

On Cultivation of Cross-cultural Awareness in College English Teaching:

Take *Integrated Skills of English* as an Example

SUR LA FORMATION DE SENSIBILISATION INTERCULTURELLE DANS L'ENSEIGNEMENT DE L'ANGLAIS AU COLLÈGE:

EN PRENANT DES *COMPÉTENCES INTÉGRÉES EN ANGLAIS* COMME UN EXEMPLE

YANG Ying¹

Abstract: Language is an indispensable part of culture. To understand language means knowing about culture first. Culture teaching plays an essential role in English language teaching. The cultural orientation in language communication should be highly valued and the relevant cultural background should be led in where necessary. This paper discusses the training of cross-cultural awareness in college English teaching by taking *Integrated Skills of English* as an example. Besides teaching language, English teaching is to cultivate the students' cross-cultural awareness and transform their linguistic competence into communicative competence in an effective way.

Key words: Culture teaching; Cross-cultural awareness; Communicative competence; *Integrated Skills of English*

Résumé: La langue est un élément indispensable de la culture. Afin de comprendre une langue, il faut connaître la culture d'abord. L'enseignement de la culture joue un rôle essentiel dans l'enseignement de la langue anglaise. L'orientation culturelle dans la communication linguistique devrait être mise en valeur et le fond culturel approprié doit être introduit dans le cas échéant. Cet article discute la formation de sensibilisation interculturelle dans l'enseignement de l'anglais au collège en prenant des *compétences intégrées en anglais* comme un exemple. Outre l'enseignement de la langue, l'enseignement de l'anglais est de former la sensibilisation interculturelle des élèves et de transformer leurs compétences linguistiques en compétence communicative de manière efficace.

Mots clés: Enseignement de la culture; Sensibilisation interculturelle; Compétence communicative; *Compétences intégrées en anglais*

1. INTRODUCTION

There is no denying that foreign language teaching in our country has always been attaching too much importance to language teaching while neglecting culture teaching since many years ago, which results in students' lack of profound understanding of English culture and stupid mistakes or errors made in the process of cross-cultural communication. That is because ELT in colleges has failed to compare and analyze the cultural differences between East and West. Meanwhile, language teaching and culture teaching are not effectively united. Therefore, students find it pretty hard to free from their mother tongue in cross-cultural communication while communicating with foreigners in English.

¹ Master, School of International Education, Shandong Economic University, Erhuan Donglu#7366, Jinan, 250014, China
E-mail: ccyangying@126.com

*Received 31 December 2010; accepted 6 February 2011

To improve such situation, it is urgent that the cultural input in college English teaching should become an important task for teachers. How to integrate culture teaching into various linguistic activities effectively, when to lead in the cultural background and how to design the cultural activities are worth taking into consideration for those measures will effectively stimulate students to participate in the teaching activities actively, improve the interaction between students and teachers and eventually enhance students' communicative competence. This paper tries to probe into the approaches to cultivation of students' cross-cultural awareness by taking the course—*Integrated Skills of English* as an example. This course, targeting the freshmen and sophomores of English major in many colleges and universities, aims at enhancing students' comprehensive ability of using English. The formation of comprehensive ability involves the practice of linguistic knowledge and skills as well as the cultivation of cross-cultural awareness, which is a more inalienable part.

2. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

As is known to all, language and culture are closely related with each other. Language is a mirror of culture because language not only reflects the environment in which we live, but also reflects cultural values, human relationships and the way the society operates. Language expresses and embodies cultural reality. For example, the complex kinship terms in Chinese reflect the importance of our family system. Quite a lot of Chinese titles do not have their equivalents in English. On the other hand, as a product of culture, changes in language uses also reflect the changes in culture.

Language learning can not be separated from culture learning. Language can be really grasped on condition that both language and culture are fully understood by the language learner. It is certain that the accumulation of cultural information will contribute to the better understanding and usage of language. To learn language must take culture into account and vice versa.

There has always been a wrong idea that one can communicate without any difficulty as long as he grasps pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, etc. Such misconception causes culture teaching to lag far behind. However, the ultimate purpose of foreign language learning is to realize appropriate cross-cultural communication. The failure to understand the culture of a nation will make it hard to really grasp the language of that nation. In comprehensive English teaching, it is of vital importance to impart the cultural knowledge in English speaking countries to students, which requires teachers to pay special attention to cultural teaching so as to cultivate students' cross-cultural communicative competence.

3. CULTURAL MISTAKES EXISTING IN ENGLISH LEARNING AND TEACHING

In college English teaching, it can be easily found that although students are adept in grammar and vocabulary, their ability to use English properly is not enhanced accordingly. The reason lies in the fact that mastering the English grammar, vocabulary and syntax does not mean mastering the English language. In addition to grammatical rules, there still exist the rules for language usage, language habits, way of thinking and values. What is viewed as the decent social behavior in one culture may be quite improper in another. Due to ignorance of the cultural knowledge as well as the cultural background of the target language, students are inclined to apply the way of speaking in their native language to the target language, which will no doubt bring about cultural errors.

