

Cultural Identity Construction of EFL Learners

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Abstract—The combination of too much input of target language culture in English teaching, the lack of mother tongue culture input and the penetration of western strong culture lead to a crisis of identity construction of EFL learners in China. Cultural identity enhances national sense of belonging and pride. Therefore, in the context of globalization, English learners are suggested to keep a critical eye on different cultures and learn to take what is beneficial for their personality development and identity construction.

Keywords—cultural identity; EFL learners; identification

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is closely related to culture. Language is both a carrier of culture and an indispensable part of culture, which are two important inseparable components. In some sense, the target language culture should be learned if the language is to be learned well. Therefore, foreign language teaching in our country has always attached great importance to the introduction of target language culture. This is undoubtedly crucial for Chinese students to understand the target language culture and improve their intercultural communication skills. However, this teaching method of inputting too much target language culture will lead to the serious lack of Chinese culture in foreign language teaching, which further leads to the aphasia of foreign language learners' mother tongue culture. Since the 1990s, with the rapid development of globalization, English has become the common language of exchange and cooperation in the international political, economic, cultural and other fields, and the rapid development of the Internet has accelerated the globalization of English. Therefore, under the extensive spread of English and the infiltration and influence of Western strong culture, too much input of target language culture and the lack of mother tongue culture in the process of foreign language teaching will inevitably weaken the sense of belonging of English learners' native language culture. This has led to the loss of their cultural identity. This situation has seriously challenged our traditional culture and threatened national cultural security. Language choice is essential for determining identity in nature and society. Using a language means accepting its cultural value or idea, and the process of communication is the process of gradual colonization and assimilation of the culture to which this language belongs. In this context, the question of the cultural identity construction of English learners in China has become a challenging dilemma. On the one hand, in the context of globalization, if a better communication and

cooperation with developed western countries is to be achieved, it is necessary to learn English well and identify with the target language culture; on the other hand, the process of English learning will inevitably weaken the learner's national cultural identity. So how can foreign language learners deal with the issue of cultural identity? They should not only learn foreign language culture for effective cross-cultural communication, but also maintain their own national cultural identity and actively spread national culture.

II. DEFINITION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

A. Definition of Cultural Identity

Cultural identity refers to, in a broad sense, the sum of material wealth and spiritual wealth created by human beings in the practice of social history. In a narrow sense, it refers to the ideology of society and the institutions and organizations that are compatible with it. As an ideology culture, it is a political and economic reflection of a certain society, and it also acts on the politics and economy of a certain society. With the emergence and development of the nation, culture has a national character. Each social form has a culture that is compatible with it, and each culture develops with the development of social material production. The continuity of the development of social material production determines the continuity of cultural development and historical inheritance. Culture is a complex whole, which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morality, law, customs, and any other talents and habits learned as a member of society. Human beings adapt themselves to their environment and improve the total achievements of his lifestyle efforts.

Cultural identity can also be called cultural identification, mainly appealing to the national essential characteristics of literary and cultural studies and the cultural essential features with national imprint. When comparing two literary texts that do not have any de facto influence, scholars can focus on comparing the fundamental differences of literature in these two cultural contexts, and find some commonality through this essential difference. Of course, this identity is mainly an aesthetic identity. Cultural identity is also the dual meaning of the theoretical lesson that cannot be ignored in the study of comparative literature in the context of cultural studies.

B. Characteristics of Cultural Identity

Cultural identity is often seen as a unique feature of a particular culture and a set of characteristics that are inherent to a particular nation. On the other hand, cultural identity has a structuralist character, because a particular culture is seen as a series of interrelated features. Therefore, the concept of "identity" is treated as a series of unique or a flexible view of structural identity that implies both the meaning of a "identity" with a fixed feature and the deep meaning of the "identity" sought by an individual with the subjective initiative. Obviously, whether it is regarded as a feature or construction, it shows that the issue of cultural identity has become more and more unavoidable in the modern era. It exists around us and infiltrates into our lives, thus entering our research horizon. The understanding of self-identity is the basic need of mankind. Since the beginning of history, people have never stopped asking "Who am I?". The identity of an individual is multiple-level including individual identity, social identity, ethnic identity, and cultural identity. Cultural identity has always been one of the core issues of cultural studies. Hamers and Blanc (1989) claims that "The integration of the complex configuration that is cultured into the individual's personality constitutes his cultural identity". Their definition emphasizes that cultural identity is the result of the socialization of human individuals and a dynamic mechanism that people gradually form and develop from childhood in the process of socialization. It will be continuously improved under the influence of social and psychological development events. The process of socialization is a never-ending process, which implies the developmental variability of individual cultural identity.

