

Role of Culture in English Teaching in China

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ABSTRACT

In order to develop global communications skills and interpreting ability for students, English serves as one of the key subjects in Chinese standardized examinations. However, the traditional teaching method is inadequate in reference to the culture. Through the analysis of English teaching in China, this paper aims to explore the significance of culture and communication in foreign language learning. Besides, the implications are discussed on the path to innovate the English teaching method under the current educational background in China. The modification of testing content, teachers professional training, as well as the innovation on obtaining knowledge in diverse platforms are three main aspects that schools and policy makers could consider. By making adjustment to the English pedagogy, students can build up cultural awareness and have a better understanding of English, recognizing and embracing the diverse culture and languages.

Keywords: foreign language learning, traditional teaching method, cultural awareness.

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporarily, the importance of learning English is recognized by Chinese education, especially for the youth education. The National Curriculum decides to include English as a main subject, starting from grade three in primary schools (8-9 years old). For some regions, English is introduced earlier, starting from Primary One [1]. According to People's Daily (the largest newspaper in China) Online, the reason for promoting English learning among students is to satisfy the increasing demand of English in the global context. For a large developing country like China, the proficiency of an international language can help create more opportunities to strengthen the overall competitiveness in many aspects [2]. Through English teaching, students are enlarged the access to diverse cultures and build up an intercultural thinking pattern which keep themselves competitive in the globalized future.

However, the implementation of English education misses the target of English application capacity due to certain limitations in the teaching methods and concepts of English subjects. Thus, the overall teaching effect is undesirable on account of the difficulty for teachers to stimulate students' enthusiasm and interest in learning English knowledge and skills. To be specific, the most critical issue for English learning is the missing role of culture comprehension in English learning, which results in a mechanically acquisition of language. Since culture is inseparable with language learning, the greater

understanding of the culture behind a language enables learners interpret and utilize the language more effectively. As Hamza stated, culture is represented by details that occur in everyday life, varied from the living styles, the ways of communication, to the food and clothes [3]. In other words, besides the basic training and resources that are provided, the learning of English culture should be regarded as an essential task towards the effective English learning.

Apart from this, research showed that many primary schools did not arrange sufficient curriculum for English subject, and quality of teachers is inadequate, especially in rural areas [1]. A class with around 50 students exhausts teachers' attention and diverts teacher's care to each individual [4]. Teachers cannot set personalized plans for students to improve their English. Without enough time and support, it is hardly possible to establish meaningful relationship with their students. Besides, the traditional Chinese teacher-student relationship emphasizes the absolute authority of teachers and the learners' role as a student, which creates less opportunities on proactive language learning. As indicated by Rao [5], English curriculum and textbook in China covered a large portion of grammar and vocabulary practices, with a less emphasis on listening and speaking owing to the test-oriented education. In that case, students cannot practice English in a comprehensive way.

Therefore, the disparities and isolation between grammar teaching and cultural education when applying traditional teaching method at school in China are discussed in this study. By corresponding to the core components in foreign language learning, this paper explains effective method of foreign language learning. With the specific analysis on Chinese educational situation and the existence of cultural barriers, suggestions are provided to help Chinese students develop English skills in a more culturally based environment.

By taking Chinese test-oriented education into consideration this study can be beneficial for the educational policy makers, the Ministry of Education, to encourage more diverse evaluating components in the test making. This paper also reminds the school principals and teachers the importance of culture behind a language and encourages them to pay more attention on cultivating students the use of English instead of focusing on the limited aspects of English training, as well as reflecting on the realistic implementation and outcomes ought to be reflected under the big aim of English education for all students.

2. TRADITIONAL TEACHING METHOD

In China, Confucianism and culture of obedience are core concepts that have existed for thousands of years. Under this social background, a traditional teaching method is used as the default mode in Chinese schools. This method includes three main characteristics. The first one is the task-oriented education, which judges the performance of students based on exams and test scores. Among these standardized tests, the form of multiple choice is popular and widely used. This method is considered as a fair and reliable way to test students' grammar and reading ability which at the same time provides convenience for teachers to grade and analyze. Meanwhile, by setting multiple choice as a testing form, students can find an easier way to prepare and improve their grades [6]. Being aware of the testing form, students in Chinese schools always put great efforts in doing related exercises for the sake of building up the "muscle memory", which allows them to select the correct answer with the help of the memory from previous exercises.

The second characteristic is the rote learning style, which has connection with the test-oriented pedagogy. Under the central agenda on curriculum's setting, teaching materials and practices of English have a heavy focus on grammar, reading, and writing but lack of listening and speaking skills practice [5]. By following the rote learning mode and letting students repeat the process of memorizing the vocabulary and grammar, teachers believe the learning outcome would be reflected positively on the testing papers [7]. Besides, students find that even though it seems boring, the rote learning

method is an effective way on memorizing vocabulary and grammar [8].

