Study on the Balance of Ethnocentrism and Western Cultural Hegemony in College Intercultural Instruction

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an academic analysis on college intercultural instruction. The analysis reveals that Ethnocentrism and Western culture hegemony are two negative attitudes intercultural teachers and learners commonly hold in the process of intercultural teaching and learning, which would inevitably hinder the development of language learners' intercultural communication competence. And a "third space" is offered as an effective way to deal with the problem which breaks down the traditional dichotomy of native and target cultures, helping language learners overcome ethnocentrism and Western culture hegemony, enabling them to broaden their international vision and develop intercultural communication competence.

Keywords: *ethnocentrism, cultural hegemony, intercultural instruction*

I. INTRODUCTION

Since 1960s, scholars in China and abroad began to explore intercultural competence theories and intercultural communication competence development. Fruitful achievements have been made, and the results all show that intercultural communication competence is of great importance in international interaction. In order to meet the needs of China's economic development, the newly released "College English Curriculum Requirements" makes it clear that one of the most important aims in college English teaching is to perform inter-culture cultivation to develop students' intercultural communication competence. Under such circumstance, colleges and universities all over the country begin to implement intercultural instruction, trying to find an effective way to develop students' intercultural competence.

Great efforts have been made in cultivating college students' competence, while the result is not satisfying. Problems exist in current college intercultural instruction. Ethnocentrism and Western culture hegemony are two negative attitudes intercultural teachers and learners commonly hold in the process of intercultural teaching and learning, which would inevitably hinder the development of students' intercultural communication competence. This paper tries to find an effective way to balance them in intercultural instruction and learning.

II. DEFINITION OF ETHNOCENTRISM AND WESTERN CULTURAL HEGEMONY

Before further exam the problem, a clear definition of ethnocentrism and cultural hegemony should be given. Ethnocentrism is a word derived from two Greek words "ethnos" and "kentron". It's an attitude to view ones' own culture as superior than other cultures. Ethnocentrism often entails the belief that one's own race or ethnic group is the most important or some or all aspects of its culture are superior to those of other groups. Like in 19 century, the Great Britain called itself the empire on which the sun never sets. The Greeks and Romans called outsiders barbarians. William Graham Sumner, a social evolutionist and professor of Political and Social Science at Yale University, defined it as the viewpoint that "one's own group is the center of everything" against which all other groups are judged. With this ideology, individuals judge other groups in relation to their own particular ethnic group or culture, especially with concern to language, behavior, customs, and religion which may cause misunderstanding in intercultural communication.

The opposite attitude toward ethnocentrism is Western cultural hegemony in intercultural communication. The term cultural hegemony was proposed by the writings of the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. According to him, Cultural hegemony means that one nation or culture, either by direct intent or merely by its dominant position in the world, exerts an inordinate influence into how other cultures should conduct themselves, both in terms of values and

political and economic aspirations. This phenomenon could be seen in different periods of historical development. For example, at the height of Greek culture, those who spoke Greek were considered as "civilized" and "eloquent", those who couldn't were mocked as "barbarians"; In Roman empire, Roman values took a dominant position, anything that didn't agree with it was considered inferior; And in European colonial period, European culture was the dominant culture over its colonial countries even long after these countries gained their independence. Western culture hegemony means in intercultural class, Western cultures are the dominant or only content introduced by intercultural teachers, there's few or even no information about Chinese culture. The ideology and values of Western cultures gradually become the dominant ones students learned in class. And the infiltration of Western cultural hegemony has seriously violated Chinese "cultural sovereignty".

III.   RIGHT JUDGEMENT PREVENTED BY ETHNOCENTRISM

Ethnocentrism is sometimes a product of unconsciousness with strong emotional factors. It is a common feature all the nations share in the world. All ethnic groups advocate their own culture, focusing on the group they belong and they tend to see high of their own group and discriminate against other groups. Therefore, when people encounter unfamiliar cultures, they always adopt negative attitude to resist them. The extreme manifestation of ethnocentrism is to claim that its own culture is superior to other cultures and put different cultures in a certain order. The more similarities the target culture shares with their native culture, the better ethnocentrists believe, vice versa. As ethnocentrism has the characteristics of "self-centered" and "cultural superiority", social psychologists generally believe that this attitude will bring serious negative impact on cross-cultural communication.

The direct consequence of ethnocentrism is to produce communication distance. Ethnocentrists prefer to exaggerate the differences of groups, regarding their own group as superior to other groups; regarding their norms, values and behaviors as moral, good and appropriate, and think that those differences from their own culture are immoral, wrong and inappropriate. On the one hand, communication distance is shown in the form of indifference. When communicating with other groups, they use inappropriate questions, deliberately raising the voice or slowing down the speed of speaking to show their apathy. Sometimes they even take evasive behavior, avoid or limit contact with other ethnic groups, only keep eye contact with members of internal groups to highlight the contact with internal groups. On the other hand, serious ethnocentrism will also use contemptuous words or even physical violence to

isolate or exclude members of other groups which is very easy to lead to the rejection of communication between the two sides. Mutual denial, accusation, cultural conflict, prejudice, discrimination, distrust, or even hatred appear.

Generally speaking, ethnocentrism suppresses people's intercultural communication potential. It deprives positive attitude, learning enthusiasm and communicative competence which are of great significance in intercultural communication. It also prevents people's right judgement which may lead to limitation of vision and cultural stereotype. When facing a new culture, one should adopt a positive attitude, knowing there's no good or bad culture, and see it as a good opportunity to expand horizons and promote character mature instead of threaten or danger. Then he can have a better understanding of both our own and other cultures and distinguish the differences between them to promote cultural communication competence.

