

Culture Differences and English Teaching

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Abstract

Language is a part of culture, and plays a very important role in the development of the culture. Some sociologists consider it as the keystone of culture. They believe, without language, culture would not be available. At the same time, language is influenced and shaped by culture, it reflects culture. Therefore, culture plays a very important part in language teaching, which is widely acknowledged by English teaching circle. This thesis depicts the relationship between culture and language. As a result, the gap of cultural differences is one of the most important barriers in English teaching and study. Among the students, lacking of cultural background knowledge can, to a great extent, hold up the improvement of English teaching and become a noticeable problem. At present, the objective of English teaching has broken free from the traditional listening, speaking, reading and writing, and the demand for cultural background knowledge in language learning has been gradually concerned. Presentation of history of the country which has the target language, cultural background knowledge and customs is the proposed solution to the problem. This paper mainly discusses how to present cultural background knowledge and expose learners to it in the need of English teaching at Chinese schools so as to solve the problems caused by cultural differences, help learners grasp the crux of the language and develop their comprehensive English ability.

Keywords: Cultural background knowledge, Cultural differences, English teaching

1. Introduction

The linguist Robert Lado defines the goal of learning a foreign language as “the ability to use it, understanding its meanings and connotations in terms of the target language and culture, and the ability to understand the speech and writing of natives of the target culture in terms of their great ideas and achievement” (Lado, 1964: 25) Therefore, the English teaching inevitably involves the culture teaching of target language.

With China’s open-up policy and entry in WTO, how to lay a solid foundation for cultivating learners becomes an important objective in teaching English as a foreign language. In traditional teaching, though students master the pronunciation, grammar, vocabularies and a lot of skills about listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, they still can not be said to fully understand and master English. English, as a foreign language, is the unity of the language itself and culture. One purpose of English teaching is to develop learners’ awareness of cultural differences reflected in languages. The teacher must help learners to realize that thoughts and views of different nationalities and different types of societies about nature and human society are quite different. Therefore, it is of great importance to take for cultural background knowledge as one of the contents in the whole process of English teaching so as to help students to have a good command of necessary cultural background knowledge and to develop their comprehensive English ability. Though culture instruction may not be new to most English teachers in an examination-oriented environment in China, the research and practice of English teaching in China still have a long way to go before they reach satisfactory results.

This paper, therefore, aims to present what most actual practice in the classroom are needed to be clarified before anything can be done to improve future practice.

There are three major parts in the paper: firstly, it is the literature review, which consists of the relation of culture and teaching, traditional and current situation of English teaching in China. Secondly, the extent to how to present cultural background knowledge and expose learners to it in the need of English teaching so as to help learners grasp the crux of the language and develop their comprehensive English ability, followed by the introduction of some of such techniques. Finally the model of classroom practices was proposed by the teaching culture.

2. English Teaching in China

2.1 Traditional English Teaching in China

In traditional English teaching in China, English is considered as a sequence of phonetics, grammar and vocabulary, neglecting cultural knowledge input. This usually causes cultural breakdowns. As communication between China

and western countries is becoming closer, cultural factors should be paid enough attention.

2.2 Current English Teaching in China

China boasts the world's biggest population of English learners. The English course has been one of the most important compulsory subjects in China from primary schools to universities.

We should get rid of traditional teaching methods, and introduce more culture background knowledge. It is impossible to introduce all knowledge of British and American culture even by all kinds of approaches of culture introduction. In English teaching, teachers should take one step at a time to impart cultural knowledge from the shallower to the deeper, from the easier to the more advanced. Approaches of cultural introduction in English teaching, of course, can be varied. Any approach, which accelerates students to grasp the knowledge of English – the language itself - and culture so as to improve their comprehensive English capability, should be adopted.

3. Culture Differences between China and America

3.1 Culture

What's culture? There are many definitions of culture. "Culture is a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors and artifacts that the members of a society use to cope with. Their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning"; "Culture consists of all the shared products of human society" (Robertson1981:67). This means not only such visible things as cities, organizations and schools, but also non-material things such as ideas, customs, family patterns, languages. To simplify, culture refers to the entire way of life of a society, "the ways of a people."

