

Cultivation of Chinese Students' Cultural Awareness in College English Teaching

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Abstract

Language and culture are always closely mingled together and sophisticatedly interact with each other. Language is a main expression of culture; meanwhile language is a carrier of culture. There is no language without the influence of culture. Therefore, it is imperative to integrate culture education with language teaching, have students understand different culture through the introduction of cultural knowledge, comparison of cultural phenomenon and cultivation of students' cultural awareness from the aspects of typical cultural difference including value, national psychological characteristics, thought pattern and connotation of vocabulary and idioms. When carrying out language teaching, teachers should provide students more materials and references related to western culture at the same time of exploring cultural points in textbooks, and designing more class activities, such as role-play and mini drama, comparison and contrast, holding parties on western festivals, etc. to widen students' cultural horizon and thereby develop students' cross-cultural communicative competence in order to get acclimatized to the new world that is increasingly globalized and internationalized.

Key words: Culture; Language; Cultural awareness; Cultural difference; Cross-cultural communicative competence

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INTRODUCTION

Along with the continuous development of economic globalization and wide use of high-tech, international exchanges become more and more frequent. There is an increasing demand for the people with cross-cultural communicative competence. Foreign languages, especially English, play a more and more important part in our daily life, but it is far from enough to speak fluent foreign language in the process of intercultural communication. According to *Chinese College English Curriculum Requirements* (2007), the development of college students' comprehensive culture sophistication and cultivation of cross-cultural communicative competence and strategy have been considered as the part of main aims of Chinese college English teaching.

1. LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

When referring to culture, there are a variety of definitions. Different people may have different idea about it. According to Wikipedia (2012), culture is what distinguishes life in one group from life in another group. It can be regarded as an organization of comprehensive human behavior patterns including way of thinking, communication, language, custom, belief, convention, value, etiquette and the relation between races, nationalities, religions and social communities as well. In a specific cultural group, one has to know or to believe this set of patterns in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members (Goodenough, 1981). Most people are able to anticipate the others' behavior according to the patterns and they would pass on those patterns to their descendants. Culture, in this sense, is shared and linked with people. It nearly refers to all aspects of a shared life within a certain society. It is the basis of society.

"Language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols, a system of signs, created by human beings and used for human communication" (Saussure, 2002, p.1). It may refer

either to the specific human capacity for acquiring and using complex systems of communication, or to a specific instance of such a system of complex communication.

Language and culture are closely related to each other which can not be broken up. H.D. Brown (2000) describes the relationship between them this way, "a language is a part of culture and culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one can not separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture" (p.177). Culture depends on language and language pushes forward cultural transmission. The relationship between culture and language is mutual restraint and interdependent.

Language is an important and indispensable aspect of culture, a main expression of culture, and plays a very important role in culture. Without language, the existence, inheritance and transmission of culture would not be possible. Meanwhile, language is a carrier of culture. Language develops with the development of society and culture. The use of language is strongly influenced and shaped by culture. There is no language without culture content. Culture determines one's behaviour and the way one thinks and speaks. H.D. Brown (2000) stated precisely, "Culture is really an integral part of the interactions between language and thought. Culture patterns, customs, and ways of life are expressed in language; Cultural-specific world views are reflected in language" (p.179). When communication between people from different cultural background takes place, the most important thing is to learn and understand the different cultural influence on their behaviors and also on their activities and the forms of linguistic expressions, because language does not exist on its own but is embedded in the culture of a nation and reflects its beliefs and ideas.

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF DEVELOPING STUDENTS' CULTURAL AWARENESS

International cooperation and global population flow have been thriving since the latter part of the last century. Nearly all nationalities have been brought into a common global village. Meanwhile, the rapid progress in communication technology has opened a door for us to exchange and share an enormous amount of information with people from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Cross-cultural communication has become an integral part of national life. In order to get better communication, it is necessary to explore foreign culture. It is obvious that cultural differences and misunderstandings have become the serious obstacle to cross-cultural communication. If people knew nothing about the cultural convention of other countries and just use their presumed traditional way to treat foreigners, misunderstanding and even the hurting of each others' feeling would inevitably arise. Thus, an emphasis on the cross-cultural awareness

and communicative competence may help people to understand foreign cultures better and avoid cultural misunderstanding.

