

Cultivation of College Students' Intercultural Communication Competence

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Abstract—Intercultural communication competence serves as an essential part of one's language competence. In order to improve students' intercultural competence, things can be done in the following four aspects: renewing teachers' education philosophies, compiling and selection of appropriate textbooks, wide use of multi-media devices and introduction of intercultural practices and activities. In the meanwhile, teachers have to take the responsibility to help students to strengthen their abilities of autonomous learning to cultivate their intercultural communication competence.

Keywords—*intercultural communication competence; education philosophies; textbooks; multi-media; cross-cultural practices*

I. INTRODUCTION

Foreign language teaching can never focus on language system itself only; instead, it is supposed to include relevant background knowledge about the language. Only when students have access to language practices outside the language itself, can they master the language in a comprehensive way and can they communicate with foreigners under certain pragmatic principles. Therefore, developing students' intercultural competence by means of teaching them socio-cultural aspects of language and raising students' intercultural awareness should become a significant dimension in foreign language teaching.

With the globalization of the world economy, intercultural communication between China and other countries in all fields is becoming increasingly frequent. Under these circumstances, the modern society and enterprises have made higher demands for graduates' English communication abilities and intercultural communication competence is widely accepted as a necessity in people's daily life and professional arena [1]. College English Curriculum Requirements issued in September of 2007 clearly specifies that intercultural communication is an important aspect of college English teaching and that the objective of college English teaching has to stress more on students' abilities to communicate across cultures to meet the demands for the society's expectations for students' intercultural competence in the modern world.

The present paper analyzes college students' lack of intercultural communication competence in great detail, and points out the necessity and significance of teaching

intercultural knowledge in classroom college English teaching and learning. After that, it proposes several ways to highlight the teaching of cultural knowledge. By so doing, concrete measures are proposed to improve students' intercultural communication awareness and competence.

II. RECONSIDERATION OF "INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION"

Offering intercultural education to people within a country, a region or a nationality helps to eliminate one's cultural individualism to some degree. It promotes the sensitivity and understanding of other cultures, further pushing communication and interaction in areas of politics, economics, social affairs and cultures forward [2].

A. Definition of "Intercultural Communication"

In 1980, after World Culture Policies Conference" in the United States, UNESCO launched "A decade for World Cultures", initiating intercultural education. In 1992, international education conference of UNESCO issued Contributions of Education to Cultural Development. The document proposed the concept of intercultural education systematically and organized a series of intercultural practices, putting forward an array of methods to carry out intercultural education.

Contributions of Education to Cultural Development first defined "cultural education" and then explained interculturality, intercultural education and multicultural education. The document pointed out that cultural education should include "the admission of equal dignity of different cultures and the indispensable connection between cultural relics and modern culture", and intercultural/multicultural education [3].

Interculturality/multiculturalism means the knowledge and understanding of different cultures, exchanges of sub-cultures within a country, and positive communication between different cultures in the world. In the modern world, all countries are facing multiculturalism to some extent; therefore, intercultural/multicultural education has to "promote the mutual respect, understanding and enrichment of multiculturalism", "promote the respect of cultural diversity and respect of cultures from different ethnics", "enhance international understanding and encourage campaigns against activities undermining international understanding", and "aim to appreciate global cultures" [4]. The document presents the

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connotation of intercultural education from three successive aspects of cultural education, interculturality and intercultural education in a broad sense.

More specifically, intercultural communication refers to the communication between “people (senders and receivers of information) with diverse cultural backgrounds”; from the perspective of psychology, the communication realized by people with information coding and decoding from different cultural backgrounds should be taken as intercultural communication. Language is the carrier of culture, but a sound mastery of pure language knowledge does not necessarily guarantee one’s familiarity of relevant intercultural knowledge, not to mention the acquisition of intercultural communication competence. In other words, language learning should involve how to develop learners’ intercultural communication competence. Prof. Wen Qiufang has proposed that intercultural communication competence is composed of two aspects: communication competence and intercultural competence; communication competence deals with language competence (including both grammatical abilities and textual abilities), pragmatic competence and strategic competence (including both compensation abilities and negotiation abilities) while intercultural competence consists of sensibility to cultural differences, tolerance to cultural divergence and flexibility to settle cultural differences [5].