Because of the differences between cultural subjects, the identity of the subject is required, and the interaction between cultural subjects leads to the transformation of identity. Identity is mainly a question of cultural identity, which is mainly composed of the individual attributes, historical culture and development prospects of the subject. Collective identity refers to the choice of cultural subjects between two different cultural groups or sub-groups. Because of the influence of different cultures, this cultural subject must regard one culture as the collective cultural self and the other culture as the other. Self-identity emphasizes the psychological and physical experience of the self, with the core of the self. Social identity emphasizes the social attributes of people. From individual identity to collective identity, from one culture to another, such processes dynamically describe the metamorphosis of identity. In a self-contained tribal society or a feudal patriarchal society in which Heaven and Man are united, surnames, bloodlines, and genders together constitute a firm identity mechanism.

Myron, W. Lustig and Jolene Koester argue that cultural identity is the individual's sense of belonging to a particular culture or nation. It internalizes the beliefs, values, ethical standards and social practice patterns of its cultural groups, making it an important part of self-identification. They also believe that cultural identity is the core of self-identity. Individual speech acts are often carried out within the framework of their cultural identity. Most of the individual's words and deeds can be explained and understood from the

perspective of cultural identity (Myron, 2007). That is to say, cultural identity is a cultural identification of a member of a cultural group for its own cultural identity, and its characteristics are expressed by the words, actions, and feelings of members of a cultural group. Cultural identity is not an intrinsic property, but the result of constant positioning under the influence of the environment. It is always in the flow of "bringing in", "learning", "absorbing" and "shaping". The unfinished state of constant construction is more inclusive or multicultural. The stability and constructive characteristics of cultural identity not only emphasize the decisive influence of specific cultural traditions and cultural living environment on cultural identity, but also affirm the impact of cultural and power factors on cultural identity. Understanding the cultural identity construction of foreign language learners has important guiding significance.

III. THE INTERRELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Language plays an important role in all human activities and is an indispensable part of human social life. However, the human language phenomenon is so mysterious that humans have not yet fully understood. Since ancient times, linguists try to explore language from many aspects and form many linguistic schools. In summary, modern linguistics mainly comes from two traditions: literary tradition and anthropological tradition. At the beginning, language was analyzed and compared according to the study of literary works and written literature. The work of linguists in the 19th century laid the foundation for the independent study of modern linguistics, and later developed into Bloomfield's structuralism and Chomsky's Transformational Grammar. This traditional successor emphasizes the natural attributes of language, treating language as a closed, independent system and linguistics as an independent marginal science across the humanities and natural sciences. Anthropological traditions refer to the use of anthropological methods to study the language of social groups without writing systems and written traditions. Since the early 20th century in the United States, Boas and Samuel have emphasized the social attributes of language and believed that language and its social environment are inseparable. Therefore, linguistics must be regarded as a social science. The study tradition of human linguistics has induced the emergence and rise of cultural linguistics. By examining the communicative process of language from a cultural perspective, linguists have found that people not only involve language in the process of language communication, but also involve a cultural system that is closely related to the language system.

First of all, scholars who conduct language and identity believe that language and identity are associated in many complex ways. Language expresses identity, and many linguists believe that language is a means of showing people's identity. Speakers use their specific language to carry out social information to position themselves and others. Packing in or out of a group to define yourself and your identity, communication with others, even gossip, is the way to establish relationships with others, and the way to

define your identity based on others. Language choices indicate the group membership, and language is used as a tool to express power and equality to create and maintain role relationships.

Secondly, language helps to construct identity. Speakers use language not only to express but also to construct their own representations. The speaker selects linguistic features of specific social information to construct identity, which determines that they are members of a particular speech community. Identity is not necessarily constructed by linguistic means, but language plays a key role in identity construction. One of the most basic ways for us to construct identity in front of others is through the use of language. Identity is constructed and reconstructed through the process of people's continuous communication with others in life. Identity is a kind of "two-way construction", in which the speaker himself performs and is recognized by others. Identity is not mapped in discourse. The speaker uses language to construct and maintain the relationship between individuals and groups, thus continuously constructing identity in the discourse.