3.1 Social Improperness

Such errors mainly manifest themselves in ways of greeting and addressing people. Some foreign teachers find it is common for their students to use "Where are you going?" or "Are you going to ...?" as a form of greeting, especially among beginning students. In western custom, "Hello" or "Hi" is the common way of greeting on a social level. Another example, the typical telephoning expressions in English are: "Hello, this is Mary speaking. Is that John?" As a result, it would be inappropriate for students to use the expressions like "I am Mary. Are you John?", which are characteristic of Chinese people's way of thinking.

Influenced by the Chinese habit, some students use a foreign teacher's surname directly without any titles before it just as they call the name of their Chinese friends. Therefore, some foreign teachers find it unbearable that students insist on using their surnames as a means of address. The use of surname alone is absolutely incorrect when addressing a foreigner because there are many possible forms in spoken English. For example, an English female teacher, whose name is Jenny Meredith, would feel rather annoyed when addressed by her students as "Meredith" only. Similarly, students usually say "Good morning, teacher" in response to "Good morning, class." In Chinese, "teacher" serves as both the addressing term as well as the honorific title. However, in English-speaking countries, elementary and middle school students put "Mr", "Mrs" or "Miss" before their teachers' surnames. In colleges or universities, students usually put "professor" or "doctor"

before the surname of their teacher, such as “Prof. Smith” or “Dr. Brown”. The difference in the form of address lies in the fact that the word “teacher” in Chinese does not have its equivalent in English.

3.2 Cultural Unacceptability and Misunderstanding

One of the virtues held by the Chinese people is self-deprecation in expressing modesty. However, this practice causes much trouble for foreigners. When many Chinese students are complimented by a foreigner, they respond with humility and modesty like “Oh, it’s nothing” or “Well, just so so.” The reason why they deny the compliment is that they respond according to their cultural values. It is well known that in western culture, the appropriate reply to compliment should be “Thank you very much.” Quite a lot of students’ comment on their English level is “My English is very poor” to show their modesty although they can use English fluently. Therefore, some English sentences used by students actually have no problems either from the grammatical or linguistic angle but they do not conform to the customs in English-speaking countries.

One of the difficulties that Chinese students have is that their mother tongue often interferes with their English learning. Although they express themselves in English, their way of thinking is still typically Chinese. It is inevitable that when they communicate with foreigners, they will probably put themselves or their partners in an awkward position.

Example 1:

Li Ming: Are you busy recently, Professor Smith?

Smith: Yes, very. I’ve been working on an English play that will be put on next week.

Li Ming: ...

Li Ming, a Chinese student, wants to ask the American teacher, Prof. Smith to help him do something. However, his question put forward in the Chinese habit is not understood by his American teacher. The question in Chinese is usually regarded as greeting, but to the Americans, it is just a question and has nothing to do with greeting.

Example 2:

A: Hi, B. You have a pair of beautiful shoes.

B: Thank you. My friend bought them for me in Guangzhou. Do you like them?

A: Oh, yes. They look very comfortable.

B: Well. If you like them, I will ask him to buy a pair for you too.

A: ...

A, an American person, praises B, a Chinese student for her beautiful shoes. B does not know such praise is only for the purpose of friendliness, and therefore, her response puts the foreigner into an embarrassing situation.

From these two examples, it can be concluded that such misunderstanding arising from the conversations shows that students have great difficulty in reading between the lines. We can certainly say that even if a student has a large vocabulary and sound grammar, it may not be possible that he will communicate successfully with foreigners. Faced with such situation, the course of comprehensive English which accounts for a large part in the curriculum for English major will be bound to undertake the task of cultural teaching apart from the instruction of basic language skills.

3.3 Conflict of Value Systems in East and West

Cultural mistakes committed by students originate from textbooks as well as English teaching which only emphasize the form of language but ignore both its social significance and its usage in real life. Many textbooks include the following conversations:

What’s your name?

My name is Li Ming.

How old are you?

I’m twenty.

Where do you come from?

I come from Nanjing.

Where are you going?

I’m going home.

Are you writing a letter to your wife?

Yes, I am.

How often do you write to her?

Once a week.

These conversations are featured by Chinese way of thinking plus English expression. The form is correct, however, the appropriateness of language is not fully stressed. Foreign teachers are sometimes disturbed by Chinese students who inadvertently invade their privacy. The concept of privacy is hard for Chinese students to grasp because what is regarded as privacy in the West is often not looked upon as such in China. It really annoys the western people when they are asked by Chinese people concerning income, age, marital status and political belief. Those questions are perfectly acceptable in Chinese culture, but they are not in Western culture. This is because we Chinese like to inquire into the privacy of other people to show friendship and intimacy. There is no doubt that such kind of cross-cultural communication is a total failure. Besides privacy there are other areas which show a difference in value systems. Chinese young people are more dependent on their parents while their counterparts in the West are more independent and individualistic.

