Teaching Spoken English in Classroom Under Cultural Context in China

WANG Lei[a],*

[a]College English Department, Qiqihar University, Qiqihar, China.
*Corresponding author.

Abstract

During the process of globalization, English plays an indispensable role in the communication of people. As for Chinese college students, how to improve their spoken English proficiency is a troublesome problem. This paper analyzes several reasons why students' speaking competence is hard to improve and reviews various spoken English teaching methods in the development of foreign language teaching process and proposes that teaching spoken English in classroom under cultural context is an effective method to promote spoken English proficiency of non-English majors. Foster cultural awareness is the essential part. Some practical classroom teaching procedures are presented, together with some puzzles. Without doubt, intercultural exchanges become more and more frequent. Comprehension of the culturally-loaded words plays an important role in avoiding communicative failures and improving intercultural communication.

Key words: Spoken English proficiency; Cultural awareness; Cultural context; Classroom teaching

INTRODUCTION

With the rapid growth of economy and interaction with the outside world, there is a growing need among Chinese students to learn English. Through hundreds of paper tests, most of them perform excellent in English passage-reading, grammars, and compositions. However, after eight or more years of English study, more often than not, many Chinese students still feel it hard to communicate with foreigners in English. In the real world interaction, they appear awkward. What are the reasons? How to improve the current situation? As a Chinese college English teacher, it's an unavoidable task. If there is an approach which can help students promote the proficiency of spoken English, at the same time, it aids them to cross cultural differences among nations successfully, the approach is worth practicing.

1. WHAT ARE THE REASONS?

According to my survey to about 400 college students in my university, over 20% of them don't want to join speaking activities. Only about 30% participate in the oral practice. One third of them believe they don't grasp enough words and phrases to express themselves freely and clearly in English. Difficulty in spoken English for Chinese students comes from the reasons for various aspects.

1.1 Lack of Communicative Environment

In the current teaching environment, especially in my hometown-Qiqihar, a non-provincial city in the northeast part of China, students seldom have the opportunities to contact English in a real communicative situation. Their acquisition of English knowledge mainly comes from the classroom. At the very beginning, young starters will acquire their speaking competence soon and their speaking skills are considerably higher than other skills, such as listening, reading and writing. Unfortunately, from their elementary school to their middle school and high school, time left for speaking English in class is less and less. Insufficient vocabulary, little accumulation of commonly used sentence patterns and model sentences, together with low-level listening competence all lead to the result that students can not even get the meaning of English speakers, not to mention the communication

with them. Smooth interaction across cultural gaps is beyond reach. Influenced by Chinese greatly, Chinglish emerges one after another. To those shy students, the case is worse. Many restrained Chinese students choose to keep quiet even though they clearly know what to say and how to say in English. They are used to remain silent and they prefer to be a sideliner and passive receiver than an active participant. Consequently more chances to express themselves are missed.

1.2 Lack of Enough Attention

Under the pressure of National Matriculation English Test, grammatical structure of the language is the main concern in junior and senior middle school English syllabus for Chinese students. Therefore, students' motivation of immediate need for practicing the language is often not brought into full play. The instruction materials usually consist of new vocabulary, reading materials and a great amount of corresponding exercises. Teachers pay more attention to the explanation of grammatical and vocabulary points, and students spend more time on grammar exercises in order to get higher marks. Oral activities on the textbook are neglected.

After entering college, students have not great pressure from examinations, but large-scale class lecturing is common in colleges and universities in China. This current situation hinders the development of college students' spoken competence. In Qiqihar University, , the average number in college English classes is about 50. Time left for each single student to speak is quite limited. Even though students have mastered adequate vocabulary and grammar, they have fewer chances to practice them via listening and speaking in classroom. The internalized knowledge can not be motivated actively, nor can be converted into oral communication effectively.

