

The Influence of Cultural Learning on Second Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

Culture is important for language learning, but culture in language education has not been given much attention in China. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the inseparable relationship between culture and language, and to explore how cultural education plays a role in China's language teaching system. The data collected through questionnaires and interviews in this paper suggest that Chinese university students still place a relatively high value on culture and recognize the importance of cultural education for language learning.

Keywords: Cultural education, Language learning, Chinese educational background

1. INTRODUCTION

As a result of globalization, the importance of understanding culture in language learning is becoming apparent and this is causing concern for teachers who teach languages and students who learn languages. In China, students are used to blindly following the teacher's mechanical system of grammar, reading, listening and grammar training day in and day out. The teachers' aims are also aligned with the students' demands, and language learning is ultimately about passing exams and going on to higher education. When a language is taught for its educational value, it is significant to understand the cultural content associated with that language [1]. Therefore, in the context of this worldwide trend towards cross-cultural communication and in the context of exam-oriented education in China, we believe that it is essential to integrate more cultural knowledge in the second language classroom. This paper will discuss the inseparable relationship between culture and language and to explore how cultural education can play a role in China's language teaching system.

There has been much debate about the integration of culture into the school curriculum. In this paper we review the existing literature in order to build on it and conduct further research. This paper will examine the relationship between language and culture by collecting data from foreign language university students through

interviews and questionnaires and then, using several models and theories, analyzing the results. Data will be collected and literature reviewed in order to identify the influence of culture in second language acquisition and, on this basis, to provide some suggestions for learning and teaching.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Research on cultural teaching in western Second language Teaching

From the perspective of the development of western language teaching, cultural teaching is closely related to language teaching. As early as the middle age, European language teaching has been universal culture teaching, to introduce students to the history and geography of the Roman Empire. Since the 19th century, many linguists have realized the influence of cultural factors on language acquisition and the close relationship between language and culture. After investigating the relationship between language and national culture, customs and beliefs, Sapir, an American linguist, concludes that "language has a base... Language does not exist without culture, that is to say, it does not pass down from society..." [2]. German linguist Humboldt (Humboldt, B.V.W.) believes that a nation's language and thought are inseparable, each nation will inevitably put some unique cultural awareness into their own language, and in their

own language form a special kind of "world view", the "world view" activities, in turn, will restrict people's words [3].

With the outbreak of the Second World War, people pay more attention to the cultural differences between different countries and regions, and the studies of sociolinguistics, pragmatics and cross-cultural communication theory develop rapidly. Many scholars have also proposed that foreign language should no longer be an independent discipline, but should be combined with political science, history, geography and literature of a particular region to form an interdisciplinary group [4]. Seen from the standards for Foreign Language Teaching in the 21st Century issued by the US Department of Education in 1996, cultural teaching covers all the standards in the syllabus and becomes the central task of language teaching [5]. From the current research situation, *The Concept of Cultural Teaching Practice* by Patrick R.M, an American scholar, is a relatively authoritative book that systematically discusses language and culture teaching, and makes a comprehensive and profound summary and study of the basic theories [6]. In addition, many scholars have proposed a multi-faceted and specific approach to teach language and culture, which has been gradually systematised.

2.2. Cultural studies in Second language Teaching in China

Cultural teaching in China starts late, and a majority of it are to directly absorb western research results. In the actual teaching process, teachers are relatively cautious and not systematic, and there is a lack of corresponding teaching materials covering intercultural communication. The attention of the Chinese language and culture teaching originated in the eighty s of the 20th century, Mr. Xu Guozhang's speech on the Cultural Connotation of Words and English Teaching [7] is a sign that Chinese people begin to attach importance to cultural factors in foreign language teaching (Hu Wenzhong). Prior to this, China had mainly translated a large number of foreign classics and studied foreign works, such as Hall's *The Silent Language*[8] and *Intercultural Communication and Learning*[9] (Hu Wenzhong). Chinese scholars have concentrated on integrating a great deal of theoretical and practical knowledge of cultural factors, producing a series of specific approaches to teaching foreign language and culture suitable for China, such as Chen Shen's *Language and Culture Teaching Strategies* [10] and Hu Wenzhong and Gao Yihong's *Foreign Language Teaching and Culture* [11]. But on the whole, the teaching theories of foreign language culture in China need to be enriched, and the professional practice of teaching methods need to be improved.

3. METHOD

Research has provided adequate evidence for us to analyze a variety of functions of culture during the process of second language acquisition. Considering the pertinence of the survey, students who major in foreign language are the best choice, for they have common goal which is gaining a job related to their second language. Linguistically, error analysis and acculturation model will help to parse our data.

3.1 Participants

The key research question of our study is how cultural factors influence second language acquisition in classes. To analyze this question, participants consist of undergraduate and graduate students, and present different versions of questionnaire and interview. Among them, some undergraduate students are participating the 2+2 joint tertiary study programs, while graduate students have the experience of studying abroad or the goal of working abroad or in multinational corporation.

