

Notes of Different Cultural Elements in English Reading

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Abstract. Culture is a very broad concept, referring to the sum of history, geography, local customs, traditional customs, lifestyles, literature and art, code of conduct, way of thinking and values etc of a country or nation, and also spiritual wealth that human beings accumulate during creation of material wealth. While learning the second languages, people shall understand and master cultures and customs, traditional customs, cultural background and living habits of English-speaking countries, in order to have better English reading. This paper analyzes barriers of different cultural elements in reading and notes of reading from perspectives of the important role of reading in English learning, the relationship between reading and cultural elements and the role of cultural background knowledge in reading comprehension etc, and provides ideas for further English learning and raising English reading proficiency.

Introduction

With economic globalization and accelerating development of world integration, cultural exchanges between China and the west have become an important trend to promote the development of the era. American linguist Johnson has once explained the role of reading comprehension like this: “building bridges between the new and the known” ^[1]. As a means of learning and mastering second languages, reading has become an important way of cultural exchanges. However, lots of barriers have been generated in English reading due to cultural differences between China and the west. Therefore, it is very important to study on differences in cultures and customs, living habits and thinking structures etc between English-speaking countries and Chinese.

The important role of reading in English learning

In today's era, English has become a universal language in the world, and an increasing number of people start to realize the importance of learning English. English learning is a process combining theory with practice, and also a process of continuous accumulation and use. As lots of people have not enough opportunities to listen and speak English directly under existing conditions of current China, reading is an important way to be exposed to English, learn language knowledge, improve English proficiency and level, and increase English knowledge, and plays an important role in enhancing listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating skills.

Develop communication skills

A lot of knowledge can be acquired effectively by reading books, and thus help us communicate with others and improve communication skills by evaluating, analyzing, selecting and reasoning of such knowledge. Meanwhile, lots of reading and comprehension can fully improve our subjective initiative and intrinsic potential in learning, and thus develop the mind, improve proficiency and really experience the fun of English learning in reading.

Improving writing skills

Reading plays an important role in training writing skills. One is just like an illiterate person if he could only speak and cannot write. It is also true with English learning, and people could not have normative social exchanges and communication no matter how good their spoken English is if they could not write correctly English especially formal written English. English expressions and idiomatic writing can be learned effectively through reading, and thus avoid regular Chinese thinking,

master logical relations of English, and improve English writing skills by using vocabulary and grammar flexibly.

Increase language knowledge

By English reading, people could know about lives, thoughts and feelings, society, cultures, history and traditional habits, moral standards and values etc of people in western countries. Meanwhile, reading practice can also improve language skills, enhance language sense and contexts, enrich language knowledge, further strengthen speaking and listening skills, and expand communication range.

The relationship between reading and cultural elements

Language is the carrier of culture, and is inseparable from culture. As an important means of language learning, reading contains rich cultural elements. At the initial stage of English learning, general reading requirements can be met by mastering skillfully three elements of vocabulary, grammar and cultural knowledge. However, with improving reading skills and deepening learning, the plight of language learning is no longer barriers in understanding vocabulary, but the degree of perception of foreign cultures, i.e. “non-linguistic elements”^[2]. Culture is generally divided into two categories in a broad and narrow sense. Culture in a broad sense refers to the sum of material wealth and spiritual wealth that human beings create during social and cultural development; while culture in a narrow sense refers to thoughts, morality, science and technology, knowledge, academic studies, literature and art, law, education, religious beliefs, customs, ways of thinking and behaviors etc. Culture reflects all social life experience, ethnic customs and moral characteristics of a nation. With a lack of understanding of western cultures, history and geography, local customs, traditional customs, lifestyles and values of English-speaking countries, it is easy to understand sentences literally during reading, and even analyze according to Chinese habits, or take the words too literally and have misunderstandings. Thus, English learners shall master certain cultural knowledge, better understand history and cultures of the UK and the United States, increase cultural accumulation, make full use of various cultural elements that they have mastered in reading comprehension, and thus improve their reading skills constantly.

The role of cultural and historical knowledge in reading comprehension

As the carrier of culture, language culture and knowledge is very extensive, and a lack of cultural background knowledge may hinder people’s understanding of language. In different ecological and natural contexts, different nations have created and been created by their own unique cultures. In English reading, cultural background knowledge mainly includes three aspects: namely historical culture which is cultural and social heritage of a country formed during historical development process, religious culture which refers to culture formed by national religious beliefs including taboo cultures of different countries, and geographical (regional) culture which refers to culture formed by regional natural conditions and geographical environment, and differences in social and cultural knowledge^[3]. During reading comprehension, learners can only know the real meaning of vocabulary and sentences by mastering rich cultural and historical knowledge, do not take words too literally and have misunderstandings, know meanings between lines, as the meaning of words is formed in certain cultural context. Without an understanding of English culture, history, values, thinking model, customs and habits, religions and lifestyles, the real meaning of discourse cannot be understood.

Each process of reading comprehension involved readers’ cultural background knowledge (Anderson, 1997, 14: 369). Phillips (1984) pointed out that: “successful reading paragraphs depended on comprehensive use of language knowledge, cognitive skills, experience and world knowledge, which greatly affected reading comprehension process whether such knowledge was experience or learned.” During English learning, some people use unconsciously habits or cultural models of their

nations in or impose consciously on languages they learn, and thus have misunderstandings or even failure in communication ^[4].