1.3 Lack of Understanding of Culture in English-Speaking Countries

For a long time, students' pronunciation, spelling and grammatical rules have been trained in various classroom activities. Students' reading and writing skills develop significantly, whereas the relationship between language and culture has not been given enough attention. Consequently, relevant cultural background knowledge is discussed less in classroom teaching. In addition, most teachers have no chance of visiting foreign countries in person. Their knowledge about cultural differences mainly comes from textbook. It's really hard for them to create an authentic situation for students to know and to understand the target culture. Which part is feasible and which part is unpractical? Teachers themselves are helpless.

1.4 Lack of Creative Situation

In recent years, the importance of oral competence has been emphasized in school at all levels. Students do have the opportunities to open their mouth to express their own feelings and thoughts in English in class. However, most of the oral practice tends to be some mechanical imitation. Apparently, this kind of activity is hard to motivate students' interest in learning and it's difficult to mobilize students' subjective initiative. Futhermore, as the situation created during the process of classroom teaching is totally different from that in real life, the practice seems lack of guidance.

1.5 Lack of Research in the Field

A survey of major language teaching journals in China shows, from 2000 to 2009, the number of published articles on oral English is 3,351; while from 2010 to 2014, the number rises to 3,981. Teachers and researchers seems to pay more attention to the study on spoken competence. However, compared with the total number of published articles on language teaching in the journals, 111,870, articles on the teaching of spoken language are still less than 7%. Articles concerning culture and spoken language teaching are less than 100 from 2000 to 2014. Further researches are needed urgently to probe the effect of spoken language teaching under cultural context.

2. HOW TO IMPROVE THE CURRENT SITUATION?

For learners, language learning is a risk-taking process. Beebe (1983) says, "In the classroom, learners' may have experienced a bad grade in the course, a fail on the exam, a reproach from the teacher, a smirk from a classmate, punishment or embarrassment imposed by oneself." What about the situation outside the classroom? Some learners suffer from the negative consequences due to inappropriate choice of words. Some make themselves sound ridiculous with their awkward Chinglish. Some are frustrated by the listener's blank look. And others go through alienation of not being able to communicate. All these failures build up their fears and stumble them badly. To solve all these problems in an action is impossible though, some successful attempts have been done.

2.1 Review of Some Effective Methods

In some private language schools, Direct Method achieves great success. The target language is exclusively the only medium to conduct classroom instruction. A large amount of question-and-answer exchanges between teachers and students are carefully organized and accurately graded. Oral communication skills are developed gradually. Students there have high motivation to learn a foreign language and only native-speaking teachers are qualified. Situational Language Teaching method was introduced into China in the 1970s. The underlying theory of the method is behaviorism. It can be found in many popular English textbooks in China. Multi-media teaching equipments contribute a lot to the success. Combined with developmental psychology, learning theory, and humanistic pedagogy, Total Physical Response indeed reduces the stress people feel when studying foreign

languages. Krashen's affective filter hypothesis supposes that under the happy, relaxed learning atmosphere, highly motivated learners' affective filter is down and the effective learning goals can be achieved. In a given social context, teachers ask students to communicate in a meaningful way. The topic is a meaningful one. Participants should consider both the linguistic context and the social context besides the syntactic structure. Therefore, students are brought into a closer contact with authentic language examples and the communicative competence is promoted.

Along with the process of globalization, cooperation between countries makes intercultural contact multiply. The participants who can communicate fluently in foreign language without sufficient awareness of cultural differences will encounter some embarrassing situation, even misunderstanding. There is a true story. A native Chinese host invited his American colleague to his family for dinner. In front of a table full of delicious Chinese food, the guest was confused by the host's modest words "There is no good dish. Please enjoy yourself." Since the host has possessed necessary linguistic ability to carry out the conversation and has produced structurally correct English, what confused his guest? Cultural gap. The host was showing his politeness and modesty as Chinese people commonly do in the same situation. He just ignored that his guest is used to interpret the utterance in a straightforward Western way--"I made this specially for you and hope you will like it."

Consequently, cultural context teaching is gradually considered.

