

Importance of Cultural Background in English Teaching

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Abstract—In recent years, with implementation of the Reform and Opening Policy as well as more frequent foreign exchange, the enhancement of social networking and information gathering and the widespread use of the Internet, more and more people are involved in intercultural communication. Change and new requirements of this new age increase the realization among language teachers of the importance of culture in English teaching. Language teaching and cultivating students' intercultural communication ability is becoming more important. To know cultural background knowledge is a significant aspect of cross-culture communication and also an important aim of language teaching. It requires the teachers to place significance on cultural education and combine it with language teaching to cultivate learners' competence in cross-culture communication.

Keywords—*cultural background knowledge; importance; English teaching; intercultural communication; communicative capacity; cultural differences; cross-cultural awareness; communicative teaching methods; cultural creativity*

I. INTRODUCTION

"Culture consists of all the shared products of human society.", said Roland Robertson in 1981. Language is a part of culture and a very important role in it. On one hand, without language culture would be impossible. On the other hand language is influenced and shaped by culture. It reflects culture. The culture has a close connection with a particular language and plays an important role in the leaning and teaching of it. Every country and ethnic group has its own culture and generally, the cultures of the peoples of the world are different. Owing to the disparities in culture, to people who speak different languages, a word or phrase used to express the same idea can cause misunderstanding: a word used to express good intention may surprise or irritate people: a common sentence can sometimes amuse one person greatly and draw laughter, but it can be irrelevant in the eyes of another person with different cultural background.

The content of cultural background, for language teachers, consists of two major areas. One is the connotation of words in the mother language norm, and the other is the significance of socio-cultural activities. The introduction will focus on people's thinking and mode of behavior. It is agreed that different nationalities have different points of view about the same thing and different attitudes towards the same question. In a cultural background introduction, the main task is not to

impart knowledge, but to help the learners grasp the methods of problem solving. With the development of cross-cultural ability, they will be able to solve many cultural problems. At the same time, it must be pointed out that all cultures are equal. There is no good or bad, reasonable or unreasonable, dominant or subordinate culture among them. The aim of culture study is not to argue or evaluate but to satisfy the demand of communication.

In the traditional teaching methods college English teachers in China have been concerned only with developing learners linguistic ability, as a result the learners are unable to communicate with native speakers. Social practice has proved only mastery of linguistic competence is not enough for communication among people with different cultural backgrounds. Now more and more college English teachers come to realize that English is not only a different language, but also carries several different cultures for different English speaking countries,, and they have become interested in the important role of culture in English teaching and aware of the value of cross-cultural competence.

II. IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL BACKGROUND IN TEACHING

Language is a part of culture and shaped by culture; It is also the carrier of culture and reflects cultural features of a community in which the language is spoken. Language and culture are closely related to each other. From the aspect of language teaching and learning, to teach a foreign language is to teach another culture, to learn a language is also to learn another culture.

Cultural factors are now in the international background and ready to challenge the learners' communicative competence. We should realize the importance of culture teaching in language classes. What and how to teach are still problems faced by foreign language teachers all over the world. These are not simply pedagogical problems because the answers depend on our understanding of the relationship between our own culture and foreign cultures, and the level and ability of learners' learning. These studies raise the standard of teaching college English reading, which is very instructive. However, previous language programs places little importance on cultural influence. Due to the close relationship between culture and languages, Chinese learners inevitably

have the reading habits of using Chinese to translate English words without a knowledge of culture. With increased communication with many foreign countries, we realise we must pay attention to culture while teaching English. One of the main reasons that Chinese learners cannot understand some ideas or concepts is the different English cultural background. We can see this clearly in various fields including; thought patterns, values, social systems, customs, and religion. Without learning these aspects learners can't understand the real meaning during English studies. In other words if learners want to learn English well they should know the culture differences between the East and the West.

Nowadays many learners cannot really understand what the writer wants to say in an article. They only comprehend a little of the article. There are several reasons causing the problem. The Chinese learners always study English in their own way of thinking. Many just translate the English into Chinese word by word. They pay little attention to the culture, which can cause a different understanding of words. Therefore, we have to find ways for them to solve the problem.

