

# **A Study on the Application of Cultural Equivalence in English Teaching in China**

**Zhou Yongying**

Xingzhi College of Xi'an University of Economics and Finance, Xi'an, China

samuelzhou@qq.com

**Keywords:** English teaching; culture equivalence; teaching strategy

**Abstract:** The objective of the paper is mainly to illustrate the application of cultural equivalence in English teaching in China. Cultural equivalence, derived from Nida's functional equivalence, requires good recognition of both Chinese and English culture in English teaching. Cultural equivalence indicates the Chinese culture is of equal importance with that of English-speaking countries when Chinese students learn English as a foreign language. And for Chinese cross-cultural learners, some effective teaching strategies can be employed in English teaching according to the cultural equivalence principle.

## **1. English teaching and cultural equivalence**

Language vividly and colorfully describes culture and reflects the connotation of culture. Culture, which is the carrier of language, endows language with rich and distinct features. Language is the symbol of culture, and they jointly inherit a certain regional civilization. As a bridge between different cultures, foreign language learning plays a role of communication, and appreciation. It is necessary for foreign language learners to understand the different cultural backgrounds between native language and a foreign language. To make the cultural connotation understood, teachers should act as greeters of the foreign language and its cultural.

Functional equivalence theory, proposed by Eugene Nida, emphasizes that translation is an interaction between one language and another, and that the aim of functional equivalence is that the target language can be fully understood by the recipient and the recipient shares the same response with the reader of source language. In a certain sense, the translated message can be divided into two levels one of which is the language itself and the other is the culture carried by the language. Therefore, the information transmission across languages is, in a sense, reflected in its cultural transmission. In English teaching, the functional equivalence can be embodied in the equivalence between language learners' native culture and the culture of English-speaking countries, that is, language learners should penetrate English learning with both the native culture and the English culture. Teachers should focus on the ability of empathy among different cultures and abilities of coordination and adaptation to different cultures in view of cultural equivalence.

## **2. The cultural inequivalence in English teaching**

### **2.1 Cultural deficiency and imbalance**

China's national conditions call for the output of Chinese culture of the new generation of intellectuals. Under the current educational system, most of Chinese students are incompetent to turn the Chinese culture into English though they have a strong sense of Chinese culture. In contrast, teachers generally give little introduction to the cultural background, customs, ways of thinking, expression habits and other aspects of English-speaking countries, and thus students' understanding of English context is superficial. Totally speaking, culture teaching of both China and English-speaking countries are so deficient that English teaching in China has been considered as teaching of English phonetic alphabet, vocabulary and grammar.

On the other hand, in English teaching, Chinese culture is unbalanced with the English one. In

the college where the author works, the students are using New Horizon College English Book published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. There are 32 units in the third edition of reading and writing textbooks, whose the texts has no relevance to Chinese culture and fill with the contents based on background of western centuries. What is only related to the Chinese culture is Chinese-English translation in the exercise section.

The author distributed 100 questionnaires to the freshmen and sophomore in my college, and 87 valid questionnaires were taken back with an effective ratio of 87%. The results showed that only 15% of the respondents recognized the relationship between language and culture 79% of the respondents believed that the cultural differences between China and the western counties interfere with English learning. Only 7% of the respondents were able to express "the belt and road", "Confucianism" and other Chinese culturally-specific words as well as some traditional Chinese festivals in English.

## **2.2 Reasons for cultural inequivalence**

In English teaching, cultural deficiency and imbalance mainly falls into some reasons. Firstly, teachers, to some extent, focus only on promoting students' scores in examinations, like College Entrance Examination or College English Test Band 4 and Band 6. In fact, culture teaching is excluded from English teaching in most cases since culture teaching is not set into the teaching objectives. However, the true objectives of English teaching in China should be teaching students how to listen, speak, read and write in English. Due to such objectives, it is vitally important to help students communicate effectively in the future life. Du Ruiqing believes that students should not only pay attention to the perception and experience of European and American culture, but also understand and get acquainted with the essence of the culture of their mother tongue in the process of English learning. Secondly, in China English teachers lack the necessary cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries and do not attach importance to integrating the cultural knowledge of their mother tongue. In traditional English teaching, teachers generally pay attention to the teaching of language knowledge, which is only limited to the text in hand. In English class teacher rarely talk about the matters of China, nor do they refer to Chinese culture.