3.2 Typical Culture in China

Traditional Chinese culture has varied gradually over a long historical period into a form of national spirit manifested in group loyalty. It expresses itself in the modes of thinking and behavior, in the national temperament and in other aspects of culture still perceptibly influential today. Generally speaking, the traditional Chinese culture values can be summed up as follows: Collectivism, Harmony, Hierarchy, Humility and Courtesy.

3.2.1 Collectivism and Harmony

A key belief of people in collectivist cultures is that the smallest unit of survival is the collective or group (Zhang2003:54). Chinese culture is characterized as being collectivism orientated. The basic unit is the family (collective), not the individual. It is sometimes referred to as a collective or group culture. Filial piety is one of the principal virtues counseled by Confucius; this is not an abstraction but one that manifests itself daily by children and adults demonstrating their obedience and solicitousness towards their parents and solicitous of their welfare. Family support is rated highly by all.

Family support necessitates cooperation with others. Therefore, harmony is highly valued and conflicts are avoided. Competition is not encouraged. One important way to achieve harmony is to accept and respect each person's need to preserve face.

3.2.2 Hierarchy and Humility

Another key characteristic of Chinese culture is hierarchy. People have to accept their social position both family and society in order to achieve social harmony. Confucius wrote "Let the emperor be an emperor, the subject a subject, the father a father, and the son a son". This implies that within the family as within the nation, people were not equal. He acknowledged inequality because in his view, the obligations between higher and lower orders in society worked in both directions. Each had a duty towards the other. Throughout Chinese history people have shown respect for seniority, rank, age and family with a hierarchical perspective.

3.2.3 Courtesy/Good Manners

As harmony is desired in a hierarchical society, courtesy has always played a key role in Chinese culture when interacting with people. Humility manifests itself in daily life, and often without our awareness. It often takes the form of self-disparagement.

3.3 Typical Culture in America

American culture has been viewed as "cultural pluralism". Throughout American history there has been diversity shown by the cultures of the differing Native American tribes, Spanish settlers in the south-west and Florida, African slaves, French traders and British colonialists. Over two hundred years, immigration has increased that diversification. The American culture is often referred to as an individualistic culture where individuals subordinate the goals of collectives to their personal goals. Six core values or beliefs have evolved as traditional American values: freedom of the individual, self-reliance, equality of opportunity, competition, the desire for material wealth

and hard work.

3.3.1 Individual Freedom and Self-Reliance

Due to limitation of the power of Government, Church and absence of Aristocracy, the early settlers created a climate of freedom with emphasis on the individual. The new independent United States (post 1776) instilled the concept of individual freedom, probably the most basic of American values. A key belief of people in individualistic cultures is that the smallest unit of survival is the individual. American culture is sometimes referred to as the “I” culture since it is the individual rather than the group which is emphasized.

Freedom for Americans means the right of all individuals to control their own destiny without outside interference from government, a ruling class, church or other organized authority. A price is however paid for individual freedom: self-reliance. This often means achieving financial and emotional independence from parents at the earliest time possible. The need to “stand on their own feet” is considered a priority.

3.3.2 Equality of Opportunity and Competition

President Lincoln expressed the value of “equality of opportunity”. Americans understand this as the right to have equal chance for success in life but not that everyone is or should be equal. They see life as a race for success. Equality means that everyone should have an equal chance to enter the race and win.

If life is seen as a race, then a person must run it in order to succeed. A person must compete with others. This is the price paid for equality of opportunity. It is expected that everyone should attempt to be successful. Americans match their intelligence against that of their neighbors in a competitive contest for success. The successful people are considered as winners. Competition and the desire to win are considered healthy and desirable.

3.3.3 Material Wealth and Hard Work

Material wealth is probably the most widely accepted measure of social status in America. Rejection of European class structure and the adoption of a more classless society saw the emergence of a substitute for judging social status. The quantity and quality of an individual material wealth became that substitute. However Americans pay a price for this: hard work. The land and other rich natural resources were exploited by hard work as was the industrialization of America. The wealth generated was and is still converted into material possessions and a high standard of living. Hard work has rewarded a lot. Material possessions are the tangible evidence of this.