In addition, language is affected by identity. People use different languages to communicate with others in different communities to which they belong, such as family, friends, and workplaces. If the speaker chooses a linguistic form based on social norms, then the social knowledge about the speaker is transmitted through the use of these linguistic forms.

IV. THE STATUS QUO OF EFL LEARNERS' CULTURAL IDENTITY

In the process of growth, foreign language learners will consciously form a role orientation due to historical experience and cultural traditions, and generate a sense of group belonging, i.e. their mother tongue cultural identity consciousness. However, as the living environment or social context changes, the mother tongue culture and the target language culture collide and mix, and this relatively stable cultural identity will gradually change. In the process of language learning, they inevitably come into contact with the target language culture. The target language culture will constantly communicate and collide with the learner's mother tongue culture. Under the influence of the two cultures, the learner's cultural identity will gradually change. Therefore, the process of foreign language learning is also a process of constructing learner identity. This change may have a positive or negative impact on the learner's cultural identity. On the one hand, learners can deepen their understanding of the mother tongue culture and promote the identity of the mother tongue culture through a large amount of contact with the target language culture and contrast with the mother tongue culture. On the other hand, learners gradually become more aware of the understanding of the target language culture. Foreign language cultural identity is recognized, while the mother tongue cultural identity will gradually fade. According to some studies (e.g., Gao, 2003), After the improvement of the target language culture literacy, the "Best Foreign Language Learners" maintain the national cultural identity. The mother tongue and the target language

cultural identity can be well integrated, which is a very ideal English learning effect. However, the results of ordinary college students are not as ideal as expected, and only 30% to 50% of students have undergone productive changes, which mean that more than half of foreign language learners have different levels of cultural belonging loss and identity crisis. The current situation of weakened or even missing national cultural identity of learners is closely related to the long-term cultural orientation of foreign language teaching.

Since the late Qing Dynasty, foreign language education in China mainly serves Western culture. Learning foreign languages is to learn from the West has become the stereotype of many people. Therefore, in terms of the content of English textbooks, most of the textbooks from elementary education to higher education in China are based on the mainstream culture of the Anglo-American society. Studies related to the local culture of China and the introduction of the Chinese national customs has been rarely seen. As a result, due to the widespread spread of English, strong Western culture has continuously penetrated into our daily lives through film and television, news, music, books, and consumer goods, forming the "Western discourse hegemony". Under the joint action of foreign culture and rights, the values and lifestyles of many Chinese students have also been subtly influenced. Even the mentality of blind worship for Western culture has produced a certain degree of recognition and dependence on Western culture. In contrast, due to the long-term lack of mother tongue culture in foreign language teaching, Chinese students can easily feel inferior, which leads to a self-identity crisis and an imbalanced communication between Chinese and Western cultures. As is known to all, learners inevitably engage in explicit and implicit cross-cultural communication in the process of foreign language learning. Explicit cross-cultural communication refers to the intercultural communication activities between learners and real foreign language people; implicit cross-cultural communication refers to the exchange of two cultures of learners in their own psychology when they are exposed to foreign language culture.

V. WAYS OF CONSTRUCTING THE CULTURAL IDENTITY OF EFL LEARNERS

A. *Constructing the Cultural Identity of EFL Learners Based on National Traditional Culture*

Traditional culture is the spirit and soul of a nation and it is also the ultimate source of individual cultural belonging. From the birth of an individual, the national culture began the process of shaping the individual, the mother tongue, the national classic text, the common historical memory, the custom system, the psychological and emotional way, etc., which are the codes of individual cultural identity. Human beings have root-seeking consciousness, need the sense of stability and belonging brought by tradition, and also need to use familiar thinking, language, and behavior to guide life in a fast-changing environment to integrate themselves and maintain the unity of meaning in life. It can be seen that the national cultural identity is the foundation and core of constructing the cultural identity of foreign language learners.

Fundamentally speaking, it is to awaken the cultural consciousness of students. On the basis of self-awareness of one's own culture, it is of great importance to understand other cultures and their relationship with their own culture. Only by familiarizing with traditional culture can the members of the culture clarify and strengthen the national identity of themselves, enhance the consciousness of the subject, and protect their national culture from being "marginalized" in the context of Western cultural hegemony.