## **3. Teaching strategies**

### **3.1 Enhancing teachers' cultural literacy**

The cultural literacy of teachers determines the breadth and depth of cultural knowledge taught in class. English teachers should not only be the teachers of English knowledge, but also the inheritors of cultures. The cultural equivalence demands not only spreading English culture to Chinese students, but also cultivating their Chinese cultural literacy. Teachers should have awareness of cross-cultural communication and familiarity with English and Chinese culture. Moreover, in the process of teaching and practice, English teachers should strengthen students' sense of belongingness towards Chinese culture. Teachers should make every effort to interpret and contrast Chinese and English culture through the analysis of the contents of the text to enable students to avoid the culture shock and make a successful cross-cultural communication.

### **3.2 Establishing the concept of cultural equivalence**

Pavlov believes that mother tongue was the original second signal system, and learning a foreign language is to set up a new second signal system based on the original one, that is, learning a foreign language must rely on the mother tongue. The influence of mother tongue on the foreign language learning is mainly reflected in the process of "transfer" between the native language and the foreign language. People always magnify the negative effects of this process of "transfer", while the positive effects of the culture of the native language are largely neglected. With the profound economic globalization and social integration, English teaching tends to introduce the outside world about Chinese civilization and development rather than only absorb the western science and technology and management experience into China. Therefore, teachers and students should

establish the concept of equality between Chinese culture and the western one. For this, there is an example. China and the UK has a long history of drinking tea. Teachers can form a comparison of tea culture between the two countries, making students to find out the social and historic factors beneath the different tea cultures. After checking and consulting, students greatly expand the knowledge of some related background. Besides, some words and expressions concerning tea culture can be kept in their mind.

### **3.3 Updating teaching materials and corpus**

The teaching material is one of the decisive factors in English teaching. On the premise of cultural equivalence, different teaching materials should be scaled for the reasonable purpose. The proportion should be adjusted and distributed according to students' cognitive level and learning stage. The long history of China provides an indispensable cultural corpus. It is more conducive for students' cross-cultural communication because of the conflicts and intermingling between Chinese and western cultures. Macroscopically, words and idioms are the source of the cultural connotations. Word is the basic unit of a language. To grasp the connotation and meaning of a word can help students better understand the cultural characteristics. For example, colors express different connotations in Chinese and English culture, reflecting the difference of historical and national conditions of the two countries. Microscopically, Teaching materials and corpus with different cultural backgrounds can help students comprehensively improve their cognitive and communicative competence.

### **3.4 Expanding extracurricular cultural activities.**

Despite of limited class time, English teaching can be implemented out of class. Extracurricular activities can be carried out on several occasions: first, some regular thematic activities, such as the English Speech Contest of Chinese culture, etc. Second, by celebrating traditional Chinese and western festivals, students can understand the similarities and differences between Chinese and western cultures. Third, students are encouraged to read English books on Chinese history and culture and develop their own interests in culture.

### **3.5 Amending the teaching evaluation system**

Curriculum evaluation system is the baton of teaching. Teachers evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of English teaching in the form of results-oriented evaluation and process-oriented evaluation according to the actual situation. Tests are to be designed to examine the students' English language and their understanding of the cultural knowledge. Meanwhile, the assessment of teachers should be conducted based on the all-round teaching quality and teachers' cultural literacy.

## **4. Conclusion**

To adapt to the coexistence of diverse cultures, both teachers and students tap their own potential, develop creativity in English teaching. Therefore, it is significant to grasp the two-way input and output of Chinese and English cultures in English teaching. Intercultural communication is a two-way street. Emphasizing one culture and ignoring the other culture will undoubtedly bring obstacles to communication. Only when culture teaching comes into English class and the two cultures respect and interact with each other will the satisfactory goal be achieved in English teaching.

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