4. Problems Aroused by Culture Differences

4.1 Some Communication Problems Caused by Culture Differences

Because of cultural differences mentioned above, misunderstandings may arise, although the language used in communication may be faultless. The same words or expressions may not mean the same thing to different peoples. Here is an example which is just like a joke:

Once an American visited a Chinese home, as the visitor saw the host’s wife, he said: “Your wife is very beautiful.” The host smiled and said: “Where? Where?” - which caused the American’s surprise, but still he answered: “Eyes, hair, nose, everywhere, everywhere...” - an answer that the host found a bit puzzle. The surprise was caused by different cultures. “Where? Where?” meaning “Nali! Nali!” in Chinese is a kind of humble saying. But the American understood it as “Which parts of the body are beautiful?” So, the reason for both sides’ misunderstandings was differences in customs and habits. Each was expressing and understanding what the other said according to his or her culture.

As a matter of fact, events like these are fairly common when people of different languages and cultures communicate because cultures differ from one another and each culture is unique. Learning English well means more than merely mastering the pronunciation, grammar, words and idioms, it means learning also to see the world as native speakers see it, learning the ways in which their language reflects the ideas, customs, and behavior of their society, learning to understand their “language of the mind”.

4.2 Problems in English Teaching and Material Caused by Culture Differences

Learning a language, in fact, is inseparable from learning its culture.

However, culture hasn’t been given enough care in our teaching for a long time. Although many students have acquired enough knowledge, they often make mistakes in application of language to real life, because our teaching and teaching materials attach importance to language forms but ignore the social meanings and language application in reality. We can see the following dialogues in many textbooks:

1. A: What’s your name?

B: My name is Li Hong.

A: How old are you?

B: I'm twenty.

2. A: Where are you going?

B: I'm going to the library.

3. A: Are you writing a letter to your parents?

B: Yes, I am.

A: How often do you write to your parents?

B: About once a week.

All the above dialogues are roughly the combination of Chinese thinking and English form. Although such forms are correct, they are not appropriate. Except for hospitals, immigration offices and such places, it's unimaginable for someone to ask a string of questions like: "What's your name?" "How old are you?" The natural reaction of English-speaking people to the greetings like: "Where are you going?" would mostly likely be "Why do you ask?" or "It's none of your business." Questions like "Are you writing to your parents?" would be thought to intrude on one's privacy. Our teaching materials, teachers sometimes don't pay enough attention to differences between cultures, so students are usually ignorant of the factor of culture and they can only mechanically copy what they have learned.

5. Importance of Cultural Background Knowledge in Language Teaching

So in English teaching, we should not only pass on knowledge and train learners' competence of utilizing language, but also enhance teaching relative cultural background knowledge.

5.1 Necessity of Cultural Background Knowledge in Aural Comprehension

In teaching of aural comprehension, we find many students complain that much time has been spent in listening, but little achievement has been acquired. What is the reason? On the one hand, maybe some students' English is very poor and the material is rather difficult; On the other hand, a more important reason is that they are unfamiliar with cultural background of the USA and England. Aural comprehension, which is closely related to the knowledge of American and British culture, politics and economy, in fact, is an examination of one's comprehensive competence which includes one's English level, range of knowledge, competence of analysis and imaginative power.

Maybe we have this experience: when we listen to something familiar to us, no matter what is concerned, usually we are easy to understand. Even if there are some new words in the material, we are able to guess their meanings according to its context. However, when we encounter some unfamiliar material or something closely related to cultural background, we may feel rather difficult. Even if the material is easy, we only know the literal meaning, but can't understand the connotation, because we lack knowledge of cultural background.

Here is a sentence from a report: "The path to November is uphill all the way." "November" literally means "the eleventh month of year". But here refers to "the Presidential election to be held in November". Another example is "red-letter days"—which is a simple phrase and is easy to hear, meaning holidays such as Christmas and other special and important days. But students are often unable to understand them without teacher's explanation.

In view of this, the introduction of cultural background is necessary in the teaching of English listening.

