

A Study on the Influence of Language and Cultural Knowledge's Infiltration on English Reading Ability

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ABSTRACT

Culture and language complement each other, which are two important aspects of English reading. Based on schema theory and the theory of cross-cultural communication, this paper investigates the influence of the lack of language and cultural knowledge on the ability of English reading. Aiming at the problems, it puts forward some strategies for the infiltration of language and cultural knowledge, such as cultivating the ability of thinking and interpreting the meaning of words and sentences, establishing a correct concept of cultural differences and comparing the cultural connotations of China and the west, making plans and accumulating cultural knowledge based on historical development and regional distribution.

Keywords: English reading, culture, language, infiltration, cultural knowledge

I. INTRODUCTION

The diversity which is brought about by the era of information makes people interact with more and more foreign cultures, and the content of reading is also internationalized. The process of English reading is not only the conversion of information through language symbols, but also the understanding and integration on culture through the interaction. Language, as the carrier of culture, is a tool for normal communication; culture, as the essence of language, covers the historical features of a nation, a country and a region. English reading is not only the interpretation, translation and analysis for frame, but also the understanding and application of cultural background.

II. LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND READING

After the Second World War, there is a rapid development on study about culture. Fries, an American expert in language teaching, proposed the necessity of cultural infiltration in language teaching [1]. Kramsch realized the indivisibility of language teaching and culture teaching [2]. In 1980, Xu Guozhang of China published a paper entitled "culturally loaded words and English language teaching" in the Journal of modern foreign languages, which was the first article to discuss language and culture in China [3]. Since then, the study of intercultural communication has risen in China. Hu Wenzhong introduces the research on the definition of culture in different fields systematically in his book: culture is a system of living styles that people have been creating for a long time, which includes not only abstract contents such as belief, concept, custom and

knowledge, but also specific contents such as objects and instruments [4]. Language is the carrier of culture, at the same time, it is restricted by language. Different languages in different regions have different forms due to different cultural backgrounds. Gradually, cultural research has been integrated with language research.

Coady put forward the idea on second language reading, that is, readers' background knowledge, conceptual ability and operational skills interact to produce an understanding of the text [5]. In the past three decades, the research of reading theory has focused on the study of schema theory, which interprets the process of reading as the interaction between the reader's knowledge and the information at all levels in the text. It proposes that in the process of foreign language reading, the degree of the reader's cultural knowledge accumulation is proportional to the ability of reading comprehension.

III. THEORETICAL BASIS

Schema theory originated from Gestalt psychology in the 18th century, which means "cloze" and "whole". In 1932, British psychologist Bartlett pointed out that schema is an organic combination of existing experience and reflection, which reconstructs understanding of passages from existing information [6]. After further research by Jean Piaget, Lucien Goldmann, D. Rumelhart, etc., schema theory has developed into modern theory of cognitive psychology. According to cognitive theory, schema is the organization of storage, extraction and application about declarative and procedural knowledge. Concepts and knowledge are meaningful only when they are related to what is

known in people's minds. When people receive new information, at first, they should open the diagram of structure related to existing knowledge in their minds. Then, the new diagram is reconstructed by decoding, analyzing and processing new contents. The accumulation of cultural knowledge is indispensable in English reading.

Kim, a scholar engaged in studies on cross-cultural communication, believes that the ability of cross-cultural communication includes cognition, behavior and emotion, which requires language learners to learn more about external things and feel them with different attitudes, so as to acting in a way which is different from their own [7]. Byram, a famous scholar who specializes in English language and culture, believes that the ability of cross-cultural communication includes three aspects: cross-cultural knowledge (i.e. cultural awareness and insight), proper attitude towards different cultures and proper behavior in different cultural situations [8]. Wen Qiufang, a Chinese linguist, believes that the ability of intercultural communication consists of intercultural competence and communicative competence [9]. The former refers to the sensitivity to cultural differences, the flexibility to tolerate and deal with cultural differences, and the latter refers to the ability of language and pragmatic as well as the versatility. The theory of cross-cultural communication has been widely used in guiding language reading and provided a scientific theoretical basis for English readers.

IV. THE INFLUENCE OF THE LACK OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE ON THE ABILITY OF ENGLISH READING

A. Being unable to understand correctly the valid information

Language carries the connotation of culture, and culture restricts the development of language. According to surveys, English readers pay attention to literal translation. However, in the process of extracting effective information, if readers didn't take cultural elements into account in semantic meanings, pragmatic rules and even structures of texts, it should be easy to catch the meaning of words literally from the context, resulting in failure in communication. In the process of reading, only by accumulating the historical evolution, social environment and customs of the target language, can we understand the information in the practical manuscripts correctly, improve the ability of comprehension and avoid misunderstanding.