III. METHODS OF IMPROVING ENGLISH CULTURAL BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

A. Address others correctly in language communication

As you know, different countries have different customs for addressing others correctly. In Japanese culture, for example, suppose your name is Koji Hirano. All of your colleagues may call you by your last name, Hirano. Usually they will add "san" to a name in Japan. Your boss, Nakamura, is always Nakamura-san and he calls you Hirano-san, unless he is very angry with you and then it is just Hirano. Another example, in American culture, suppose your name is Pamela Bryson, everyone at office calls you Pamela including your boss, new employees and colleagues. But usually visiting sales people call you last name, Ms. Bryson.

On business occasions in China, we tend to attach the rank or professional title to the surname of the addressed person. Examples are Wang "jiaoshou" (Prof. Wang), Li "zhuren" (Director Li), and Chen "jingli" (Manager Chen). When the person addressed is a vice-director we still tend to call him or her Director so-and so, which is sometimes quite misleading to outsiders. A more common practice in China is to add the prefixes of "lao" (to the older) or "xiao" (to the younger) to the surname of a person to show one's respect, in the same way as the English usage of "Mr., Ms., or Miss" or the Japanese employment of "San". Most fascinating about Chinese names is that our ancestors had more than one name. Aside from the conventional name, they used to have "hao" and "zi" as the other forms of name address. Do you realise that "Li Bai", "Li Taibai" and "Qing Lian Ju Shi" all refer to one person?

B. Raise awareness of non-verbal communication signals

Non-verbal communication mainly refers "body language"- the language of gesture. The simple gestures such as touching one's forehead, or shrugging one's shoulders can mean many different things, depending on one's cultural background.

For example, to nod your head show agreements while

shake your head to show disagreement in some but not all cultures; Smile to show amusement while some raise eyebrows to show surprise; Make eye contact to show that you are interested in something while shrug your shoulders to show that you don't know something; Wave your hand to say hello or goodbye while shake hands when you meet someone for the first time. These signals have different meanings in different cultures, and it is an important for people who have international contacts to become adept.

It is very interesting to watch people of different nationalities and cultures mingling together in public places. One of the best places to observe the way they communicate with each other is an airport or international conference. There you can see people from all over the world rubbing shoulders with each other. Each nationality has its own language of posture and gesture. Since the body language used may have different meanings in different cultures, a harmless gesture by one person may be seen as a deadly insult in another.

Fortunately, most people realize this, and make allowances, and so it is remarkable how they manage to communicate without giving offence.

Therefore, we should not only pay attention to application of body language in cross-cultural communication, but also know some common body language in foreign countries in order to avoid misunderstanding. I will show meaning and application of different countries' body language, such as: personal distance, eye contact, body touch, and facial expression.

The change in interpersonal distance is the emotional expression in body language. Following is an example to show different concepts of the distance influenced by different cultures. At an international conference, two professors, one Latin, and the other American, were talking. Throughout the conversation, the Latin kept advancing while the American kept retreating until the American had his back against the wall. The underlying reason for this situation lies on the concept of different body distance comfort levels. The Latin did not feel comfortable unless he was very close to the American. The American, on the contrary, does not feel relaxed unless the distance is greater.

C. Comply with a few general rules in language communication

These days America is very casual, largely because everything about American life is more relaxed. However, there are still general rules to abide by. One example is the business introduction: When introducing two equals to each other, it doesn't matter who is presented first. However, if you are introducing your administrative assistant to a superior, you say the superior's name first.

When you are seated and someone comes up to introduce him- or herself, stand up. This way you show the person you are greeting that you are giving him or her full attention. It is very important to make eye contact. If you look people in the eye, then people will think you are confident and a good listener, and people will probably listen to you when you speak. When you smile, it tells others that you accept them. A smile can be worth a thousand words, maybe even more. If

you have met the person before but think he or she may not remember your name, introduce yourself again to avoid embarrassing him or her.