5.2 Necessity of Cultural Background Knowledge in Oral Comprehension

Likewise, speaking is not merely concerned with pronunciation and intonation. Students can only improve their oral English and reach the aim of communication by means of enormous reading, mastering rich language material and acquaintance of western culture. Therefore, in oral training, teachers should lay stress on factuality of language and adopt some material approaching to daily life, such as daily dialogues with tape, magazines, newspapers and report etc., because the material is from real life, and it helps students to be well acquainted with standard pronunciation and intonation, to speak English appropriate to the occasion, to understand western way of life and customs etc. Otherwise, misunderstanding and displeasure are inevitably aroused. Let's look at some examples.

Many fixed English ways of expression cannot be changed randomly. For example, the answer to "How do you do?" is "How do you do?" When asking price, people usually say, "How much, please?" instead of: "How much do you charge me? Or "How much do I owe you"; when paying bill, "Waiter, bill please." Instead of "Excuse me, sir. We're finished eating. How much is it, please?" When asking the other one's name on the telephone, "Who's speaking, please?" or "Who is it, please?" instead of "Who are you?" "Where are you?" "What's your surname?" or "What is

your unit?”

During oral communication, speakers need standard pronunciation and intonation, as well as the suitable use of language for the occasion. There are numerous examples that we could cite of expressions that are correct according to grammatical rules, but unsuitable for the occasion.

Once, after a student gave a lecture, he asked a foreign visitor for his advice. He said like this, “I am desirous of exploring your feeling on the lecture”—which caused the foreign visitor’s surprise. He said: “You English is too beautiful to be true.” But the student refused to accept the comment. He said the sentence was extracted from the book. The visitor explained that phrases like “desirous of exploring your feelings” were not fit for spoken language, which should be replaced by “I’d like to hear your views on the lecture” or “May I have your views on the lecture?”

5.3 Necessity of Cultural Background Knowledge in Reading

Reading English articles requires a certain language basis, but the competence of reading comprehension is not entirely related to one’s language level. Knowledge of cultural background is also important. Reading is a process affected by integration of one’s language knowledge, cultural background knowledge and other professional knowledge, and a process of continuous guesses and corrections according to available language material, cultural background and logical reasoning. Generally speaking, Chinese people study Chinese without the difficulties aroused by cultural background. However, when we read English articles, differences between Chinese and western cultures often bring us many difficulties.

Effect of cultural background on reading will be discussed, with some common terms or expressions in reading material, which is often not understood by Chinese learners who are unfamiliar with western culture, as illustration.

Many allusions drawn from history, religion, literature etc., often appear in English works and have become common household terms. But without the knowledge of western culture and history, such allusions are not always easy to understand, and without understanding there can be little appreciation. For example: a Herculean task—task requiring great power of body or mind. Hercules was a powerfully built hero of ancient Greek mythology. As punishment for a serious misdeed, he was ordered to do twelve virtually impossible tasks. Hercules succeeded in doing all and was rewarded with immortality. Example:

It was a Herculean task, but he managed to do it.

Some of these allusions may be looked up in the dictionary, but with the continuous development of society and language, new allusions have appeared. Unless one is well acquainted with developments of a certain country, one would be at a loss about the meaning and connotations of terms or expressions such as those below:

A Pepsodent smile—A smile showing beautiful white teeth; from advertisements for Pepsodent tooth paste, one of the better-known brands in the USA.

Idiom is an important part of the language and culture of a society. They are often hard to understand and hard to use correctly. They are almost impossible to understand from the meanings of the individual words. And with English idioms, even the same words may have different meanings as in the examples below:

Therefore, first of all, a student should learn not to look down on such idioms just because they’re made up of such simple and easy words. He should look out for identical phrases with different meanings and look them up in a dictionary if he’s not sure. He’s bound to run into a lot of trouble when he first uses them, but he shouldn’t give in, much less give up. If he keeps trying and keeps at it long enough he’ll make out and things will turn out well in the end.

Though the passage is short, it includes ten idioms: look down, made up of, look out for, look up, run into, give in, give up, keep at it, make out and turn out (well).

It is thus clear that difficulties in reading cannot be completely solved by one’s language knowledge, because works of a people cannot be separated from the people’s cultural tradition. So, in teaching reading, a teacher should explain grammatical difficulties as well as expound cultural background.