3.2 Acculturation

Acculturation refers to changes that arise from sustained first-hand contact between individuals of differing cultural origins [12]. Using the "Acculturation model" to frame the study can better explain what the respondents said. What is mentioned most by undergraduate students is the exam-oriented education before college, causing rare exposure to cultural learning. When they have more and more classes related to culture, culture shock happens, especially to those who join the 2+2 study programs. Students who have studied abroad explain they can maintain contact with the people of targeted language society and get more linguistic as well as cultural knowledge. In this process, they realize that some of their behaviors gradually change, which means that his original culture is changed by the influence of other cultures. from data, all mention that acculturation is an indispensable step for future employment and cross-cultural communication.

3.3 Procedure

We send questionnaires to undergraduate and graduate students majoring in foreign language, and select special participants to have interview. Participants are required to express their views toward the ideas mentioned in each item by choosing the point on the scale, which is reflected their level of agreement. Also, they can write down their own opinions in the short-answer questions. Privacy will be assured. Respondents can also update their ideas after the research. All the answers are then collected to be analyzed by the research team.

4. QUESTIONNAIRES

Adapted from WeChat English culture learning and its impact on language learning, the ten-item questionnaire utilized in this study aims to assess these themes: (1) Target language learning includes cultural learning (Item 1,2), (2) The importance of cultural learning in language learning (Item 3,4,5,6,7) and (3) The position of cultural learning in language learning. (Item 8). The first theme of the questionnaire aims to investigate whether the teaching of the target language includes cultural teaching. The second theme is concerned with the attitude change in the participants towards the target culture. The last theme assesses the status of target language cultural learning in China.

Theme 1: Target language learning includes cultural learning

textbooks or courses are becoming increasingly abundant and diverse, in 2 table below, the participants expressed that cultural content is common in foreign language learning.

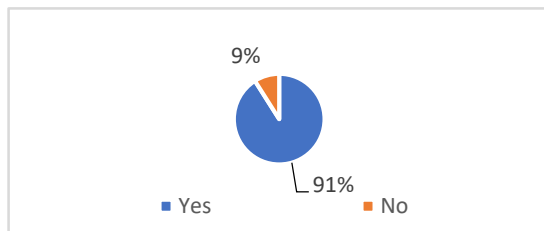


Figure 1: During your study of a foreign language, is there any content in the foreign language textbooks that involves cultural learning?

Table 1: If so, what cultural content is included in the material you are studying? [Multi-choice questions]

Response	%
Habits	86.89
Values	67.21
The way of thinking	60.66
Diet	60.66
Religion	40.98
History	54.1
Literature	50.82
Cultural traditions	52.46

Not only do almost all the textbooks contain cultural content, but also the types are very rich. Among them, living habits account for the largest proportion, as high

as 86.89%. Other types of cultural content also almost exceed 50%.

Theme 2: The importance of cultural learning in language learning.

We are concerned about this topic. Therefore, we have designed many related questions, and the results obtained are more in line with our expectations. In the minds of the interviewees, cultural learning is still very important to their target language.

Table 2: Do you think the cultural content in the textbook is helpful in learning a foreign language?

Response	%
Yes	96.72
No	3.28

Table 3: Do you think foreign language culture learning is important?

Response	%
Yes	80.33
Not so important	19.67
No	0

More than 95% of the participants clearly state that cultural learning is helpful to language learning, and everyone who participates in this questionnaire believes that foreign language and cultural learning is necessary. It is the only option in our questionnaire that does not have a candidate.

Theme 3: The position of cultural learning in language learning.

Compared with the previous ones, the last topic of our questionnaire is relatively simple with a subjective question. However, this is enough to reflect some facts: most of the language culture content is still insufficient.

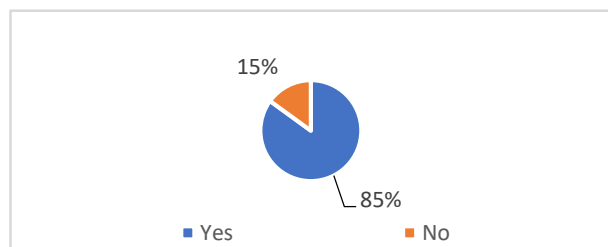


Figure 2: Do you think the foreign language textbooks should strengthen the study of cultural content ?

Certainly, we also add an open question at the end of our questionnaire. Many participants give their own answers, and some are very representative.

Do you think that in the context of Chinese language education, cultural learning is necessary for the study of its language and why? [Short answer]

The last item in this questionnaire is the only open item. When we ask them whether they find it necessary to strengthen the importance of cultural learning in their language learning. The answer can be divided into six points. Next, we'll deal with these points and discuss them with some participants' answers in the introduction respectively.

