The Role of Languaculture in Foreign Language Education: The Case in China

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ABSTRACT

With the largest population of English learners in the world and the importance of cultural knowledge in foreign language education, it is of great significance to associate the concept of language and culture with ELT in China. This paper utilizes Risager's perspective of languaculture to discuss its role of in China's ELT, aiming at removing cultural barriers and discovering cultural knowledge that is essential to the English classes. Findings from the research demonstrate that teaching semantics and pragmatics is critical to achieving proper language usage while poetic texts can have both positive and negative effects on ELT, and that identity can be strongly formed in terms of construction and transition.

Keywords: *languaculture, foreign language education, ELT in China*

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication between multiple cultures and nations is continually improving in the age of globalization, which necessitates and promotes the demand for foreign language acquisition. To thoroughly grasp the bilingual competencies, the linguistic knowledge obtained from formal education plays an indispensable part, while students are also required to be aware of its socially-constructed meaning based on diverse cultural backgrounds [8]. Being classified as an expanding circle country, China considers English a norm-dependent foreign language for international communication [20]. More importantly, concerning the fact that the world's largest population of English learners and users is identified in China [16], it is of vital significance to associate the cultural elements with foreign language education in the context of China. Under this circumstance, the research realm of linguaculture created by Paul Friedrich [12], which replaces the sole notion of culture, will be applied in this study to analyze three dimensions of linguaculture/languaculture, including the semantic and pragmatic dimension, the poetic dimension, and the identity dimension brought up by Risager [26][27][28][29]. Therefore, this study intends to remove the cultural obstacles and discover the cultural knowledge crucial to foreign language education in China by following the three-dimensional lingualcultural theory after presenting an overview of the key concepts.

2. OVERVIEW OF LINGUACULTURE

It is pointed out that a few cultural dimensions are made salient in language teaching and learning [28]. The following section will exhibit a brief introduction to the three-dimensional of lingualcultural ideology and the reasons for its application.

First and foremost, the concept of linguaculture was initially invented by Friedrich [12] to refer to the experience in which vocabularies are fused and intermingled. Then the linguistic anthropologist Michael Agar [1] modified the term linguaculture into languaculture to align it with a more expansive application of the language which concentrates on its discoursal, local, and cultural implications, rather than merely including its pure linguistic knowledge such as phonological, morphological, and semantic information. By incorporating the cultural dimension into language education and combining sociolinguistics with cultural and social anthropology, Risager [28][29] introduces a transnational perspective to rethink the relationship between language and culture.

Under the realm of linguaculture, researchers' attention has been shifted from linguistic codes to the socially and culturally constructed "content or meaning

side of language" [29]. Expanding on Agar's [1] perception of languaculture accentuating the semantics and pragmatics of language, Risager broadened the concept by endowing two additional dimensions: "the poetics of language" and "the identity dimension of language" [29]. To illustrate, the semantic and pragmatic significance of a language is concerned with the interaction of consistency and variability in the literal and contextual potentials as well as the practices of particular languages in comparison to those of other languages [29]. Moreover, the poetics of language refers to multiple meanings developed through exploiting the interplay between form and content in a specific language, including a variety of rhymes, puns on the basis of the relationship between speech and writing, the syllabic patterns, the metrical stressed sounds, and so on [29]. Last but not least, language identity regards languages as a means of communicating values and customs, which further fosters group identity and solidarity within one linguistic community [29].

In order to encompass the entire spectrum of language culturality, the abovementioned three dimensions will be utilized to comprehensively explore the languaculture in the context of China's English-language education.

3. SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC DIMENSION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

As indicated in the example of a failed American-Korean conversation in Schenck and Choi's research [30], failures in semantics and pragmatics can be a substantial impediment to effective communication. Therefore, it is necessary to identify the particular semantic and pragmatic culture useful for establishing practical foreign language education.

Semantically, culture, which is inextricably intertwined with the embedded meanings in foreign language acquisition, is a conceptual system where certain expressions are conveyed with the specific cultural and historical connotations in a specific linguistic community [2]. With the evidence from the empirical study conducted by Cui [10], Chinses EFL learners may actively respond to certain vocabularies containing languacultural elements specified to their native cultural community while departing from the standards of native speakers of the target language. For instance, the color yellow in Chinese has long been associated with sexual, unhealthy, and criminal connotations, while no similar connection has been found evident in English [22]. As a result, it is acknowledged that L1 semantic ideology exerts a profound and mediating influence on the comprehension and production of L2 lexical resources [19], resulting incorrect linguistic features to become a permanent part of the perceived usage of a new language.

In this sense, learners are required to establish a semantic interpretation exclusive to absorb L2 lexical representations, which can be prevented from the negative influence of their mother tongue [23]. For this purpose, a systematic semantic framework can be utilized in English Language Teaching (ELT) in China so that the learners will be able to retrieve the appropriately employed vocabularies and phrases assembled in an identified theme in the native-like conversation or composition, thereby building up the links and relations between each unit of word information [32].

Pragmatic culture is referred to as "the communicative approach which elucidates the importance of how to make oneself understood in real-life situations" [34]. As a result, rather than focusing on linguistic forms such as grammar and phonology, the emphasis of pragmatic perspective is placed on the functionality of sensibly and realistically practical considerations. According to Boxer [4], an educational encounter is one of the three domains most significant to cross-cultural pragmatics. However, in the context of ELT in China, even the most linguistically advanced language learners were not always capable of using appropriate English in certain contexts, and they frequently misunderstand what could be counted as suitable responses in common settings [33]. One of the main reasons for this comprehending failure is intercultural conflicts where persons from different languacultural backgrounds may adhere to their own conventions and behaviors [35]. Besides, EFL learners are frequently misled by the so-called standard, and dogmatic linguistic forms learned in the formal class [35]. As stated by Hinkel [17], without pragmatic instruction on L2 conventional norms, learners would render it difficult to make practical decisions needed to optimize their communicative competence. Hence, pragmatic languacultural knowledge is supposed to be attached great importance to ELT in the classroom as well as in textbooks.

