blood, son of Poseidon) and his friends are trying to lure the Goddess of vengeance Nike out. Percy suggests "promoting adidas shoes" to lure the goddess out. This is a reference to the famous enmity between the shoes competing companies Adidas and Nike in a direct reference to Nike vs Adidas meme which has been in circulation online for a long time.

Memes can also be generated from vines. Vines are Six (6) seconds long videos that were posted using the application "vine". "Vines" are one of the most known birthplaces of new memes or new expressions such as "on fleak" (e.g.: "eyebrows on fleak" meaning perfect or perfectly shaped). These vines are usually Humorous in nature. The Vine app have been taken down and replaced by VineCam in January 2017 (was

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bought by Twitter), yet the videos have been downloaded and posted in other platforms (Urban Dictionary). Vines are not only the source of memes, but also the sources of many modern idiomatic expressions which are added to the English language. Like memes, vines, or the expressions that were generated from vines, have found its way to literature. In Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard, the protagonist, Magnus Chase, starts narrating his story as a half-blood with godly parents. Magnus addresses the readers by saying "YEAH I KNOW. You guys are going to read about how I died in agony, and you're going be like, "Wow! That sounds cool, Magnus! Can I die in agony too? No. Just no." The expression "No, just no" which expresses complete disapproval of something is a reference to a famous expression that is generated from a well-known vine. In the original vine, a small girl dressed up as a princess for Halloween is heading toward someone with a Grim costume then she sees the Grim and heads back just saying "no, just no". This vine has transformed the expression "no, just no" into an expression that means utter disapproval. It is used when someone disapproves something so much that even justifying or giving a reason to this disapproval or disagreement is pointless.

Pop-culture references are usually references to a famous movie, show, animation, song or anything popular using a famous expression as a reference. A good example of such expressions is "with great power, comes great responsibility" from the Spiderman movies. Other good examples include "Luke, I am your father" from the Star Wars franchise and the expression "God's plan" which is the title of one of Drake songs. In the Heroes of Olympus, Nico Di Angelo, a character in the series addresses another character saying "With great power comes great need to take a nap. Wake me up later." this is a direct reference to the *Spiderman* movie where Uncle Ben tells Peter "with great power comes great responsibility". it is used to add a sense of humor to the literary text

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Expressions that are used by youth include expressions such as "water is bae" (meaning water is important) and "that party was lit" (meaning that party was great) and referring to something as "smol" (meaning it is very small in an adorable way). The origin of these expressions is not always certain and it is not specific to modern times. In Percy Jackson and the Olympians, Percy describes a group of centaurs "Some had slogans scrawled across their flanks like *HORSEZ PWN* or *KRONOS SUX*. To understand such description and the meaning of the text, one should be familiar with expressions that's are used by the youth. Understanding words such as "PWN" and "sux", for example, is necessary. In the context of a game, "own" is slang for "completely defeat the opponent; win by a large margin." The word "pwn" is only used for "own" in this sense. Because it originated on the internet recently, it is slang and it has no obvious or unified pronunciation. The noun form of the verb "sucks". Used to connote a lack of quality or skill (someone bad at something or

someone bad in general) (Merriam Webster). The quote itself contains more than just these words that are usually used by the youth. For example, adding z in the place of s is a form of typing online, (horsez to mean horses). The word "horsez" here refers to centaurs and Kronos refers to the antagonist of the story. By taking context and pop-cultural references into consideration, the general meaning of this quote is "centaurs shall win, or they are great, and Kronos shall lose (or he is bad)".

4. HOW TO DEAL WITH THESE NEW FORMS OF COMMUNICATION

These new forms of communication present a new challenge to both language and literature students and teachers, especially that they are not specific to online communities nowadays. They are updated every single day (in the same day different memes can come to life, many videos can be posted online, new songs/movies/animations are produced). This is why understanding them requires being

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familiar with the culture and being highly informed of the platforms in which they are posted and spread. To be able to detect these new forms, one must first be already familiar with at least some of them

In general, both the learner and the teacher should be aware of the existence of these new forms of communication**.** The learner and the teacher should also be familiar with some of them to be able to detect them later in the future. It is highly advised that the learner/teacher should be familiar with the platforms in which they are shared (mainly social media) and to engage in such platforms by following, sharing or at least being exposed to such content

Cultural understanding is a difficult task that both the learner and the teacher should take into consideration. Therefore, there are some steps to be followed such as: being aware of the existence of such new forms of communication, being familiar with some of them, being able to detect them (within the literary text), being able to understand them and their cultural

significance or at least being able to search effectively for its meaning, and being exposed to the content in which they are embedded in to be familiar with changes in meaning and the new updates

5. CONCLUSION

Culture is an important element in any language classroom. This is why, it should be taught to ensure a full-understanding of the language and a full-mastery of its use within context. Culture can be taught both explicitly and implicitly. The implicit approach toward culture involves teaching literature to language learners using the cultural model. However, in modern times, language has evolved to include more symbolic forms of communication that appeared within popular-culture. These forms include memes, vines, pop-cultural references and expression sued by the youth. These new forms of communication have found its way to literature with authors such as Rick Riordan who use it to appeal to their younger readers. For this reason, being familiar with these forms is necessary for both the teacher and the learner to guarantee a full understanding of the language in context.

Understanding these forms can be a difficult task for many teachers and learners. However, it can be accomplished. The first step is to be aware of its existence. This paper explains these new forms of communication and provides examples for its use in literature. It also provides a few steps that may be able to ease the road toward cultural awareness within the context of these new forms of communication.

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