

How to Enhance Cross-cultural Awareness in TEFL

COMMENT AMÉLIORER LA SENSIBILISATION INTERCULTURELLE DANS TEFL

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Abstract: There is close relationship between language and culture. Language reflects culture and it is influenced and shaped by culture at the same time. Consequently, teaching English is inseparable from teaching its culture. Cultural awareness or tolerance is of great importance in English teaching and learning. It contributes to effectiveness and appropriateness of an English discourse. Only with the communication of language competence and cultural awareness can a language learner be successful in communication. To achieve this goal, the article develops closely around how to foster students' cross-cultural awareness in EFL teaching.

Key words: cross-cultural awareness; EFL teaching; cultural differences

Résumé: Il y a des liens étroits entre la langue et la culture. La langue reflète la culture et elle est influencée et façonnée par la culture en même temps. Par conséquent, l'enseignement de l'anglais est inséparable de l'enseignement de la culture anglaise. La sensibilisation à la culture ou la tolérance est de grande importance dans l'enseignement et dans l'apprentissage de l'anglais. Elle contribue à l'efficacité et à la pertinence d'un discours en anglais. Un apprenant de langue ne peut réussir dans la communication qu'avec des compétences linguistiques et la sensibilisation. Pour atteindre cet objectif, l'article se développe autour de la façon de favoriser la sensibilisation interculturelle des élèves dans l'enseignement EFL.

Mots-Clés: sensibilisation interculturelle; enseignement EFL; différences culturelles

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is the keystone of culture. Some social scientists maintain that culture would not be possible without language. On the other hand, language is influence and shaped by culture. In the broad sense, language is the symbolic representation of a people, and it comprises their historical and cultural backgrounds as well as their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking.(Deng Yanchang: 1989) from the above definitions, the close relationship can be seen between language and culture, that is, they can interact with each other. On the one hand, they evolved together and have been mutually dependent through their history. Understanding one requires understanding of the other; on the other

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hand, however, cultures differ from one another, so languages are diverse.

Therefore, teaching English well means more than merely teaching learners the vocabulary, structures and grammars. It also means teaching them how to slip into the English culture without their foreignness exposed. Learners should be informed how native speakers of English see the world and how the English language reflects the ideas, customs, and behavior of their society. In other words, to have a good command of grammatical rules of a language contributes to correctness of sentence structures while familiarity with as much cultural knowledge of that language as possible guarantees appropriateness of discourse. Only with the combination of language competence and cultural awareness can language achieve its communicative function.

2. DIFFERENCES IN ENGLISH CULTURE AND CHINESE CULTURE

The Chinese take pride in “modesty”, the Americans in “straight forwardness”. An American hostess, for example, complimented for her cooking skills, is likely to say, “Oh, I’m so glad that you liked it. I cooked it especially for you.” But not so a Chinese host or hostess, who will instead apologize for giving you “nothing” even slightly edible and for not showing you enough honor by providing proper dishes. Cultural differences exist not only in customs and habits, but also in beliefs, value systems, mode of thinking and others. As far as mode of thing is concerned, it touches one term: philosophical base, philosophical base of the western world lies in a clear cut between self-being and outside-being. It tends to objectify the outside world. The basis of Chinese philosophy, however, is quite different, which is sort of monistic and dynamic. It lays stress on subjectivity. Cultural diversity due to different philosophical bases shows that approaches to the description of the law of the universe vary from language to language. As a consequence, the English language and the Chinese language have different ways of interpreting the outside world. The former is hypotactic, compact and overt, the latter paratactic, diffusive and covert. Culture has influence on every aspect of language: lexical study, syntactical and grammatical study, literature and reading, composition and essay writing. As for words, the Chinese language is a self-sufficient and closed language system. Other cultures never got dominance in China. As a result, the language is stable. It creates synonyms within the language. Compared with English language, which has been enriched by the western cultures, Chinese is less generative. As for the English language, its development has a long history. Roman conquest, Anglo-Saxon invasion, Norman conquest, the Renaissance and other historical events greatly enriched the English vocabulary and culture. With the influence, English is an open system.

The examples mentioned reflect the diversity that exists in cultures and languages between China and English-speaking countries. So, in EFL teaching, a teacher has to take all these factors into account. And it is due to this culture load that teachers’ work and students’ cross-cultural communication have become a tough task.

3. SOME CAUSES OF STUDENTS’ LACK OF CULTURAL BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

As mentioned above, culture can lead to different interpretations and reaction to language, so students’ ability to comprehend and communicate in English is highly dependent on the culture background knowledge, and the deficiency of this knowledge is most likely to cause their poor English.

Generally speaking, the students’ culture mistakes fall into four categories: sociolinguistic ally inappropriate, culturally unacceptable, conflict of different value systems and over-simplification or over-generalization. Many factors can lead to these mistakes.

The first one is the lack of the environment of English learning. We often say different countries

share different cultures. So, one of the most obvious reasons is that Chinese students learn English and its culture knowledge not in English speaking –countries, but in the non-English speaking –country—China. One kind of cultures only belongs to its own country and is not part of particular reader’s culture background. In addition, it’s very clear that our students have never been to any English-speaking countries before they start to learn and use the target language –English. They have to learn English culture mostly from books or mass media and they have less opportunities to contact and experience English culture in person. In this sense, it’s natural that many students may fail to master more English cultural background knowledge.

The second is the way of thinking. Chinese students often unconsciously use their own customs of thought to learn English, so that they comprehend English passages incorrectly. A reader, no matter how much cultural background knowledge he has learned and acquired, couldn’t possibly have all the knowledge needed for learning a foreign language. So the thinking customs are very important, which may serve as the best explanation of students’ frequent failure to comprehend materials about typical English culture and failure to communicate with English native speakers.