IV.   CULTURE SOVEREIGNTY INVADED BY WESTERN CULTURE HEGEMONY

According to scholars' research in intercultural instruction in China, content of culture teaching are generally casual and blind. There is no uniform and systematic guidance and regulation in intercultural teaching. Most intercultural teachers focus on the introduction of Western cultures to students, especially British and American cultures. Internalizing them and reaching the level of native language proficiency is seen as the final teaching aim. This kind of teaching mode has strong marks of Western cultural hegemony and European ethnocentrism. On the one hand, it ignores cultural diversity and heterogeneity, which runs counter to cultural pluralism advocated by postmodernism. On the other hand, Chinese culture is affected and impacted and we gradually lost culture sovereignty.

It's obvious that Chinese core value system has been weakened. Western cultural hegemonism claims that Western values are universal values and the symbol of freedom, democracy and human rights. It emphasizes that all cultures should take Western cultural values and political economic system as the standard. Through ideological infiltration, quite a lot of Chinese people generally lack national and cultural self-esteem. They gradually lose their own cultural sovereignty. Chinese core value has been challenged.

Traditional culture is questioned and discarded or even despised in such intercultural teaching environment. Because Chinese teachers simply introduce Western cultures directly without or with no enough guidance to students, Western cultures just like flood are poured into young generations. Young as they are, they don't have the ability to critically accept the

knowledge and just take them all. When they do this, they take Western capitalist ideology at the same time. Things go on like this, they will naturally accept Western thoughts and thinking patterns, and gradually lose the connection with traditional Chinese culture. "Western holiday fever" is a good example to illustrate the trend of admiring Western cultures. In recent years, more and more young people begin to celebrate Western holidays like Christmas or Thanksgiving Day. They enthuse every detail about those Western holidays, but when asked the legend about traditional Chinese holidays, they can barely say a word. They accept Western cultures in open minded, believing everything in Western country is good and losing interest in their own culture, which is shown as they no longer learn Chinese calligraphy, don't appreciate Chinese poems and songs as they did before, etc. They don't take Chinese traditional culture seriously and begin to doubt about or even completely deny their own culture, which of cause will cause the rupture of inheritance of Chinese traditional culture. In fact, more and more young men are reluctant to know Chinese traditional culture, let alone actively carry forward the essence of it. Cultural aphasia appears and the expressive power of Chinese culture has been weakened. It is not too much to say, Western culture hegemony is trying to bring everyone into the same value system and the same cultural atmosphere so as to melt the national characteristics, weaken the national consciousness and dismantle the ethic culture. Thus, it's urgent for language teachers to guide the young generations properly in intercultural class in case the lost of Chinese culture sovereignty.

V. CREATING A "THIRD SPACE" TO BALANCE ETHNOCENTRISM AND WESTERN CULTURAL HEGEMONY

The aim of intercultural teaching is to let students know culture has the characteristic of diversity, different culture has its own characters, and help students enhance their consciousness of the differences between different cultures to develop their intercultural communication competence. But most Chinese intercultural teachers take Chinese and Western cultures as two totally independent or even opposite cultures, they don't realize each culture has its own characteristics but they also share common features as cultures. In order to have a better understand of Western culture, Chinese culture should also be introduced to students. By comparing the similarities and differences of the cultures students can experience cultural diversity. Only focusing on the cultivating of Western culture and neglecting Chinese culture will not develop students' intercultural communication competence properly. "Third space" is a feasible way to balance ethnocentrism and Western culture hegemony.

The concept of "third space" was proposed by American sociologist Ray Oldenbury. It is a middle zone between different cultures formed from native language culture and target language culture in cultural communication by cross-cultural exploration and negotiation. In the space, different cultures complement each other harmoniously and achieve win-win coexistence. All cultures have the right to take equal dialogue. The characteristics of different cultures will be contained and understood instead of erased and diluted.

"Third space" in intercultural instruction is a language and culture learning space created by language learners. It's just like a store room. Knowledge of native language culture and target language culture; people like learners themselves and other people such as teachers or peers or counterparts; learning tools like textbooks or images, etc. are just put into it. It's also like a processing workshop. In this workshop, language learning is not a process of assimilation by target language but a process of exploring and negotiating between two languages and cultures to meet the need of communication. In the space, all cultures are treated equally, all cultures' characteristics are respected, there're no good or bad, right or wrong cultures. Learners can express themselves freely and achieve the purpose of individual communication without the constraints of their mother tongue and target language cultural norms. (Kramsch 1993:13)

Australian famous language education expert Lo Bianco and some domestic scholars such Ye Hong, Gao Yihong, etc., all give a confirm on the concept. They believe that cultures in "third space" is not compromised cultures in which knowledge from different cultures are simply piled together. It's a place for real culture innovation. It emphasizes that native culture is the starting point of cross-cultural exploration which has the same status as important as target language culture. There, the study of native language culture and target language culture can achieve positive interaction, both native and target cultures will be strengthened and deepened and integrated into a new culture which can form a value foundation beyond the nation, region and country. Real equality and dialogue can be realized. Language learners can form a cross-cultural complex personality so as to realize successful communication.

VI. CONCLUSION

By intercultural instruction, Students should adopt a positive, open and inclusive attitude in intercultural communication, respecting cultural diversity and avoiding cultural bias or cultural centralism. They should know individuals in the same culture have generality, but also inevitably have differences.

Therefore, they are encouraged to understand individuals from different cultures comprehensively, dynamically and objectively to ensure the smooth progress of cross-cultural communication.

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