2.2 Cultural Context Teaching Model

Culture is a complicated definition. Many sociologists and anthropologists have put forward various ones. On Wikipedia, culture is, in the words of E.B. Tylor, "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." (Tylor, 1871, p.1) American linguist Halliday pointed out that cultural transmission is one of the three characteristics of language. Language is the conveyor of a culture and indispensable tool to explore a culture. On the other hand, cultural context is critical for language learning. Learning a language is more than merely mastering the pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and idioms. It also means learning the ideas, thinking patterns, values, customs and behaviors of the native speakers. Therefore, cultural context is the essential background of a country and nation. It is the most important one among other contexts.

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) attaches importance to the training of learners' communicative competence which is composed of four fundamental skills and the ability of understanding culture and the society. That means it is indispensable to improve students' cross-cultural awareness and to boost their ability of cross-cultural communication in language training, including spoken language training. Students need to increase the sensitivity to cultural differences and compare Chinese culture with western culture, especially concept of value, mode of thinking, code of ethics, life style, customs and religious culture.

2.2.1 Foster Cultural Awareness

Cultural awareness includes the awareness of one's own national culture, the awareness of one's own personal cultural profile, the awareness of one's own community, and also the awareness of the culture one is going to meet. With adequate cultural awareness, one has the ability to understand cultures—one's own and others' by means of objective, non-judgmental comparisons. One can get rid of ethnocentric tendencies and accept other cultures. Students have learnt of other cultures from textbooks, traveling, TV programs or some documentaries. Their understanding is superficial or stereotyped. Once they confront some subtle and significant cultural traits, they are likely to feel unbelievable, frustrated or irritated.

Dragon has totally different symbolic meaning in western and Chinese culture. As Chinese men, we are proud of being the descendants of the dragon, because this auspicious creature supposedly brings good luck to us. It has the head of a lion, antlers of a deer, legs of a shrimp, the mouth of a crocodile, the neck of a turtle, the body of a snake, scales of a fish, the abdomen of a clam, the spine of a fish, palms of a tiger, claws of an eagle and the tail of a goldfish. The mythical creature, together with phoenix, is a symbol of royalty in ancient China. In Chinese, there are lots of four character idiom concerning with dragons, such as 龙凤呈祥 (dragon and phoenix bring prosperity), 二龙戏珠（two dragons are playing with a pearl）and so on.

On the contrary, western dragon-- a large fierce animal with wings and a long tail—is a symbol of evil and the embodiment of Santa. It is immense in size and skillful in magic. The avaricious, brutal and tyrannical creature often destroys villages with breathing fire. The brave Saint George, who killed an evil dragon, used the blood of the dragon drew a cross on his shield and later the red cross became the pattern on the white flag of England. In Bible, Santa is a great dragon. "Her mother is a real dragon" means her mother is strict with her. "Chase the dragon" means taking heroin, especially by injecting.

In the movie *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*. The antagonist is such a one.

Cultural conflicts may confuse students who are not aware of the differences. Teachers are supposed to help foster students' awareness of cross-culture. The cognitive awareness, the ability to differentiate, understand and describe the differences, is also necessary. After all, the reason why students study a foreign language is to communicate with people who have learned their culture in nature, everyday interactions with people and situations in their culture.

2.2.2 Choose a Cultural Topic

In each semester, there are some traditional festivals to celebrate. Some of them have counterparts in western culture. The comparison is not only interesting but culturally informative as well. Christmas to westerners is what the Spring Festival to Chinese. Students are familiar with the customs of the two holidays and they can share their amazing experience with classmates fluently. The same as the Valentine's Day with Chinese Double Seventh, Easter Day with Tomb-sweeping Day, American Independence Day with Chinese National Day... Information about all these holidays provides rich cultural atmosphere in college English classroom. During the process, the target language should be used as the medium so that the language acquisition and cultural studies can be integrated.