Furthermore, "One can not really learn the language, and teach language well unless one knows the patterns and norms of culture and cultural background" (Song, 1998, p.85). With the relationship between language and culture illustrated above, it is evident that without a specific cultural background, language is non-existent. If we do not know the culture of target language, we would find it difficult to understand the meaning of certain words. For example, in English, there is a very useful phrase "a lucky dog", which refers to somebody who is very lucky. Whereas in China, "you are a lucky dog" is a satiric sentence, because in western culture, "dog" is a very adorable animal which many people keep as a family member, and they are harmoniously coexisting. "Dog" here is a very intimate expression. While in Chinese views, "dog" is an expression when people used to refer generally to inferior ones.

It is widely acknowledged that the main objective of foreign language teaching is to develop communicative competence of language learners by using the language in various social and cultural situations. At present, the significance of cultural awareness in language pedagogy has been highlighted and it has become a hot topic in language teaching circle. However, when talking about language teaching, many people may think of the training of the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. In fact, current situation of Chinese college English teaching has witness a lack of culture education. In China, cultural knowledge teaching has long been neglected in English classroom interactions. Traditional English teaching only emphasizes pure language competence and aims at teaching students to produce sentences that are grammatically correct and rhetorically effective. What they neglect is being culturally acceptable. Pure language competence practically does not exist because it is not enough to guide learners to communicate suitably in real communicative environment. For example, although most Chinese college students have learnt English for many years, and they have mastered the fundamentals of these skills they have learned a lot of words, sentence structures and grammatical rules well in heart, they do not know the difference between "how do you do" and "how are you" which may put foreigners into confusion.

Consequently, only learning the vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation is extremely insufficient for learning a foreign language well. It is impossible for students to learn a language well without having a good command of knowledge about the culture of the foreign language, we also should learn the ways of thinking and ways of doing things. All in all, the culture education should be emphasized, and the cultivation of students' cultural awareness is extremely crucial in language teaching and learning process.

3. CLASSIFICATIONS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Each country, community, even social group has its unique culture, which makes its language different from other languages or bring forth some language varieties. So in the process of the communication with people from different countries, communities, what people exchange is not just the language itself, but also the culture. However, it seems impossible and unnecessary for us to have a systematic study of target culture, which covers almost everything. The difficulty shows that culture is ubiquitous, multidimensional and complex. A good solution to this problem might be to explore selectively those origins that result in different cultural phenomena which are closely related to the language.

When it comes to culture in English speaking countries, the cultural differences between Chinese and English and the difficulties they bring to students' English learning are mainly in the following respects.

3.1 Value

Every culture possesses a set of unique beliefs which tells people what is good or bad, what is allowed, appreciated, criticized and prohibited by the society. It is called "value". It is a set of instructions inevitable to everybody anytime and anywhere which indicates people's moral criterion and regulates people's behavior, thought and moral. Value is the core of culture. Different cultural implications are gifted by different values in Chinese and English.

For example, at the sight of the word "individualism", what is reflected in Chinese's mind is a set of selfish thoughts and behaviors of somebody who always takes too much care of himself without taking other people and collectivity. On the contrary, westerners show great respect for individualism. According to Samovar and Porter (2009), individualism refers to the "doctrine that the interests of the individual are or ought to be paramount, and that all values, rights and duties originate in individuals" (p.85). In English, we can see more than one hundred words which have "self" as the prefix, for example, self-control, self-esteem, self-reliance, and self-made man, etc. It can be inferred that initiative, independence, individual expression and even privacy are paid great emphases in western countries.

