

Research on Culture Differences and Language Teaching

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Abstract: This paper explains culture and cultural differences between China and western countries. Examples in communication caused by not knowing cultural differences are provided. The problems embody the importance of teaching culture. English must be taught with its culture. The approaches of introducing culture in English suggest language can be learned in culture and culture should be taught in language. Meanwhile teacher's knowledge of culture is emphasized.

Introduction

Learners of English sometimes can't express themselves in communication in some circumstance. It is certain that cultural difference is one of the factors to influence it. Different people speak different languages and different language is of different culture. When people are learning a second language, the target language is influenced by native language. Chinese culture is quite different from that of English-speaking countries, which is a big problem for Chinese learners. This paper reviews the cultural differences and mentions the ways to improve both English teaching and learning by introducing cultural knowledge in FLT.

Culture and Language Learning

A. Relationship between language and culture

Language is a unit of culture. It is also an important expression of culture. [1] With its rich connotation, it conveys great deal of cultural information. So the development and the spread of culture must have drawn the support from language. Language is also the outcome of culture. They influence each other. [2] The development of culture must have enriched language. After language came into being, the content of culture became more and more complicated with the development of society and the progress of science and technology. Meanwhile, language also became richer and richer, which could accurately pass the cultural information. [3] Different nations have different culture, history and customs, which are shown in the languages of different nations. If language is the product language, culture is the soil. If language is a fish, culture is water. Language is the carrier of culture. Culture provides the context for language. Without the support of culture, language is lifeless and meaningless. [4] In a word, language can't be separated from culture and the essential distinction of languages is the culture. As we know, English teaching is the teaching of language, so we can't teach English without letting the students know its culture. [5] In order to let the students learn and master English well, we can't separate English teaching from culture teaching.

B. Importance of culture in language teaching

There are two sets of rules in a language: grammatical rules and pragmatical rules. In real life communication, mistakes in language forms are usually forgivable. But if the speaker violates the pragmatical rules, ill feeling or communication breakdown might be the result. Rich culture knowledge is the prerequisite to a person's appropriate behavior in interaction. This implies that language teaching should aim to improve both learners language and culture knowledge.

Another important factor is that cultural knowledge helps to develop students' integrative motivation. It encourages their intellectual curiosity about the target language. The result of Gardner

and Lambert's research shows that "Learners with a higher integrative orientation are likely to achieve greater proficiency". (Littlewood, 1984)

Thirdly, cultural knowledge of the target language helps students to have a better understanding of their own culture. By comparing different cultures, their worldview is broadened. Gradually, they acquire the most valuable message of culture -- "while cultures may differ, people more or less share a common humanity." (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993). The tolerance of difference between target language culture and the source culture constitutes a very favorable factor in second language learning.

C. Goals of English culture acquisition

Since the native speak of any language has built into his language repertoire, his unique cultural assumptions and values, English culture acquisition should aim at some goals which, I think, should at least include the following in China: Firstly, English culture acquisition should aim at familiarizing EFL Learners with the mundane situations of the English speaking countries: their customs and habits, life-styles, generally accepted world outlook, etc. Secondly, English Culture acquisition should aim at enabling EFL learners to understand the interaction between language and such social variables as age, sex, race, social classes, and occupation, for these social variables affect the way people speak and behave. Thirdly, English culture acquisition should aim at cultivating the students' ability to evaluate the culture of the target country in an objective manner. In a word, the goal of intercultural communication studies is to help increase people's cross-cultural awareness so that fewer problems arise in their interaction with people of another culture.

Cultural Differences

A. Differences between vocabularies

When teaching new words, teachers often tell students directly the Chinese meaning of the words but seldom talk about the cultural implication of the words. Take "Lao" in Chinese for instance. The Chinese word "Lao" is often used when we want to show our respect to senior people, but in English we must be careful when we use the word "old" to talk with people. Once, while talking with an Australian woman who came to visit our school, a teacher of English said that many old people enjoyed doing morning exercises at the central park in the morning. The Australian asked immediately "What do you mean by old people?" The speaker realized the Australian was not young at all and she might not like the word "old". So he changed it into "senior". Then the Australian was satisfied. In English-speaking countries, people are proud of being young thus "old" means no use. But in Chinese, "Lao" has two quite different meanings, one means "aged, old" the other shows "respect, esteem". Therefore, we'd better avoid using "old" when we talk of senior people. Obviously the implication of the word in English culture is quite different from Chinese characters.

B. Differences between sentences

The difference between languages is also manifested with sentences. The contents of sentences between English and Chinese are sometimes different.

E.g. "Where are you going?"