As for Thanksgiving Day, it is hard to find a Chinese counterpart. Talking about the origin of the holiday provides a good chance for students to understand the festival deeply. The first Thanksgiving dated back to 1621. The Pilgrims shared their first harvest with the Indians who helped them survived in the harsh winter of 1620 and planted their crops in the desolated land of the penal colony. The reason why turkeys were chosen as the symbolic food for this day is not because turkey is more delicious than chicken, but because turkeys were common in America land for that harsh time. The family reunion feast is some like the dinner on Chinese Mid-autumn Day, except the full moon in the sky on the fifteenth night of the eighth month according to Chinese lunar calendar.

Cultural context doesn't exclude students' own culture. Chinese traditional festivals have their unique cultural connotation, too. The Dragon Boat Festival is one of them. The festival is best known for its dragon-boat races, especially in the southern provinces where there are many rivers and lakes. This regatta commemorates the death of Qu Yuan, an honest minister who is said to have committed suicide by drowning himself in Miluo river after hearing that his hometown was occupied by State Qin in the Warring States Period. He was upright, loyal and highly esteemed for his wise counsel that brought peace and prosperity to the State of Chu. People of Chu who mourned the death of Qu threw zong zi, a pyramid-shaped glutinous rice pudding wrapped with bamboo leaves, into the river to feed his ghost every year on the fifth day of the fifth month. Dragon-boat races are held on this day every year in the south part of China. The races symbolize the many attempts to rescue and recover Qu's body. Sharing the traditional Chinese festival in English with students in the classroom offers students a chance to review familiar information from a new perspective.

2.2.3 Set Up a Cultural Context

In classroom teaching, warm-up activities are important for the following mental work. Choosing an appropriate topic concerned with the certain theme of the text is an effective way to stimulate students' learning interest and attract their attention. By providing students with cultural background information, the entire teaching process is facilitated. For example, in our textbook—New Horizon College English, unit three in book two, the title of the text is *Marriage across Nations*. Naturally, in the session of warm-up activity, students are assigned to introduce some traditions and customs of both western and Chinese wedding ceremony. The topic arouses students' interest greatly and they are eager to share their information with the whole class. The grand church, the romantic oath and the exciting bouquet toss enchant the audience a lot. The red bridal sedan chair, the interesting procedure and the implication of peanuts, red dates and longans fill the class with joy and happiness. Furthermore, the differences between western and oriental wedding ceremony lead students to probe the advantages and disadvantages of a mixed marriage. In the heated discussion, their classroom anxiety is at a relatively low level and the utterance is continuous and automatic. This imaginative and creative activity helps classroom learners develop communicative competence remarkably

2.2.4 Experience Cultural Shocks

According to Wikidepia, culture shock is the personal disorientation a person may feel when experiencing an unfamiliar way of life due to immigration or a visit to a new country, a move between social environments, or simply travel to another type of life. One of the most common causes of culture shock involves individuals in a foreign environment. In class, one student was supposed to have a job interview with an American interviewer (acted by another student). After an excellent self-introduction and several rounds of questions and answers, the interviewer was satisfied with the applicant and informed him to start his work the next day. Extremely happy, the applicant said, "Lack of experience, I will try my best to learn from my colleagues in the future work. If I do something wrong, please bear with me and I would appreciate your guidance." Chinese virtue of modesty is shown incisively and vividly. Out of surprise, the interviewer changed his mind after hearing the applicant's self-depreciating reply, the applicant just missed the opportunity. What is wrong? All students began to guess. They ignore that Americans say what they mean. As an employee, your duty is to create value for the company, not to make some mistakes. Your colleagues are due to do their jobs, not to guide you. Since you are not equipped with efficient knowledge and skills, please go back to school and learn them well.

3. PUZZLES

3.1 Teacher-Talk or Student-Talk

The notion of social interaction has nothing to do with teacher-talk or student-talk. However, in a classroom,

it is a puzzle. According to the pedagogical principle, students should talk as much as possible while the teacher should talk as little as possible. The metaphor teacher-talk/student-talk, coined by Flanders (1960), has no doubt been useful to dramatize the new focus on students, but it has limited our understanding of the nature of classroom dialogue. Krashen, an American linguist who has contributed a lot in the field of second-language acquisition and bilingual education, told teachers students should be exposed to sufficient comprehensive input. How can teachers ensure that qualitative, rather than quantitative input can be provided? The larger psychological issue seems to be the following: teachers have to impart a body of knowledge, but students have to discover that knowledge for themselves in order to internalize it—how can teachers at the same time give it to them and make them discover it on their own?