Based on this belief, western people pay great attention to "privacy" which is a sign of esteem for individualism. So individual age, religion, marriage state, private activities are taboos for daily conversation. Otherwise, they may feel to be offended.

Apart from "individualism", there are other words which show different value of western people from Chinese, such as "idealism", "liberalism", "equalitarian", and "materialism", etc..

3.2 National Psychological Characteristics

People's psychological characteristics in different areas are different based on different values and beliefs. Both of these two have a control of communicative behaviors.

Samovar and Porter (2009) mention that cultures vary greatly in their conceptions of time. Where they differ is in the value placed on the past, present and future and how each influences interaction. Western people most think future is more important than present and past and expect that future be grander than present and past and new things be always better than old things, which is called future-oriented cultures. Therefore they are less worried about history and events that have happened. "Let bygones be bygones" is a familiar proverb to voice their idea of past time. They hold firmly the idea that future is what they are pursuing, they set up targets for it and believe that it is in their own hands. On the contrary, Chinese culture is typical past-oriented culture. Chinese people are all very proud of our long history that dates back thousands of years, and established culture and traditions which have very great influence on our present life. There is a strong belief that the past should be the guide for making decisions and living and behaving at present. As a Chinese proverb advises, "Consider the past and you will know the present." On the basis of these two different concepts of time, western people seldom show respect to the elders, and the old people do not like to be called "old", whereas Chinese people always think the elder people should undoubtedly be respected and taken great care to.

The other obvious difference in the perspective of national psychological characteristics between Chinese and western people lies in the ways of responding compliments and ways of greeting and leave-taking. Westerners speak in a concise and direct way, while Chinese people tend to be modest, formal and polite in behavior and speech under the influence of the Confucius morality. According to Leech, westerners consider the Agreement Maxim as the primary principle for responding to compliments, so "thanks", and "I'm flattered" are most commonly used. However, on the other hand, the first consideration for Chinese is the Modest Maxim for their responses, so we often hear such Chinese responses as, "not good" or "far from good" to show humility and respect to others.

People of different cultures have various ways and formulaic expressions to greet other and say good-bye to others. Expressions like "How are you?", "How are things going?", "Well, nice talking to you, but I'm afraid I must be going now. I hope we'll be able to get together again before long" are often used for greeting and leave-taking in English. While Chinese people are likely to greet and say goodbye by saying "Where are you going?", "Have you had your meal?" or "go slowly" etc. which is an

expression of politeness and cordiality but would sound strange in Western culture.

3.3 Thought Pattern

Values, national psychological characteristics, history and social custom in different culture determines different thought pattern which results in different language usages. There are many different features between Chinese and western thought patterns in which the two are evidently manifested.

First and foremost, western style of thinking is linear while Chinese style of thinking is cyclical. Therefore, westerners are likely to do things and say something directly while Chinese tend to mix a lot of thoughts together and do things indirectly. In their writing and speaking, westerners would like to present their main idea at the beginning then bring forward a lot of facts to support the main idea. Chinese people use different ways. They never get to the point directly but testify the idea from different perspectives or make a detour to achieve the aim.

On the other hand, In China, we are accustomed to describing things from whole to part, from large to small, from far to near, from concrete to abstract, or from specific to general. People call this "induction". By this pattern of thinking, the most important points are often shown in the end. However, westerners are used to describing things in reversed order, when thinking, they make a comprehensive survey of the overall situation or a general statement first, and then thinking over details, which is accordingly called "deduction". It can be illustrated in a simple example. When talking about place or time, it is expressed in descending order in the Chinese language, while the English language the opposite. We can see this in the expression "at 8:00 on the morning of February 8th, 2012", or "in Jinan, Shandong Province, China". Here is another example. Before making a request, Chinese people prefer to present the backgrounds and list reasons first to develop others' understanding and evoke their sympathy. Western people do not like speak and think in this way. In the same circumstance, they like to present their request first, and then reasons followed.