"I am going to--"

In the past few years, if you can say such sentences in English write them down and know their meanings, it means that you have mastered them. In fact, the students don't know that in western countries such sentences are not used as we do in China. They even seldom use it. Because the sentence "Where are you going?" isn't completely equal to the Chinese sentence "你去哪里" when it is used. In China, when someone meets his acquaintances, we will say "Where are you going?" That is to say its function is a greeting instead of caring where you are going. It's the same as "Have you eaten?" in Chinese. We don't really care if you have had meals but just greet. However, in English the sentence, "Where are you going?" has no function of greeting, but interferes with others' privacy. In fact, these formulas are nothing more than a Chinese way of saying "Hello" or

“Hi”. They are often used in Chinese greeting while in the western culture they are not acceptable at all. It must be avoided in western countries for it is not polite. So saying out sentences correctly and knowing its meaning is not enough. It’s not equal to knowing its function.

C. Differences between ways of thinking

The attitude towards being praised is quite different between the Chinese and westerners. The Chinese consider modesty to be good virtue. Being praised, they often feel shy. For instance, in China when someone says “Your handwriting is very good.” They may answer, “No, I’m sorry, it’s bad.” The Chinese often say “No, no” When people pay them compliment or when they are offered something. While in the west, people consider self-confidence to be good virtue. Being praised, they will feel very happy to accept your flattery. If someone says “Your handwriting is very good.” A westerner will reply “Thank you very much.” When an American says “This is a beautiful skirt.” He expects you to say “I’m glad you like it.” He doesn’t expect you to tell him where you bought it and its price. This is the problem of the differences in the mode of thinking between the Chinese and the westerners but not the problem in grammar or vocabulary. These differences have great influence upon our smooth communication.

D. Difference between etiquettes

It is important to know about the different etiquettes in English language learning. If you know nothing about it, you can’t understand or use English correctly. Even it is the simplest everyday English. Its different cultural contents might be the obstacles of comprehension. “Yes” and “No” is the example. Generally speaking, if a Chinese is invited to a house for the first time, perhaps what he says isn’t really what he wants. When the host asks him, “Would you like some tea?” The Chinese guest will answer “No. Thank you.” But the Chinese hosts know it is just courtesy and will still make tea for the guests. On the contrary the American are quite different from the Chinese. They will frankly tell whether they would like to drink or not. For a Chinese who doesn’t know the culture of English-speaking countries, it will be amusing to communicate with them in the Chinese way. Once an American was invited to a Chinese family, he really didn’t want to drink, so he said in an American way. “No, thank you.” However, the Chinese thought it was courtesy and insisted making tea for him. According to American’s customs, since the host has made the tea, he had better drink it up. So the host kept making tea while the guest kept drinking. In the end he drank twelve glasses of tea! This example tells us that in order to understand someone’s language; we’d better first understand their etiquettes, which are influenced by circumstance of social culture.

There is no right or wrong about a culture. And cultural values are constantly changing as time goes on. One of the wonderful things about the world is the fact that there are different cultures. Cultural barrier is caused by cultural differences. These differences from the barrier are caused by cultural differences. If we only let the students recite some drills stiffly and apply some structures mechanically, the students may notice the correct form of the language, but neglect the content of the sentences. As a result, they can’t use the structure to communicate. In that case, even if the students can read the sentences of some grammar forms, perhaps they even can do some spoken and written exercises correctly, but in real life they can neither say nor listen, they can’t use them wrongly. Thus, we will miss the aim -- The ultimate of language teaching is to train the students to gain the communicative ability (Huang Jiuhua, 1996). This kind of teaching is a great failure.

Approaches of Introducing Culture

From what have been discussed previously, we can see language and culture can’t be separated. Language background, situation and content are closely related to culture. On the one hand language can be learned in culture; on the other hand culture should be taught through language.

A. Teaching culture through language

According to the aim to train students’ communicative competence, teachers should find out the cultural part that influences language transmission and teach it with language. Thus cultural knowledge enables students to learn language well and language along with culture is easier to understand.

a. In the teaching of phonetics and vocabulary

Some vowels often confuse students. While teaching, teachers may firstly teach them how to pronounce. Then ask them to imitate the sounds and train them with some practical passages. Finally, ask them to pick out the words containing these vowels from the passage and compare them. If students can pronounce them correctly, the teaching task may be finished. But because of some words related to the culture must be involved in the passage. Teachers may add some background knowledge in time.