3.2 Thinking or Speaking

Thinking and speaking are closely related. Olato once said, "Thinking is precisely, the inward dialogue carried on by the mind with itself without spoken sound...whereas the stream which flows from the mind through the lips with sound is called speech." In most situations, if students can think clearly, they are able to express their ideas, feelings and experiences precisely in language. That means, without a clear conception of what they are thinking about, it is difficult for them to express their thoughts. On the contrary, fluent and precise language leads to logical and clear thinking. In a formal context, a speech aims to express some original ideas, to convey some innovative information, to persuade someone to take actions, to explain reasons or to stimulate someone intellectually. In the cultural context, students have to examine the situation, analyze the topic, and then choose the appropriate communicating strategies on condition that they have sufficient cultural awareness.

3.3 Knowing or Behaving

The aim of spoken English teaching is to facilitate students communicate with foreigners in English smoothly. Therefore, knowing and understanding the target culture is only one part of the task. Students are supposed to behave properly during the process of interaction. So teachers need to choose the useful part of the target culture and ensure that plentiful input is guaranteed. Otherwise, the teaching is still a failure. The accompanying problem of which and how much puzzles teachers a lot. After all, an effective cross-cultural communication is based on the mutual understanding instead of losing one's own national identity.

CONCLUSION

By attending only to the grammatical forms of language, some teachers have constrained the learning context to its linguistic dimensions. However, under the cultural context, students' potentials of cultural are tremendously provoked. They are offered opportunities to broaden the context of communication to include its referential aspects. Divergent activities under cultural context can provide insights into different ways of utterance. One day, more and more students will step out of homeland and communicate with people of diverse cultures. Having the respect, tolerance and acceptance of cultural differences, students in classroom today will be qualified to carry out international exchange outside classroom successfully in future. And the capacity of judgment and reflection is a must in the multi-cultural society. Therefore the classroom teaching which offers a range of contextual possibilities containing linguistic, situational and cultural content is an effective attempt.

REFERENCES

Beebe, L. M. (1983). *Risk-taking and the language learner.* rowley, Mass.: Newbury House Press.

Berns, M. S. (1984). Functional approaches to language and language teaching: Another look. In S. Savignon & M. S. Berns (Eds.), *Initiatives in communicative language teaching. A book of readings* (pp.3-21). Reading, PA: Addison-Wesley.

Carroll, J. B. (1981). Twenty-five years of research on foreign language aptitude. In K. C. Diller (Ed.), *Individual differences and universals in language learning aptitude.* Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.

Chamot, A. U., & O'Malley, J. M. (1994). *The CALLA Handbook: Implementing the cognitive academic language learning approach Reading.* Mass.: Addison-Wesley.

Cohen, A. D., & Aphek, E. (1980). Retention of second-language vocabulary over time: Investigating the role of mnemonic associations. *System, 8*(3), 221-235

Cohen, A. C. (1990). *Strategies in learning and using a second language.* Shanghai, China: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Flanders, N. A. (1960). *Interaction analysis in the classroom: A manual for observers.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Hymes, D. (1972) *On communicative competence.* In I. B. Pride & J. Homles (Eds.). Sociolinguistics.

O'Malley, J. M. (1987). The effects of training in the use of learning strategies. In A. Wenden & J. Rubin (Eds.), *Learning strategies in language learning.* Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

O'Malley, J. M., & Chamot, A. U. (1990). *Learning strategies in second language acquisition.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Oxford, R. L. (1990). *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know.* New York, NY: Newbury House/ Harper Collins.

Tylor, E. B. (1871). *Primitive culture (volume 1).* London: John Murray.

Tarone, E. (1981). Some thoughts on the notion of communication strategy. *TESOL Quarterly, 15,* 286.