D. Teach cultural differences by comparison

From what has been said, it is clear that cultural background knowledge is necessary in language teaching. Teachers should help learners solve the problems in language as well as in culture. Thus teachers should also further improve their teaching. Firstly teachers should try their best to learn about the difference between the two cultures. Then teachers use appropriate methods to pass them to learners. Comparison is a good way. In teaching we can find the cultural differences by comparison. This is an efficient method, which can help learners deepen the understanding of the culture between Chinese and English and train learners to have the consciousness of culture. For example when teachers teach the learners an English text about Christmas Day, the teacher firstly ask the learners to introduce some differences between the Spring Festival and Christmas Day. They are very interested in the subject. Homework after class can include reading more articles about it. They discuss it and give a talk in English. They know that the Spring Festival includes: a red packet, dumplings, setting off firecrackers, visiting relatives, telling story about "nian"; Christmas Day includes: Jesus, family gatherings, gifts, Christmas trees, Santa Claus. Christmas celebrations hint at hope, warmth within the chill. Using this method learners can understand the two festivals, and also learn the cultural differences and motivates the learners' interest. Therefore by comparison learners become acquainted with local customs and practices of English-speaking countries quickly. Simple differences in culture include understanding that while Chinese people do not usually say "Thank you" between parents and children or among good friends, but in English speaking countries it is different, even if the help is slight, English speaking people will say "Thank you". So in language teaching we should make use of way of comparison.

E. Choose appropriate teaching material and enhance the annotation

Appropriate teaching material is vital. A proportion of foreign material and authentic material should be used, especially dialogues, because it is more authentic and reflects the cultural behavior followed by speaker. Authentic material refers to material selected from authentic activities highlighting social factors. The teacher should explain cultural factors involved in the material. Below is a dialogue between the two Britons.

A: Hello!

B: Hello! I'm going to get a magazine and some chocolate. Would you like to come with me?

A: OK. Let's go to the newsagent in the corner. I want some cigarettes.

B: I want to go to the one down the road. I've got to send off this parcel and there is a post office in that one.

This dialogue tells us in England some newsagents' shops not only sell sweets and cigarettes, but also can have a post

office where people can send letters and parcels. However, in China, there are no such shops. If the teacher doesn't give the explanations, the students may feel puzzled.

Appropriate teaching material will offer many examples of cultural differences that need to be explained and annotated, because these contents are often difficult for learners to understand. Sometimes they cause deflection in understanding. For example, "Would you like to black coffee or black tea?" The word "black" in English means black in color. But we cannot translate the sentence by individual words. Black coffee means coffee without milk in it. Black tea means red tea, without milk in it. Thus the teacher should emphasize the explanatory notes. This method of annotation aims directly at cultural differences and can be used for different language materials and different stages. For example, the dialogue in the teaching material includes examples of a rich culture. The teacher should not only introduce the new words, new structure, new expressions, but also pay attention to the teaching of culture. Selecting materials and enhancing annotations are better methods to learn cultural background.

F. Cultivate the learners' cross-cultural consciousness

English is an international language, which should be taught as a tool for intercultural communication. Therefore, it is necessary to cultivate students' intercultural communication consciousness and cultural creativity. The purpose of learning English is both for communication with English-speaking people and for the interaction with people from many other countries, so the learners should be familiar with various cultures just to broaden their cultural view. Although English is regarded as an international language, the point of view that it carries the worldwide culture could not be accepted and observed by all the people. Though we can speak the same language, it doesn't mean we can share the same thought and same communication values. Learners should be taught that there is no cultural description and the intercultural communication should be based on cultural equality. For one thing, we should take a critical attitude towards the foreign culture instead of accepting it blindly. For another aspect, we should make the best use of English to spread the Chinese culture all over the world to consequently achieve equal communication between the Chinese culture and western cultures.

IV. CONCLUSION

From the analysis above, we can see that learning a language, in fact, is inseparable from learning its culture, and the teaching of culture should become an integral part of language teaching. English teaching should make learners aware of the cultures English speaking people have and provide them with the opportunity to act as a member of the target culture). Moreover, English teachers must be interested in the study of culture (in the social scientist's sense of the word) not because they necessarily want to teach the culture of the other country but because they have to teach it, and they have to find effective ways to teach it.

As there is no single thing in the world without a dual nature, so language and culture, language teaching and culture teaching have a dual nature. In order to encourage language

teaching well, the English teacher must take up the teaching of culture. As long as the emphasis is laid both on cultural understanding, linguistic skills and communicative competence, the goals of language teaching will be satisfactorily achieved.

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