Intercultural awareness includes thinking modes, behavior patterns and emotional and personalized features with specific cultural traits as well as systematic culture knowledge. Culture is the integration of spiritual life and material life in the society: it consists of both the present and the past, both the subjective and the objective, and both represented in advanced intellectual activities and common lifestyles and behaviors of common people. Thus, both the construction of students’ structural cultural knowledge system (such as historical development, social constitutions, lifestyles and customs, taboos and so forth of English-speaking countries) and the cultivation of students’ thinking abilities, action abilities, emotions and personalities should be highlighted in the process of fostering students’ intercultural communication competence [6]. Undoubtedly, students’ objective culture knowledge is indispensable to the successful implementation of their intercultural communication. However, when faced with concrete intercultural communication situations, students can hardly realize successful communication with generalized cultural traits and behaviors specifications.

B. Current Situation and Objectives

From both theoretical and practical perspectives, intercultural education in China has not yet attracted its deserved attention. Currently, relevant theoretical research is still in its initial stage, lacking clarity, systematicness and theorization [7]. In practice, the significance of intercultural education is unknown to school authorities; thus, intercultural education is largely neglected and courses in this field are rarely seen. Even when some universities have realized the importance of intercultural education, no definite policies and forceful guidelines have been proposed to guarantee the implementation of the practice.

Intercultural education works to eliminate cultural barriers, respect different cultures, respect individual differences and the concept of human rights, to promote the equality in right allocation among different ethnics, and to endow people chances to pursue different lifestyles. In more specific terms, intercultural education firstly has to cultivate students’ openness and enable them to listen to different opinions and viewpoints, to tolerate different views, to understand value systems in different cultures, to tap one’s own potentials to create something new and to foster intercultural operational competence of one’s own [8].

III. WAYS TO CULTIVATE STUDENTS’ INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

Teaching culture knowledge is considered as a fundamental part of college English teaching and learning; at the same time, it represents students’ continuous learning abilities in English learning. Once language knowledge and culture are combined together in college English classrooms, students can gain many opportunities to better reflect on their own culture, to acquaint themselves with new cultures and to clarify how people respond to cultural diversity. Following steps can be made to cultivate students’ intercultural communication competence in a systematic way.

A. Renewing Teachers’ Education Philosophies

Due to historical reasons, current college English teachers are cultivated to master knowledge of English language instead of professionals familiar with diverse cultural groups with intercultural visions. As a result, these teachers themselves lack intercultural education awareness, bearing in mind that English education is supposed to focus on the teaching of English language knowledge, history commonsense and customs; they fail to realize that the core of English education is to form a mindset for students to understand English culture, to eliminate cultural barriers and cultivate their correct cultural awareness [9].

College English teachers have to renew their teaching philosophies and include the teaching objective of cultivating students’ intercultural concept into their curriculum. Teachers have to realize the cultural and social significance of cultural education and develop students’ understanding of cultural diversity and respect for cultural differences in both classroom settings and practical settings.

B. Taking Full Advantage of Textbooks to Tap Culture Information

Currently, texts in mainstream English textbooks in China originate from influential media from native English-speaking countries, embedding plentiful culture information that mirrors social realities in today’s western world. In dealing with these texts, teachers should not only analyze and interpret the overall structure, writing skills and linguistic features of these texts, but also should lay enough emphasis on cultural knowledge hidden in the texts. Lecturing and discussion can be arranged based on students’ needs and interests to help students understand relevant cultural connotations between the lines.