While learning new words, students sometimes can't spell and remember words correctly. It is a good way to introduce the history origins, which may help students to remember and use words correctly. As an example, students often spell the words "breakfast" as "breskfirst" on account of its pronunciation. Teachers may explain that this word is compounded with two words "break" and "fast" (during daytime people can't eat or drink). The first meal breaking fast is certainly "breakfast". As a result students may find it interesting and never forget it. Actually a word or phrase has its own specific implication and stands for a specific conception in its own culture. For example, the Great Wall of China is described as a dragon. This is because the word dragon stands for noble, sacred, great and strong life in Chinese culture, whereas, in English it is the name of devil or a person who is fierce and brutal. Another word "dog" is a negative word in Chinese whereas in English it is a positive one. We may see "You lucky dog", "Love me love my dog", "Every dog has his day" in English. Yet it is quite different from Chinese. Hence in language teaching teachers can't teach language forms isolated. Forms must be taught with meanings as well as communicative functions.

It follows that this class will be successful both in phonetic, vocabulary and cultural teaching. Students should not only be taught the pronunciations and meanings, but also how to use words and where to use them.

b. In the teaching of texts

In text teaching, background knowledge must be supplied to help students to comprehend and remember texts. Besides, teachers may also use the knowledge that students have had to impress texts upon them. For example, while introducing the city New York, teachers may quote the words from the TV play "Beijing Native in New York". "If you like him, send him to New York where is the heaven. If you hate him, send him to New York where is the hell." It vividly describes New York as a big city full of chances and a place full of cheating and darkness as well. This will be of great help for students to learn texts efficiently.

c. In the teaching of situational conversation

Of all English teaching approaches, SSC (structural, situational, communicational approaches) may be the best way to improve students' communicative competence. Apart from daily expression in communication in textbook, teachers may create different kinds of situations for students to practise. By taking part in role-plays or doing such kinds of written exercises, students may get some information and dare to express themselves. The structural pattern with the explanation of the habits and cultural differences is a must for students to practise in suitable situation.

E.g.

A: You don't think movie tickets are expensive, do you?

B: Yes, I do. They are expensive.

In the Chinese response which means that "yes" should be "No, I don't think they are expensive." in English. If the Chinese response means "No", English must be "Yes, I think so." This is a quite different habit. Having such information in mind, students may be trained in patterns and try to understand them until they can use them freely.

B. Introducing Culture by Audio-visual Aids

"Teaching aids undoubtedly help to make the teaching of foreign languages more effective and efficient."(Liu Zouhuan, 1991) Cultural language environments help students to experience in a foreign atmosphere. Accordingly teachers may collect objects and pictures that display foreign arts, carving architectures and customs then show them to learners. Meanwhile, watching foreign films or TV programmes, students should be asked to observe what people eat and wear, what kind of houses they live in. They may see how people celebrate their holidays as well as their expressions

and gestures. As a case in point, in western countries, people usually embrace or kiss others to express congratulation or comfort. However, Chinese just shake others' hands to show such feelings. Furthermore, during obsequies westerners are in black to show a solemn occasion; in China people are in white to express their feelings of the thinking of the dead. By contrast in western countries a bride would wear a white robe in wedding, which implies innocence and purity. A Chinese bride usually wears a red dress, suggesting luck and happiness. Such interesting comparison will help understand the culture of English-speaking countries and avoid prejudice of cultural differences.

C. Comparing differences and seeking similarities

In FLT, teachers should deal with the main differences between Chinese and English and the language forms used in daily communication. This may help students to improve their communication competence actively. Conclusion of taboo may be drawn in four words: "I, WARM, where, meal." "I" stands for income, "W" stands for weight, "A" for age, "R" for religion, "M" for marriage. Therefore one should never ask for age, weigh religion, income and marriage. Neither does he or she ask such questions as "Where are you going?" "Have you had dinner yet?". If attentions are paid in these areas, learners won't offend a foreigner when they talk with him or her.

Although we often emphasize the differences between native and target language and the influences on language in FLT, there are some similarities, for they are both of the same culture of human being. So it is with culture and language. In FLT teachers should distinct the differences between native and target language, at the same time they should lead learners to pay attention to similarities. Only in this way can we lighten the study burden on students and make them learn English efficiently. One example is that both Chinese and English have the same basic structure, that is, S+V+O. Another is that some semantic structures are almost the same, especially in idioms.

E.g. bad egg/坏蛋; lose face/丢脸; empty talk/空谈; gold rule/金科玉律

As we see, culture is the root of language. The coincidence of language is that of the basic way of thinking and living of human being. Also it is the coincidence of basic culture. Knowing learners may find a short cut to learn a foreign language well.

Conclusion

Having analyzed the problems in communication because of the lack of cultural knowledge, I put forward some proposals to introduce culture in FLT in a limited range. To sum up, in FLT teachers should let learners not only pay attention to cultural differences but also try to understand and study the differences to avoid misunderstanding in communication. It is necessary for students to teach directly and overcome the obstacles produced by cultural differences. Above all, teachers should accumulate their knowledge concerning in English teaching.

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