5.4 Necessity of Cultural Background Knowledge in Writing and Translating

Similarly, writing and translating cannot be separated from cultural background knowledge. In translation, even the very simple expressions cannot be dealt with without any consideration of specific context and customs.

In writing, cultural background knowledge is also important. Why it is that one can fairly easily tell whether an article was written by a Chinese or by a native speaker of English? On the one hand, it is probably because most Chinese students have not yet mastered the language; On the other hand, it is probably because of differences in Chinese and English writing styles that reflect cultural differences. Narration and description in Chinese seem to be

a bit more ornate, or more “flowery”, than in English. The following passage from a student’s composition is typical of this kind of faulty writing in English:

“I walked joyfully along the path that was lit up by the golden rays of the morning sun. Beautiful flowers of many colors were blooming. How fragrant they smelled! Little birds were singing in the trees, as if greeting me ‘Good morning! Good morning!’... My heart was bursting with happiness...”

One of the common faults in this matter is the tendency of Chinese students to use too many adjectives. Adjectives, of course, are necessary in good writing. But if not used with care, they can have the opposite effect—quickly kill interest and produce boredom.

Chinese and English-speaking people seem to look differently on the use of set phrases and expressions. Good English writing discourages what are called “ clichés” or “trite expressions”. Chinese writing, on the other hand, gives its approval to well-chosen “four-character expressions.” To a native English-speaker, the following sentence would be frowned on as an example of poor writing: He slept like a log and woke up at the crack of dawn, fresh as a daisy.

Trite expressions and clichés originally caught people’s attention precisely because they were and are so colorful and express an idea so well. But overuse caused them to lose their charm and freshness.

In persuasive writing such as social or political essays and editorials, English-speaking writers tend to be less militant in tone and language than most Chinese. The idea is to let the facts speak for themselves. Thus in such types of writing, one finds rather sparing use of such phrases as we must, we should not, it is wrong to, it is absurd, cannot be denied, resolutely demand. The tone is usually restrained; the language is generally moderate. In present-day Chinese social and political writings, facts are of primary importance, of course, but considerable stress is also laid on militancy, on making one’s stand clear. This difference in attitudes is an important one.

Besides the three points of differences mentioned above, there are others. If we couldn’t be acquainted with these differences, we would not write a standard English composition.

6. How to Improve English Teaching of Different Culture

From above analysis, it is concluded easily that knowing language forms only is inadequate for English learners. English learning has rich culture meaning. It’s not only the process of mastering, but also that of touching and recognizing cultural thought patterns of the English people. However, what kinds of culture can be taught in English teaching?

6.1 Making Comparison and Contrast

6.1.1 Words

Word is the smallest unit of a language that can be used by it. (Bolinger and Sear, 1968) In English, there may be a single word for a certain object, creature or concept, whereas in Chinese, there may be several words even quite a large number and vice versa. For example, one Chinese word “Fu” is equal to vice, associate, assistant, deputy, lieutenant, under-, etc. Therefore, in teaching teachers should make a comparison of the customs and traditions between Chinese and English culture. For example, both English and Chinese, words have their symbolic meanings. In English “Sunday” means the first day of a week whereas in Chinese it’s the last day.

6.1.2 Culture Content in Communication Words

With the development of civilization, people pay more and more attention to situation, relationship, strategy, intension and influence of communication. Because of the different culture between China and English countries, there are some differences of communication in some situation. Some major situations are following:

6.1.2.1 Thanks

In both English and Chinese there are expressions of gratitude. Differences lie in what to thank for and whom to thank. English speakers think that everyone is treated as individuals. So the kindness shown in whatever way should be appreciated explicitly. They say “thank you” to anyone who helps them. In contrast the Chinese people tend to thank the one who has done them a major favors several times.

6.1.2.2 Compliments

It is generally accepted that showing modesty is to be polite. When being complimented, English speakers would be likely to accept it by saying “thank you” or “I’m pleased to hear so” to show their pleasure and appreciation, while the Chinese would probably try not to accept the compliment to show their modesty and politeness. Both are trying to be polite and modest and probably think they are behaving suitably. It is hard to say who is right and who is wrong because of cultural differences. The point is that in order to learn a second language well, one has to acquire

its culture as well.