The third characteristic is the conservative teacher-student relationship. Teachers in the Chinese culture are always regarded as the authority of knowledge, which means the knowledge they teach should never be doubted. In the normal English class, students accept the knowledge teachers provided instead of proactively asking for it [9]. Grasha introduced five teaching styles that a teacher could perform in class [10]: "Expert", "Formal authority", "Personal model", "Facilitator" and "Delegator". Corresponding to the situation of typical classes at Chinese schools, most teachers fell into the category of "Formal authority". Contrary to the style "Facilitator" (emphasizes the flexibility and interactions in class), teachers with "Formal authority" set up rules and expectations, and guide students to follow the "correct" ways of learning. In this process, what students can learn and should learn are almost all decided by the teachers. Therefore, the ability and experience of the teachers contributes largely to the learning outcome of students.

3. CONCERNS

3.1. Underestimation of Culture Imparting

As a main subject in Chinese schools, English teaching follows the same method described above. The traditional teaching method in China has been modified and developed frequently. However, as the different cultural contexts and abilities required behind foreign language learning. The traditional teaching method cannot fulfill all the needs of English learning. For the first aspect, with the heavy focus on testing materials, the English culture is often underestimated or even be ignored. As Chinese examination does not include testing criteria for cultural awareness or communication skills, students do not have a better understanding of the culture during the learning process [7]. "Language learning is fully situated within a given cultural context". The essential role of culture in a language is also proved by the Bassnett's article that no language can exist without the context of culture, and culture cannot exist with less understanding of the language's structure [11]. In that case, the ignorance of culture in the tests would become a drawback that prevent students from learning a foreign language effectively.

3.2. Cultural Barrier

The cultural barriers between Chinese and English affect teachers who have relatively less English proficiency and fails to support innovative teaching method. Biswas discussed how culture was closely related to a language during the translation process: "The understanding of the culture of the second or foreign

language will help the interpreter to comprehend the text and to translate it in a significant way” [12]. Learning and interpreting a language in its own cultural context is more convenient and effective for foreign language learners. Conversely, if learners try to understand the language based on their native cultural background, the interpretation may encounter problems. The implementation of English teaching in Chinese schools does not show enough emphasis on cultivating the cultural awareness of a language. In that case, different from the grammar and vocabulary mastery, teachers themselves cannot understand the English culture as well because many of them also learn the English from the textbook instead of truly experience how the native speakers use English [5]. By imitating the traditional teaching method based on Chinese culture, this lack of attention on the cultural difference prevents teachers from creating meaningful strategies for their students.

3.3. *Worship of Authority*

The Worship of authority provides less possibility for students on speaking practice. Under the influence of Confucianism, the quote “Speech is silver, silence is gold” is praised among Chinese people. Affected by the cultural background and the authority of teachers, students tend to be quiet and listen to the teacher’s instruction while are not willing to hands up and ask questions in English [13]. It is even less likely to see debate in a typical class, so teachers always play as the leading role. This quality of Chinese is more towards reserved and conservative, and it may be helpful for test preparation on reading and writing. However, this passively knowledge receiving mode cannot assist students to develop their communicating ability. The practice of foreign language speaking requires courage, for Chinese students under the traditional teaching mode, it is less likely for them to utilize the class time and create more speaking interaction with teachers.

4. MEANINGFUL COMPONENTS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

4.1. *The Social Function of a Language*

Widdowson believed that people should understand the sentence’ function and realize the purpose in the communication [14]. It is more essential when the communication is based on a foreign language. High context culture and low context culture are two terms defined and distinguished by Hall. During the high context communication, people detect and interpret with cultural values, which means that the simple message always reflects a deeper meaning. Conversely, people in low context communication are more individualized, and the interactions are more straight forward and publicly. Asian countries like China are more towards high context cultures, while English speaking countries like United

States falls closer to low context culture [15]. Hence, the English learning by a Chinese language learner should be aware of the cultural difference in the process of study.

Grammar based teaching is the traditional form of foreign language learning. However, when taking the goal of making effective conversation into account, this grammar-translation method may not fulfill the goal of utilizing the language for communication [16]. Nevertheless, the grammar is crucial in language learning as functions are meaningless without the grammatic base [17]. In that case, in addition to the teaching of language structure, it is encouraged to include the social functions into the language course [16]. By building up cultural awareness, language learners will find it easier to understand the purpose of the language.