All in all, both semantics and pragmatics of the English language should be taught in class; otherwise, accurately mastering constancy and variability [29] of the foreign language will not be achieved, let alone the communicative competence required in the College English Curriculum Requirements [7].

4. POETIC DIMENSION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

By exploiting the phonology and syllables of a certain language, the poetic dimension of languaculture can be demonstrated, including literary poetics, style, literariness, and so forth [29]. It is pointed out that "the essence of a poetic text resides in its ability to perform intertextual, complex, and richly structured communicational situations in pragmatic, cultural, and social dimensions" [9]; therefore, this sector will take the

example of literature education in China's ELT to illustrate the role of poetic languaculture in foreign language education.

In higher education in China, heated disputes and contradictions have been aroused concerning the meaning and function of English literature courses. For example, the course is designed to improve students' foreign language proficiency, while many people would assume the artistic works for the class were created before the 19th century, the linguistic expressions of which are distinctively different from those of the current teaching resources. Also, if the goal is to improve literary appreciation, it is unreasonable to place a premium on memorizing the historical background, different genres, representative authors, and so forth [31]. However, both language and culture contained in the literary works should be concerned, as language conveys the cultural connotations while the languaculture elements can help students to understand literary statements comprehensively.

On the one hand, the fluid and flexible languages in literature are not constrained by fixed language forms, which allows learners to be exposed to a variety of language styles and expressions rather than the rigid and monotonous materials that are purposefully created or chosen for language education [6]. For advanced English learners, it is imperative to appreciate English rhetoric, poetic rhymes, and the like, which can be acquired through various genres of authentic literature materials. Therefore, literature plays a significant role in achieving effective intercultural communication by enabling foreign language learners to gain a penetrating insight into the characteristics of a certain time, social institutions, customs, and values [25].

On the other hand, languaculture can be a barrier to comprehending literary works. To be more specific, it is challenging to deeply understand the implications of the work and the author's writing intentions due to students' insufficient knowledge of fundamental social and historical information in that era. In addition, non-native speakers may also be prevented from comprehending works renowned for their profound literary abilities because of their inadequate language proficiency. For instance, not only the implicit metaphors, synecdoche, and metonymy but also the old English vocabularies which have already been discarded in modern English, including thee, thou, and hath, all hinder learners' grasp of language knowledge.

In summary, learning the poetic dimension of languaculture requires a more advanced command of the language, or it may become an obstacle. As a result, the poetry texts in foreign language education should be selected deliberately to help learners develop their languacultural intelligence to a higher level.

5. IDENTITY DIMENSION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

In the context of language education, identity can be defined as people's understanding of their relationship to the world and how they interpret the future possibilities through time and space [24]. In a wider sense, identity is concerned with the relationship between our sense of self and the awareness of the rest of the world [21]. As claimed by several researchers, foreign language study is intimately tied to concerns about the construction and transition of learners' identity [3].

Students often enter a general foreign language classroom with their own cultural and social identity, but they are also required to gain a penetrating insight into the foreign culture of the target language [11]. Besides, students are cognitively, emotionally, and physically engaged in the classroom, which significantly contributes to learners' formation of foreign language identity [11]. When people are exposed to different social cultures, their sense of identity is compromised and confused until a balance is found, at which point the transformative phase in the learner's identity occurs. This is of vital significance as it can either result in an unconfident foreign language learner or a well-balanced identity in the learner [11]. Meanwhile, language can be considered not only an effective way to express one's opinion but also a weapon to confront the socially created identity [11].

In comparison to the contexts where English is learned as a second language, the immediate learning environment in Chinese EFL classes plays an essential and indispensable part in the formation of learners' identity [18]. According to Gao, Li, and Li [13], Chinese foreign language learners often share a similar core identity, indicating that students uphold a consistent and unified attitude towards English learning and personal development, which further leads to their similar choices in learning situations and learning behaviors [13]. Also, Gao et al. [14] conducted another study examining how Chinese undergraduates' self-identity changes with English learning. Regarding the results, cultural identity was partially correlated with their English proficiency, as students with higher English proficiency are more likely to undergo cultural identity shifts [14].

In brief, the identity dimension of languaculture is crucial in foreign language education. For one thing, the classroom context not only impacts the construction and transformation of identity but also provides opportunities for language learners to challenge socially considered identities. For another, the identity of Chinese EFL students is to some extent dependent on English proficiency.

6. CONCLUSION

As the connection between language and culture has become increasingly recognized and explored, it is worth investigating the role of languaculture in foreign language education. In the context of EFL in China, this essay mainly digs into the three dimensions of languaculture proposed by Risager [26][27][28][29], including the semantic and pragmatic dimension, poetic dimension, and identity dimension. The study reveals that teaching semantics and pragmatics is crucial to realizing proper language usage, poetic texts can exert both positive and negative influence on ELT, and identity can be strongly established in terms of construction and transition.

However, there are two limitations to this article. For one thing, the Chinese ELT context included in this study mainly refers to those educational institutions at the tertiary level, as undergraduates all over the country acquire the foreign language through a standardized curriculum. Nevertheless, primary and secondary English education is overlooked because of the huge regional discrepancies. This may lead to an incomprehensive description of English education in China. Furthermore, due to the different educational policies and syllabuses for foreign language education, the findings produced from Chinese students may not be overgeneralized to students in other countries, even though they all belong to the expanding circle of English use. Thus, the two restrictions are expected to be overcome in the future studies by considering pupils in other phases of studying and in other places of the world.

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