The last, but not the least, is the failure to give sufficient attention to culturally-orientated courses in EFL teaching.

4. APPROACH OF TEACHING TO DEVELOP STUDENT’S CULTURAL AWARENESS

According to Hanvey (1979), there are four levels of cross-cultural awareness, Level 1 is awareness of superficial cultural traits often interpreted as exotic or bizarre. Level 2 is awareness of significant and subtle cultural traits that contrast markedly with one’s own and are interpreted as unbelievable through irrational. Level 3 is similar to Level 2, but the cultural traits are recognized as believable through intellectual analysis. Level 4 is awareness of how another culture feels from generally recognized that for most people empathy is something very difficult, if not impossible, to attain.

To change this situation and increase cultural awareness, some suggestions are provided in the following.

In my opinion, the goals of foreign culture acquisition, in China, should at least encompass the following:

Foreign culture acquisition should aim at familiarizing EFL learner with the mundane situations of the English speaking countries-their customs and habits, life-styles, generally –accepted world outlook, etc.

Foreign culture acquisition should aim at enabling EFL learners to understand the interaction between language and such social variables affect the way people speak and behave.

Foreign culture acquisition should be aimed at cultivating the students’ ability to evaluate the culture of the target country in an objective manner.

Try to strengthen the input and guidance of cultural awareness

English teachers should make good use of the reading materials in textbooks. It should be noted that textbooks writing should be approached from a cultural perspective. Traditional text materials were in principle arranged for the convenience grammar presentation. Therefore, most of the textbooks available are grammar-centered, giving little or no attention to cultural content. Although linguists and educators still disagree as to how to produce textbook, those which take cultural factors into consideration would be more helpful and beneficial to EFL learners than those with which I ever used in my teaching four years ago, is such kind of textbook.

In Book One, the article “Table Manners and Customs” makes a good comparison and introduction of the concrete table manners and customs in many English-speaking countries. From Unit 2, students also can learn more about American music, which was characterized as Rock and Roll in history. Then

they can enjoy American Music in proper ways. Especially the article “What Is Culture” in Book Two gives students more knowledge on “CULTURE” itself.

Therefore, since the textbooks are students’ major source and they have lots of valuable contents to make up for the students’ deficiency of cultural background knowledge, English teachers have to value the teaching of those articles so as to achieve the desired results of teaching through enriching students’ cultural background knowledge in English and fostering students’ cultural competence.

Train the student to think in an American way

Our students have lived in Chinese Culture background for many years. While learning English, they are accustomed to unconsciously applying the Chinese modes or patterns of thinking, which often contributes to wrong comprehension and communication in English. Therefore, English teachers have the responsibility to train our Chinese students to make reasonable and logical thinking at the English culture background through the patters of English thinking so that they’ll acquire the ability to communicate in English. In addition, students should have easier access to visual aids such as films and videotapes. It is generally agreed that what helps in culture acquisition is first and foremost personal contact with native speakers, followed by access to films and videotapes. Under the circumstance where there lacks the opportunities for students to communicate with foreigners, films, and videotapes can create the most real English-speaking environment and these two also can provide some cultural background information, such as westerners’ behavior, thinking and humor. If conditions permit, English films should be shown to students regularly. Documentaries, newsreels, educational serials, etc, will all be of help.

5. MY TEACHING PRACTICE

In my class, I always tell the students that they cannot totally rely on dictionaries to get the proper English for a Chinese term, or the proper Chinese for an English word. Terms that have more or less the same primary meaning, may have second or additional meanings that differ considerably from each other. Connotation works sometimes. Serious blunders have been committed because of ignorance of a connotation. For example, I ever explained that to Chinese people, kitchen is merely a place where food is prepared; to most westerners, however, kitchen also has a function of family interaction. It is shared by husband and wife and all the other family members. And it is one of the finest rooms in the house. “The mystery of the White Gardenia” in *Integrated Skills of English* Book 1 which I am teaching with now for English majors describes a mother’s love to her daughter in the west. When explaining this text, I compared this love to a Chinese mother’s love and put forward questions for my students to discuss so that they can fully understand westerners’ culture.

On the other hand, I pay great attention to English idioms which, I think, are the gems or treasure of the English language. They have close relations to English culture just like its mirror. In addition, English idioms are very short and easy to remember as song as students have grasped their original sources and meanings. Let’s take some phrases for examples.

- as strong as a horse (ti zhaung ru niu)
- as timid as a rabbit (dan xiao ru shu)
- as busy as a bee (mang de xiang re guo shang de ma yi)

When I explained these, not only can students learn some cultural background, but also the knowledge can activate and improve their interests in English study.

6. CONCLUSION

Since culture has great impact on language, it is natural that cultural awareness should be given enough attention. And each English teacher should realize the inevitability of culture in teaching methodology.

Problems of methodology that exist in the study of language are also found in the study of culture. In the development of language teaching methodology, there have arisen many teaching methods, grammar-translation method, direct method, audio-lingual method, natural approach, and communicative approach. In my experience of teaching of a foreign culture, a comparative perspective becomes important as a pedagogical means of motivation. Not only does it allow students to understand the language and the nuances of American and British culture better, it also helps them acquire a more conscious awareness of their own culture and encourages students to dedicate themselves to the development of China. But, after all, each method has its own advantages and disadvantages. With regard to the significance of culture, whatever approach he or she adopts, a teacher should never neglect the significance of culture in EFL teaching and should make effort to enhance students' cultural awareness

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