3.4 Connotation of Vocabulary and Idioms

Vocabulary is the basic element of language. Because of different value, belief and historical background in oriental and occidental culture, the words that refer the same things and frame the same concept may have different connotations under the impact of respective cultural traditions.

Some color words and animal words can be listed as examples. The same color may have different implications in different cultures. In Chinese, red color is always the symbol of happiness, joy, and celebration. Therefore, in a Chinese wedding ceremony, the wedding room is furnished with red flowers, red silk, and the bride is

dressed in bright red to show the happy event. However, in the western people's eyes, red color often indicates danger, alert, and horror; The color of blue brings Chinese people the feeling of tranquility, solemnity and royalty, while to westerners, it means unhappy, depressed and upset mood. In English, "a blue Monday" refers to an unlucky day. "I have got the blues" is equal to "I feel sad and depressed". The animal word "dragon" is looked upon as the totem of Chinese nation, which is gifted a lot of good meanings such as holy, majestic, honorable and extraordinary. The monarchs in ancient China were regarded as the sons of dragons. Totally different from Chinese opinion, westerners have never had good impression on dragons. In most western books, dragons are described as an ugly, evil and vicious animal which are very frightening and disgusting.

Idioms and allusions are very important part of social culture which are very difficult to understand and use. There are a great many of idioms both in Chinese and English. Some of them have similar meanings, for example, "walls have ears", "strike while the iron is hot" can be found their Chinese equivalents easily. Meanwhile there are some other English idioms which we can not find the Chinese counterparts so that they are difficult to understand. At the first sight of the phrase, "it's raining cats and dogs", Chinese readers may feel very strange till we understand "cats and dogs" in this sentence symbolizes "heavy rain and strong wind". As for allusions, they are more elusive and mysterious than idioms. Allusions originate from great literary works, Greek-roman mythology, fairy tales, significant event and Bible which are all closely related to history and culture. For example, when we see the sentence "She is a Cleopatra", we may wonder what "a Cleopatra" means. But if we have read Shakespeare's play *Antony and Cleopatra*, we can find that "a Cleopatra" is a synonym for "a woman of breathtaking beauty".

In addition to the above four categories, there still exist cultural differences in the aspects of daily life, custom and tradition, non-verbal language, etc. which Chinese English learners should pay special attention to.

4. WAYS TO CULTIVATE STUDENTS' CULTURAL AWARENESS

The problems of the importance of cultural differences and lack of cultural education in language teaching class have been aware of in recent years. The best way to promote college students' cultural awareness is to make them involved in a native foreign environment so that they can mix them up completely with the foreign culture and have close contact with foreigners. But it is impractical for most Chinese students. Therefore, there is a higher level demand on language teachers that they should take on the dual responsibilities of both language teaching and

culture cultivation. According to Byram (1989), language is the richest source for studying culture. Culture teaching must synchronize with language teaching. Otherwise, culture will be divorced from language. Teachers should combine these two aspects together, and pass on cultural knowledge intentionally while teaching language and use various methods to improve students' sensitivity to culture and cultivate cultural awareness so that they can initiatively and willingly absorb it and get involved in the new cultural environment. Some techniques are listed here to maximize the efficiency of culture teaching.

4.1 Providing Students with Cultural Materials

Most traditional teaching materials are selected with too much concern being placed on such linguistic forms as discourse, grammar, sentence patterns, and vocabulary, etc.. Culture knowledge introduction is only paid little attention to these materials and meanwhile most cultural knowledge is very easy and superficial. Therefore, in order to develop student' cultural awareness, the thing coming first is to reform the traditional teaching methods and provide students with more materials which contain rich cultural background information and are fit into the contemporary cultural reality. The teacher should pay more attention to cultural points, explain more extended meaning of vocabularies and introduce more background of texts. At the same time, teachers should make students aware of and fully understand the cultural differences in every level of language, including lexicology, idioms, syntax, discourse, and pragmatics. Furthermore, authentic materials from native countries are the best resources for students to widen their cultural horizon, including articles written by native writers, films, newspapers, magazines, TV programs, websites, menus and even travel brochures. Through these first-hand native materials, students may learn directly what the real lives of foreigners look like. Meanwhile students should be encouraged to find out and identify implicit cultural phenomenon and should be enlightened to explore and analyze the inner reasons of these phenomenon and to get involved into the socio-cultural background, values, morality, history and present situation experience so as to expand their cross-cultural learning, to understand the essence of culture and enhance their cross-cultural competence.