4.2. *Transformative Learning*

As multiple social and cultural factors are involved in a language, instead of rote learning that only focuses on grammar and vocabulary, more flexible and transformative learning methods should be encouraged. For instance, the ability of comprehending idioms is one aspect that helps students interpret foreign language effectively. English is a language merging from many languages with distinctive cultures and expressions. The idioms in English in that case are difficult to be all translated into words from other languages as they are grouped and mixed by absorbing different cultural factors [18]. To measure the use of idioms in English, there are two figures that being created. The first is the idiom familiarity, which measures the frequency of idioms appear in the language [19]. The second one is the idiom transparency, which measures the level of correlation between the literal and figurative meaning of the idiom. Xie discussed the effects of familiarity and transparency of idioms on the foreign language learners’ understanding accuracy about the content [20]. Students can interpret the meaning of the information. While when there is lack of supportive context, students always rely on previous experience and knowledge on idioms to translate. In that case, the proper exposure to idioms and cultural characteristics will develop language learners’ ability on transparency of language as well as help them to interpret the content with less difficulty can more accuracy. The comprehension of idioms is a challenge for foreign language learners, but it is an essential ability during the communication and language interpretation.

4.3. *Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)*

Steele explained the central position of language learners in the teaching and learning process [21]. He indicated that the intercultural interaction played as a mediator that could connect two cultures and could be an effective way of language learning. Instead of

abandoning the host culture, the role of intercultural speaker keeps their own identity and at the same time can think from the perspective of the other culture. In that case, language learners with ICC are capable of coordinating the conversation with people who have different cultural backgrounds without losing the view from his own culture. Byram explained the possible ways of obtaining ICC, which included the experience and self-reflections without being educated. Nonetheless, he embraced and encouraged the idea that including cultural teaching in educational program could help language learners build up ICC [22]. Therefore, one goal of foreign language teaching should be cultivating the cultural awareness of students.

Besides understanding the core components on effective language learning, the question of what schools and teachers can do to improve the efficiency of English teaching should be reconsidered. In responding to the three main shortcomings English education has in China, English teaching can be modified in three different aspects as follows.

5. IMPLICATIONS

5.1. Changes of the Examination Content

The growing population in China contributes as a main factor towards the competitive selectness of students. Standardized tests that act as the in-depth method to evaluate students' academic performance cannot be replaced in the short term. Based on Kim's empirical research [23], the overall performance of students on standardized tests is the main judging criteria to define the quality of a teacher. In consequence, teachers often overlook the importance of knowledge and test scores but tend to ignore the characteristics of the students and the individual learning progress. In that case, the changes of testing content should be an essential path which affects the focus of teachers and the English learning of students. Therefore, one should recognize the effectiveness of the method and modify the testing contents to train students' English ability in a more comprehensive way. (e.g., test speaking and listening skills). It is also beneficial to add testing content for cultural awareness. With more diverse judging criteria on English ability, both teachers and students would have better understanding on English.

5.2. Teacher's Professional Training

In addition to the modification of exams, it is necessary to reflect from the teacher's perspective. It is proved that the different teaching orientations contribute to different students' learning outcome. The existentialist teacher encourages students to explore the diversity of knowledge on their own instead of following the teaching agenda strictly. Conversely, the behaviorist teacher

instructs students to study in a pre-set plan and aims to achieve the goals that are decided by the external factors [24]. From the classification, Chinese teachers prefer to act as the role of behaviorist teacher. As the foreign language learning requires more practice on the cultural understanding and communication, more professional training is required to help teachers understand their role in English learning. This deeper understanding on the importance of open-minded relationship allows teachers to pay more effort on creating more interactions and encouraging students to express themselves freely in class [8]. Corresponding to the style of "Facilitator" in Grasha's model, instead of teaching the fixed expression of English, teachers should also be aware of the flexibility of using a language and allow proper tolerance of errors in students oral expression [10]. Therefore, teachers can balance grammar teaching and cultural education through this transformation and help students improve their English ability.

5.3. Innovative Pedagogy

According to the New Curriculum Standard, the English textbook serves as the guiding tool for teachers in class, while this does not mean that teachers should only rely on them. By giving analysis on students' individual performance and learning styles, it is teachers' responsibility to customize and modify the teaching methods [25]. Not only the grammar knowledge and readings, the practices on listening skills should also be assigned so that students can absorb the knowledge from different ways. Besides, the utility of technology should also be encouraged to ensure the flexibility of learning. This effective usage will bring innovation to the traditional mode and provide more platforms and online tools for students to choose outside the class. In that case, connection will be built up between teachers and students without the limitations of time and space.

6. CONCLUSION

Chinese culture has influenced the way of teaching in Chinese schools. However, for foreign language learning which requires the understanding of a different culture, how to build up a bridge between one's own culture and the foreign culture in foreign language learning should be a key question that policy makers and teachers consider. By accepting the large background that the test-oriented education in China cannot be replaced in a short time, the changing of testing content, more professional training on teachers, as well as the innovative pedagogy could all contribute to build up a more cultural and social based language environment. This innovation could deliver the meaningful message to students on how language is related to culture, and how to learn a foreign language effectively.

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