Point 1: Language is a part of culture, and language cannot exist independently without culture.

I think it is necessary. Language is a part of a nation's culture and a way of disseminating culture. After the introduction of the Direct Method into the English Language teaching, cultural elements begin to be regarded as an important aspect of language learning. Nowadays, cultural background knowledge is accepted as a necessary place for language teaching. As Edward Sapir (Language) points, there is something behind the language and language cannot exist without culture. The so-called culture is the summation of inherited habit and belief, which can determine our living organization. L.P. Palmer states the history of language and the language of history are complement to each other. They can assist and enlighten each other. Language does not exist in a vacuum so that language learners should understand the background, they should also learn about the target culture. In this respect, Crystal well supports this statement: "Language has no independent existence: it exists only in the brains and mouths and ears and hands and eyes of its user" [13]. Some participants in this questionnaire are clearly aware of the importance of culture and believe that culture and language are inseparable.

Point 2: Cultural learning contributes to its language learning

Knowing the cultural background can make people understand the language better. The main problem in teaching culture in the foreign language classroom is on the uncertainty of the meaning of the culture itself (Furstenberg, 2010). Although there have been teaching activities which are devoted to culture teaching and textbook materials have included the cultural dimensions, there is still a constant need to redefine the concept of culture that is meaningful in language classroom, which is the first place that students encounter with another language [14]. Therefore, whether in China or in other countries, cultural teaching has always been full of uncertainty. However, the process of language learning is a relatively abstract concept. Many interviewees said that cultural education is more like a background introduction for them. This is a process of concretizing the original abstract concept, and it will gradually make them form a picture in their mind. For example, the word

"renaissance", we all know that it has the meaning of revival, regeneration. But if you know something about the Renaissance, you will immediately realize that renaissance can be used as a proper term, referring to the Renaissance. Or when the teacher introduces relevant content about Renaissance, you can quickly accept this concept and visualize in your mind. We also mention that however course books provide real life situations, learners, lacking insights about the target culture, have difficulty in associating these situations with real people [15]. Participants say that culture learning is an extremely efficient way of learning, so they regard cultural learning as a tool and method for learning the target language, so that they can better master it.

Point 3: Mastering the grammatical framework does not mean mastering the language.

The importance is not the grammatical structure but the change in the way of thinking. While discussing the language proficiency, linguists often make a distinction between linguistic competence and linguistic performance. Chomsky defines linguistic competence as what one knows about the language while linguistic performance is one's actual language use [15]. Many of our participants say that in addition to being able to take exams, the biggest purpose of their language learning is to communicate. The ability of communicating is very important in two directions. One is the language itself, that is, its structure, grammar, etc. And the other is the way of expression, cultural competence falls in the category of expression. This likes the learner thinking from the cultural perspective of the target language and expressing it according to the native speaker's thinking mode. This thinking mode is influenced by many aspects, such as religion, customs, social structure, etc., which are all covered by culture. Lado argues that lack of cultural competence in the target language will surely lead to transfer from the native language to the target language [5]. This is why there is such a saying as Chinglish, which is imposing the Chinese model on English, this kind of English can be understood by Chinese people as soon as they listen, but native English speakers generally have to guess. Therefore, even though the grammatical structure may be correct, the locals cannot understand what it means. The participants here are clear that being more exposed to cultural learning can enhance their communication skills.

Point 4: Cultural teaching does not fit the Chinese education system

I do not think it is necessary, it may be more important for students who need to go abroad. As the exchanges between countries around the world become closer and closer, in order to adapt to the development of globalization, many students choose to study abroad, but it is obvious that a larger part of the students do not consider this path. Therefore, for them, even if they do not deny the importance of culture to language learning,

they still think it is unnecessary. As far as the current situation is concerned, China's education model is still relatively mechanical, so does language teaching. Teachers are accustomed to strengthening students' grammar system, that they teach grammatical rules over and over again, and students do it over and over again. Of course, both the content of the textbook and the teacher's words will involve some cultural knowledge, but we are more accustomed to using it as a moderator, which is an additional content that is free from rigid courses. So, in the end we will return to the environment of the Chinese education system. It is precisely because of this restriction that the participants have voices of opposition.

5. CONCLUSION

Cultural learning is to deepen the understanding of the language, which is very helpful to language learning. Even if the cultural content involved in our textbooks or teaching is not sufficient, in fact, many students regard cultural learning as an important part of language learning. And they also use their own methods to absorb cultural knowledge. The results of our questionnaire have already shown that people still value cultural learning. Cultural learning and language learning are inseparable and interacted. Cultural learning is helpful to our language learning, and can strengthen the expressive ability as well. But if it is just to pass the exam, it is another matter. Therefore, according to the current situation, there is no doubt that cultural learning is necessary. But if it is under China's education system, as the results of this article, there is still no conclusive conclusion.

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