4.2 Designing Various Class Activities to Foster Cross-Cultural Communicative Competence

As a teacher, one should strive to make English classes more interesting and appealing for students when teaching cultural knowledge. Then following activities are available to select:

4.2.1 Role-Plays and Mini-Dramas

Role-plays and Mini-dramas encourage the students to view the cultural knowledge as a tool for communication rather than as an academic subject. It can bring life and vitality into the classroom. It is proved that role-plays

and mini dramas are the most efficient ways in cultural knowledge. Students are asked to play different roles in an embarrassing situation which is caused by cultural obstacles and conflicts in the process of intercultural communication. Once being put into a real situation, students can learn cultural points better and quicker and they may have an idea about in which situation some behaviors are proper or improper. Students can act out mini-dramas written by them, which show misunderstanding of a situation that happens in the target cultural background. At the same time, the other students watch the role-play and mini-drama, then cultural problems will be explored, cultural similarities and differences will be analyzed by follow-up discussions.

4.2.2 Comparison and Contrast

Because different languages reflects different cultures, so comparison and contrast can become one of the most commonly teaching methods when teachers want to introduce cultural knowledge. The comparison and contrast of two or more cultures gives great vistas for the students and provides a basis for better understanding of cultural phenomenon from other backgrounds. The teacher put forward one or more phenomena in the target culture that are distinctly different from the students' culture, so that students can make discussions related to the cultural phenomena in our country, and do some comparative analyses. Then the discussion centers on why these differences may cause problems. Comparison and contrast between varied cultures helps students get rid of obstacles caused by different cultural backgrounds. Such discussions will make it possible to bring the initiative of students into full play, and make the classroom atmosphere active and their study effective as well.

4.2.3 Parties on Foreign Festivals

Young students are quite interested in foreign festivals. The celebration party of festivals could be held in class, completely according to traditional customs of the festival. At the party, students can sing foreign songs, dance some folk dances, play dramas, hold costume parties, watch foreign films, attend lectures given by foreign experts and enjoy foreign food, etc. All programs are required to be related to the festival. Teachers are to give introduction on the origin and conventional activities and customs of the festival. By celebrating foreign festivals, students will understand the intrinsic notion of the festival better and get interested in the festival. These activities can inspire students' enthusiasm for cultural knowledge learning and get students immersed in the target cultural context.

Besides the above methods, there are some others worth mentioning, such as case study, song appreciation, video watching, literary work reading, and lecture. All these can help bring up students' interest in culture and cultivate students' cultural awareness.

CONCLUSION

As Byram (1989) argues, "Cultural study has a rightful place as part of language teaching, not just as an adjunct to language learning, but as an integral component" (p.3). Cultivation of cultural awareness is an indispensable aspect for language learners to gain a high level of communicative competence which is the final goal of language learning. Foreign language teachers should carry out cultural teaching intentionally in language teaching classes, free students from boring and frustrating vocabulary and grammar learning, and arouse students' interest in foreign language learning. Moreover, teachers should lay much emphasis on introduction of cultural knowledge, comparison of cultural differences and development of cultural awareness to open the door to western culture to students systematically and thoroughly which will benefit students a lot to achieve the final goal of language learning, that is, to gain a high level of cross-culture communicative competence and to get ready and qualified for increasingly frequent international cooperation and communication.

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