Thus, by comparison, students can have an awareness of the differences between the two cultures. Comparison and contrast also helps learners explain different cultural behaviors, and it can avoid just explaining another's behaviors according to his standards. By comparison and contrast one can distinguish acceptable culture and unacceptable culture, thus preventing learners from accepting the target culture uncritically.

6.2 Exploring Culture-based Activities

Linguistic behavior is part of human behavior that differs from culture to culture. The communicative activities here refer to those involving learners' active participation in communication, such as role-play, information-gap activities, problem-solving activities, etc. If an English teacher wants to present the learners with the general practice of eating out in a restaurant, the best way is probably to provide the learners with English instructions about how to find the table reserved, how to order and how to pay and so on, which can then be followed by the learners' role-play. This will not only show how well the learners understand them, but also help give them a vivid impression. This technique is useful in which it can help combine with the cultural content and communication-oriented activities.

6.3 Excavating the Cultural Information in the Reading Material

Firstly teachers should make good use of the text and help students grasp cultural information in English learning. Like in "ABRAHAM LINCOLN", teacher should introduce Lincoln to the student and let them know struggle course from the common people to the America President, letting the students feel a great personality. In "MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.", let the student peep the historical truth of the US racial discrimination and the present situations of a spot, and let the students understand until now US is how arbitrary and is laughable to make unwarranted criticisms to other national human rights conditions. In brief, in the teaching process, introducing some relative cultural knowledge to students at the right moment can cause the students' curiosity western culture and western society, thus stimulating their study interest.

Secondly, teachers should encourage students to read extensively. To most Chinese learners, acquisition of knowledge of western culture, mainly depend on reading material, while literal works is the richest material through which we can know something about a people's psychology, cultural characters, customs and habits, social relations etc.

6.4 Using Authentic Materials

Using authentic sources from the native speech community helps to engage students in authentic cultural experiences. Sources can include films, news broadcasts, and television shows; Web sites; and photographs, magazines, newspapers, restaurant menus, travel brochures, and other materials.

Teachers can adapt their usage of authentic materials to suit the age and language proficiency level of the students. For example, even at the beginning students can watch and listen to video clips taken from a television show in the target language and focus on such cultural conventions as greetings. The teacher might supply students with a detailed translation or give them a chart diagram of outline to complete while they listen to a dialogue or watch a video. Teacher can also pick up some materials pertaining to some aspects of culture revealed in newspapers or magazines and to the discussions of certain questions that might elucidate Western patterns of behavior. Moreover, it can ring in cultural input in a clear and realistic way as compared with traditional instruction.

7. Conclusion

As mentioned in this paper, one culture or language is unique and differs from another. Cultural differences can be viewed as the way in which other groups, societies or countries are socially organized, developed and communicated which have customs, laws and lifestyles from other ethnographic groups. Therefore, understanding the target language is not quite easy and it is very important to be aware of cultural differences, only with that will someone knows how to respect other cultures and how to use their languages well.

In this thesis, I give the relation of culture and teaching, traditional and current situation of English teaching in China firstly. Secondly, it is the introduction of traditional culture in China and America and the problems caused by cultural differences. After having analyzed the problems in English teaching caused by cultural differences, I put forward some proposals to introduce culture in a limited range. This is the last but the most important part, in which I explain how to present cultural background knowledge and expose learners to it in the need of English teaching so as to help learners grasp the crux of the language and develop their comprehensive English ability.

To sum up, teachers should let learners not only pay attention to cultural differences but also try to understand and study the differences to avoid misunderstanding in study and communication. It is necessary for students to be taught directly and develop their awareness of cultural background knowledge in order to overcome the obstacles

produced by cultural differences.

All in all, cultural factors play an important role in English teaching. The aim of English teaching is to foster students' comprehensive English capability by learning language and its culture. In successful teaching and study of both language and cultural background knowledge, cultural introduction contributes to foster students' cultural consciousness of target language. By doing so, students can improve their English comprehensive capacity and cultural communication of the target language. This accomplishes the target of foreign language teaching.

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