With the rapid development of globalization, English has become an international language. The exchanges and cooperation between China and the world are becoming more and more frequent. The ultimate goal of intercultural communication is not only to understand the world, but also to let the world know about China. Intercultural communication should be a two-way communication based on equality, so cultural output is as important as cultural input. It can't be limited to the understanding of the communication target, but also has the cultural sharing with the communication target and the cultural influence on the communication target. In fact, inheriting and carrying forward the national traditional culture is also the inner need to enhance China's soft power. If a country can attract other countries with its own cultural values and win their recognition, it will have greater influence in the international community and will have strong soft power. Therefore, in the foreign language teaching, while introducing Western culture, teachers must pay attention to the spread of the traditional culture of the nation. Teachers should consciously introduce Chinese traditional culture from both the content of teaching materials and teaching methods. Only in this way can the learners' cultural self-awareness be cultivated, national pride and sense of belonging can be enhanced, and Chinese cultural identity can be constructed to highlight the cultural individuality of the nation and better spread and promote Chinese national culture.

B. Guiding English learners to Transcend Cultural Identity

Constructing a cultural identity with the traditional culture of the nation as the main body is conducive for foreign language learners to maintain national dignity and self-confidence, and to "send out" Chinese culture in intercultural communication and enhance China's cultural influence in the international arena. But sticking to our national cultural identity is not to reject other cultures. With the increasing exchanges between countries in the political, economic, and cultural fields, no country can be isolated, and conflicts in intercultural communication are inevitable. In fact, foreign language learning should be the process of constructing a new dynamic cultural identity through the conflicts and integration of cultural values and cultural patterns on the basis of cultural learning and cultural exchange. In this process, it is necessary to guide learners to maintain an open and inclusive mentality to compare, analyze and reflect on Chinese and Western cultures. In the process of two cultural conflicts and dialogues, people constantly seek the commonality of human beings and establish the basis of cross-cultural communication. At the same time, people must objectively evaluate and rationally

judge the similarities and differences, advantages and disadvantages of Chinese and Western cultures. As is well known, the culture of each nation is the result of the accumulation of wisdom through thousands of years of history. It is the result of interaction, communication and integration among different civilizations. It has its own value and reason, and it is a precious asset of human society. This also means that learners can absorb the essence of Western culture in the process of identity construction, and constantly enrich their own culture; but at the same time, they must abandon what is not in line with the development of the times in their own culture.

In this process, foreign language learners are not supposed to adhere to the national cultural identity and succumb to self-style, nor should they change to a different cultural identity due to blind worship, but detach themselves from the local culture and internalize and absorb the essence of both cultures. This transcendence of cultural identity enables learners to have a broader vision in the process of cultural acquisition, a more peaceful and tolerant attitude, and a better and more integrated personality.

VI. CONCLUSION

Identity is a complex concept with multiple levels and multiple dimensions. The complexity of identity determines the complexity and difficulty of its research. Western identity theory has achieved fruitful results. Sociologically oriented identity theory, psychology-oriented social identity paradigm, social constructivist identity theory, language and identity theory, and narrative identity theory have proposed the theory of identity from their respective fields. Different identity theories study identity from different perspectives. Because of the different focus of attention, the interpretation of identity is also different. Therefore, identity research presents a diversified trend. These Western identity theories are based on the mainstream cultural background of the West. When applying it to the identity research of Chinese society, it is necessary to adapt to local conditions. Then, on the basis of drawing on the Western identity theory, it is necessary to build an identity theory framework under the historical and cultural background of Chinese society.

The construction of foreign language learners' cultural identity is related to the inheritance and promotion of Chinese excellent traditional culture. Therefore, teachers must strengthen the introduction of mother tongue culture in foreign language teaching, and build up the cultural identity of learners with the national traditional culture as the main body, and enhance their national affiliation. In addition, they must guide students to think independently and rationally on the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western cultures, to foster strengths and circumvent weaknesses, to communicate with each other. In this process, the cultural identity of learners will continue to improve with the improvement of its cultural personality, and truly promote the learning of the target language and the exchange of culture.

At present, the domestic identity of special groups is mostly of synchronic research. In the future, diachronic

research should be carried out, that is to say, not only the identification of a particular group at a certain time, but also the study of a particular group across the history of time.

The study of identity in the field of language teaching should study the relationship between language learning and identity of major ethnic groups (Han/Chinese students) and ethnic minorities, and learn from the language of ethnic minorities. In addition, students need to study the relationship between identity and language learning, such as the relationship between identity and learning motivation, and the relationship between identity and language teaching.

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