Different cultural elements of reading

Vocabulary, sentences and grammar are basic elements of English, and play a very important role English reading. Only with a certain amount of vocabulary, can sentences be fully understood, and only by combining with grammar, can articles be translated and understood correctly. However, with vocabulary, sentences and grammar out of specific language environment and cultural background, it is easy to take the words too literally and have misunderstandings.

Cultural difference of vocabulary

Vocabulary is one of three elements of language, and is a pillar on which language exists. British practical linguist Wilkins (1976) (1) said that: “people could not express many models without grammar, but could not express anything without vocabulary.” In English reading, vocabulary also reflects significantly differences in geographical and cultural background, and has national cultural characteristics. For example, some English vocabulary can be translated into Chinese literally, such as red and blue etc, of which people from any cultural background would not have misunderstandings. However, some have not equivalents in Chinese culture, i.e. lexical gaps occur. For example, there are a variety of names of “笔” in English, such as Pencil, pen, painting brush, chalk and ball-point pen etc, but there is an English word corresponding to “笔”, while English words “hot dog” and “pudding” etc have not equivalents in Chinese.

Then, some words in target language and mother tongue seem to be equivalent in terms of conceptual meaning, but have a certain kind of differences in terms of reference range, expression degree, and implicit praise and disparage etc. Word “people” in English and “人民” in Chinese are different in terms of conceptual meaning, the former only refers to the number of people, while the latter refers to social basic members with working masses as subjects and thus has strong political complexion ^[5].

Finally, some English words have opposite meaning with Chinese. For example: peacock represents good and luck in Chinese culture, but means arrogance in English-speaking countries, which would bring great difficulty to reading without a certain understanding of cultural background and customs. In addition, it is common to personify animals in both Chinese and English vocabulary with certain emotions. For example, “cat” in Chinese often refers to “treacherous court officials”; while “cat” in English refers to females with “evil intentions”.

Cultural difference of sentences

In English reading, sentences consisting of words with the same meaning may have opposite meaning, indicating differences in Chinese and western cultures. For example, “the sky pours cats and dogs.” is literally translated into Chinese as “天上下来了猫和狗”, which has a different meaning with the original sentence. People who know language habits of British and American people know that this sentence means “天空下起了倾盆大雨”. “Cats and dogs” has a meaning of cats and dogs in groups, and is very appropriate to describe heavy rain. Here, both proverb and slang are contained. Another example is that: for sentence “The thief was caught red-handed”, beginners would translate red-handed as “沾满鲜血的手” because of a lack of understanding of unique habits of English language, and would translate literally “black tea” in “She likes black tea.” as “黑茶” or “浓茶”, and translate “I always sleep late on Sundays.” literally as “睡得晚”. Thus, cultural phenomena expressed in sentences are very important during reading, and are also very important for us to master cultural differences in reading and understand cultural customs and living habits of the UK and the United States.

Cultural difference of discourse

Normative and complete articles are formed by organically combining words and sentences, and discourse structure is influenced by thinking models and cultural thoughts of writers, making

discourse content has more implicit and deep cultural connotation, and some specific cultural information is integrated into logical relations between vocabulary and sentences.

Notes of different cultural elements in reading

Make preparation before reading

Readers shall have a certain understanding of articles when reading, as each article has a certain cultural background, and there would not be barriers in comprehension and analysis when reading if they learn selectively some corresponding cultural knowledge according to discourse content. For example: *Frida Kahlo's* tells about "Art odness of mexico" Frida Kahlo's legendary experience and her achievements in painting, and readers could know something about terminologies related to painting and life story of Frida Kahlo before reading. *SEFC Book 2B. Unit 21 Music* is an article about music, and readers can have an understanding of other categories of music, to broaden their horizon and increase aesthetic consciousness.

Increase knowledge reserve

During English reading, readers shall have an understanding of books and magazines of the UK and the United States related to science and technology, culture, literature, history, official thoughts research and commentary on current affairs etc, to be familiar with western cultures and customs. In particular, they shall also know more about foreign literary masterpieces, as excellent literary works reflect people's living conditions of a period of time including social information such as humanity and livelihood. Or, they could appreciate properly English songs and films to feel closely about foreigners' lifestyles, behavioral habits, thoughts and feelings, and thus improve their cultural literacy and reduce reading barriers.

Master reading skills

By mastering reading skills during English reading, readers can not only increase reading speed, acquire important information within a short time, and improve reading quality. Reading skills include: firstly, skimming, which refers to read and skip fast and know the first sentence of each paragraph, which is often topic sentence of the entire article and paragraph, and readers could know the main content of articles by reading the first sentence; secondly, read through articles to mainly grasp main sentences, and skim inessential sentences. Based on this, readers shall pay attention to writing ideas and central structure of articles, know about main ideas and details of each paragraph, and pay special attention to conjunctions and adverbs, comparative and the highest degree of adjectives, judge meaning of words carefully, avoid subjectivity and misunderstanding or improper understanding of original articles when reading.

Conclusions

Learning foreign language is not only a process of mastering language, but also a process of knowing and understanding another culture^[6]. Through English reading, we could not only master and use basic language proficiently, but also have a deep understanding of foreign cultures and long history including new cultures which advance with the times, and compare these cultures with our own cultures. Only in this way, can we better understand cultural differences among countries. Therefore, during English reading, we shall have rich cultural background knowledge, try to learn knowledge about society, cultures, literature, history, geography, local conditions, customs and habits of English-speaking countries, and broaden our horizon constantly. Only in this way, can we eliminate differences in cultural understanding and communication as soon as possible, and improve foreign language reading proficiency.

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