Take the text of Five Famous Symbols of American Culture in Unit Four of the New Horizontal College English (Book 3) for example. The passage, served as a green channel is overwhelmed with cultural knowledge that elaborates many aspects of American history, life, art, politics and diplomacy of Americans. Before teaching the passage, teachers should collect adequate information about five famous cultural symbols in America (statue of liberty, Barbie, American Gothicism, Buffalo Nickel and Uncle Sam). During the class teaching, teachers can transmit the cultural knowledge by means of discussion and lectures. Such a method cannot only facilitate students' understanding of the connotation of America, but also motivate students to learn English with keen interest. And present English textbooks are paying growing attention to cultural tips which we can make the best of in English teaching and learning.

C. Taking Full Advantage of Multimedia to Analyze Cultural Differences

Although students in general know the sharp differences between Chinese and western culture, students tend to carry out intercultural communication with the help of traditional Chinese cultural knowledge and customs because of their inadequate understanding of target language and culture. Under such circumstances, failures in intercultural communication are likely to occur, even leaving foreigners negative impressions. In order to solve the problem, teachers should both analyze cultural connotations in texts and spread western customs with multimedia to lead students to compare and discuss cultural diversity between China and the west. In this way, not only students' language cultural awareness, but also students' analysis abilities can be well cultivated to felicitate their comprehensive development.

Multimedia devices are commonly used in current college English teaching and learning. College English teachers can take advantages of videos to play original foreign movies during breaks to raise students' intercultural communication abilities effectively. For example, in the comedy movie *Just for Luck*, the director explains and demonstrates symbols of luck and misfortunes in current American social life in great detail. Students can have a better understanding of western culture while enjoying the movie with ease and delight.

D. Encouraging Students to Carry out Intercultural Communication Practice

As language learning needs great amounts of practice, it also requires adequate practice to raise intercultural communication competence. After culture input, teachers should encourage students to communicate with native English speakers by all means to put the knowledge acquired to intercultural communication practice to promote their practice abilities.

In the process of learning English as a foreign language, intercultural practice is relatively inadequate. But as long as teachers can play the role of guides and students can participate positively, there are still a lot of opportunities for practice. In the first place, teachers can encourage students to take part in English corner activities and English saloons to raise oral

communication awareness and abilities to establish a sound atmosphere for English cultural exchange. Secondly, teachers can encourage students to volunteer in some large-scaled international activities to gain opportunities to communicate with foreigners directly. Last but not the least, teachers can organize seminars to create occasions for students and foreign teachers to talk together. By so doing, an intercultural communication atmosphere can be created to facilitate students' acquisition of cultural tips in other languages and cultures.

Besides classroom activities, various extracurricular activities can also be organized to offer students more opportunities for intercultural communication practice [10]. Generally, extracurricular activities have quite a few advantages: flexible timing, little reliance on sites, rich contents and forms and meeting students' different demands. Although flexibility features extracurricular activities, teachers should also manage these activities to make the best of them.

First of all, in the aspect of activity contents, teachers can add more culture knowledge to enrich multicultural atmosphere. Because of the complexity of culture, the contents should involve history, traditions, customs, geographic conditions, weather patterns, politics, economic situations, social organizations, religious beliefs, value systems and so forth. Of course, pragmatic studies on different languages should also be conducted, including contrastive textual analysis, comparison of language elements, and analysis of communication cases. In general, teaching content should include both national features and highlight regional and individual differences.

With the measures above, teachers can help students construct an intercultural communication knowledge system to enable them to enjoy the cultural essence of English speaking countries, to raise students' intercultural awareness, to achieve mutual understanding, to explore cultural differences between cultures and to design appropriate intercultural communication strategies. This is of crucial significance in cultivating students' intercultural awareness and intercultural communication competence.

IV. SUMMARY

Cultivation of intercultural communication competence is a long process, during which teachers are supposed to guide students positively to acquire the knowledge required and to raise intercultural communication competence in practice. The objective of intercultural education is to guide students to form intercultural perspectives, to understand and respect different cultures and to achieve integration of multiculturalism. Only when college English teachers have obtained the understanding of the connotations and essence of intercultural education and put the intercultural awareness into their teaching practice, can they cultivate students with desired intercultural communication competence. Equipped with intercultural knowledge, graduates today can better cope with chances and challenges brought about in the era of globalization.

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