B. Being unable to understand the differences in values

Due to the differences of traditional culture, social environment and social system, the values formed in the process of social development are different. Chinese

culture is moderate, peaceful, modest and courteous, which advocates that individuals obey the collective, as well as individual interests are less than collective interests. Therefore, Chinese people are accustomed to regard this tradition as the standard to measure people's outlook on life, world view and moral behavior. However, in contrast, westerners advocate independence as well as personal privacy, rights, struggle and enterprising spirit. They usually regard personal success as the standard to measure the value of life. In different languages, words with the same language meaning may have different pragmatic meanings due to the influence of "conscious culture". If we don't have certain cultural background knowledge, we can't understand the differences between the two languages in reading, let alone the differences in behavior norms caused by the differences in values.

C. Being unable to interpret culture in depth

According to the relevant theory of semiotics, language is a kind of conscious sign, which mainly includes signs of information such as world view, moral and religious belief, philosophy view, mode of thinking, form of national concept, etc. As a symbolic system, language can be divided into five categories: regional symbols, social symbols, national consciousness symbols, material symbols and audio-visual symbols. A large number of idioms, maxims, sayings, allegorical sayings, proverbs, allusions and slangs have rich influence and reflect culture of different nationalities. One of the main reasons for the poor results of readers after a lot of reading practice is the lack of a good environment for language and the neglect of the infiltration of British and American culture. It is difficult for readers to grasp thinking orientations, discussions about fact and opinions on some subjects in reading under some circumstances, such as: the lack of understanding of British and American culture, the misunderstanding of historical knowledge, allusions and folk customs, and the lack of comparison of different expressions and even the way of thinking between western people and Chinese. Thus, the lack of language and cultural knowledge for a long-term forms obstacles of English reading.

V. STRATEGIES FOR THE INFILTRATION OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

In line with the three principles of "practical appropriateness, appropriate application and gradual progress", the author infiltrates cultural knowledge through the following methods to improve the ability of English reading.

A. Paying attention to cultural infiltration and digging the cultural background of passages

Readers should pay attention to the importance of cultural infiltration in reading. Reading is not only the expression of words, it is permeated with strong cultural factors, if we ignore the existence of cultural knowledge, it will cause differences in understanding. The completion of the task of reading is not only the understanding of the surface of passages, but also the deep excavation of the cultural background. It is necessary to choose materials with rich cultural background to accumulate and supplement knowledge. The recommended reading topics are extensive, involving astronomy, geography, customs, science, society, sports, economy and other aspects, which should keep pace with the times. The infiltration of cultural knowledge enables readers not only to enjoy reading, but also to experience the inner charm of culture.

B. Cultivating the ability of thinking and interpreting the meaning of words and sentences

Language is determined by thinking. English reading is to understand and express in English, and to intervene in mother tongue as little as possible. Through text reading, we can understand structures, characteristics and habits of English. When readers understand the literal meaning, they should expand the cultural knowledge including the connotative meaning, social meaning and emotional meaning, which will not only help them understand passages deeply, remember and master language quickly, but also understand evolution processes and pragmatic situations of vocabularies and sentences. This is especially true for interpretation of idioms, such as "a kiss of death". Only when we understand the seemingly friendly kiss of Judas when he betrayed Jesus in the Bible, can we understand the true meaning of this idiom and avoid misuse.

C. Establishing a correct concept of cultural differences and comparing the cultural connotations of China and the West

With the pattern of global integration, China has undertaken more and more international tasks. It is equally important to introduce foreign culture and spread Chinese culture. In the process of cultural knowledge penetration, readers should treat different cultures with the concept of equality, development and mutual integration, and eliminate prejudices and solidified ideas, neither worship the culture blindly nor despise it. Readers can compare and accumulate differences between Chinese and English through finding starting points from passages, and learn different expressions in different cultural backgrounds from grammars, semantics, pragmatics and other aspects of key words and sentences. Through this kind

of direct comparison, readers can feel the language deeply in cultural contexts, enhance their observation of society and sensitivity to culture, and deepen their understanding of the two cultures.

D. Making plans and accumulating cultural knowledge based on historical development and regional distribution

The study and infiltration of cultural knowledge can take the historical development and geographical distribution as the context, and take the UK, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and other countries as the main objects. Readers should make plans and accumulate cultural knowledge step by step. Readers absorb a lot of cultural information unconsciously in the stage of collection, and further refine specific knowledge when sorting out the context. Through reading a large number of English chapters, readers will accumulate cultural knowledge of various countries and form a systematic framework.

VI. CONCLUSION

Culture and reading are inseparable. The infiltration of cultural knowledge is an indispensable part for English reading. In order to improve the ability of English reading and avoid cultural aphasia, readers should enhance their awareness and literacy about culture, change their ideas properly in time, and combine the introduction of background knowledge with the training of reading skills.

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