4. APPROACHES TO CULTIVATION OF CROSS-CULTURAL AWARENESS

In view of the cultural mistakes mentioned above in English learning and teaching, how to increase students' cross-cultural awareness becomes more and more important. In the textbook *Integrated Skills of English*, a large amount of cultural information is implanted in each unit. Each unit centers on one subject and there is a close relationship between different parts within a unit. For example, in Unit Two Book One, the first part "Listening and Speaking Activities" includes a conversation that describes an English flat and an oral exercise which asks students to introduce a Chinese farmer's home to a foreigner; the second part "Reading Comprehension and Language Activity" introduces American homes as well as British homes together with people's way of life in the United States and Britain; the third part "Extended Activities" provides students with an extra reading material called "American and traditional Chinese Homes" in which students are given a lot of contrasts between Chinese and American residences, enabling students to get to know the different cultural customs and values in these two countries; and the final part "Cultural Information" helps students understand the cultural elements in western culture about buying and selling houses. From this example, it is obvious to see that this course is intended to integrate cultural background with linguistic skills where necessary. The parts in each unit are relatively independent but mutually complementary, all of which contribute to instilling cultural knowledge into students gradually and systematically. The following part will probe into possible approaches to cultivation of cross-cultural awareness from various perspectives.

4.1 Vocabulary Teaching

Vocabulary is the most active element in a language and a tool that clearly carries the cultural information and reflects the social life of human beings. The living environment, customs, historical background and psychological traits enable many words to bear specific cultural color and endow them with rich cultural connotation. For example, when explaining the word "individualism" ("個人主義" in Chinese), teachers should compare the cultural connotation of these two words in Chinese and western culture. In Chinese culture, "individualism" is synonymous with being fond of showing off, and hence, it contains a strong negative meaning. On the contrary, the westerners especially the Americans hold extreme worship of individualism because they are eager to become "self-made man" or "self-made woman" and realize their American dream. As a result, the word "individualism" in American culture has positive meaning for it emphasizes personal interest, upholds individual will and advocates individual freedom and independence. The same is true of the explanation of the word "ambition" and comparison between "politician" and "statesman", "propaganda" and "publicity". Such words are abundant in English language, which requires teachers to carry out cross-cultural education consciously.

For another example, the kinship terms will frequently cause a lot of trouble in understanding each other when the communication happens between people with different cultural background because it is rather difficult to find out the satisfactory equivalents for all the titles. The English sentence "Mary's brother married Tom's sister." makes it hard for Chinese students to translate it into Chinese since "brother" can refer to Mary's elder brother or younger brother and the same is true of "sister". This is because kinship terms are not only a universally linguistic phenomenon, but also a cultural phenomenon which reflects a nation's cultural and social essence. Chinese kinship terms are quite different from English kinship terms in complexity and concreteness.

In vocabulary teaching, teachers should also pay attention to words' associative meaning. Different nationalities establish their own cultural system in different social environments. The words used in different cultures will generate different associative meaning in addition to their literal meaning, which result in different psychological reaction. In view of this, teachers ought to show students cultural background as well as allusions behind words, which would be more significant than explaining the literal meanings of words only.

4.2 Grammar Teaching

Grammar reflects ways of linguistic expression. Different cultures are bound to make the ways of expression varied. For Chinese and English, perhaps one of the most striking linguistic distinctions is the contrast between hypotaxis and parataxis. In English and most Indo-European languages, a great deal of subordination is clearly marked by conjunctions such as “if, although, because, when, and, but”, just to name a few. However, in Chinese one may communicate essentially the same concepts by means of parataxis; that is to say, placing two propositions together without marking but indicating the relationship by content. For example:

Original: 陝西是中華民族文明的發源地之一，陝西是中國五千年文明的縮影，陝西是所有炎黃子孫的根基。

Version 1: Shanxi is one of the birthplaces of the civilization of the Chinese nation; Shanxi is also the root of all people of Chinese descent.

Version 2: Shanxi is one of the birthplaces of the civilization of China and is also the root of all Chinese descendants.

Version 1 seems to be loose in structure, and not fit for the English readers' expectation. Version 2 adds a connective word “and” and abridges some repeated words. Concerning this kind of difference between Chinese and English, Pinkham said: “Chinese usually adopts juxtaposed sentence without any connective tags. The meaning between different clauses is easy to understand for Chinese readers, but when translated into English, the translation turns out to be clumsy, unclear, and difficult to comprehend for English readers” (Pinkham, 2000, p. 181).

Since Chinese and English belong to different language families, the links between sentences in a Chinese text and an English text are quite different. As a result, teachers are supposed to lead students to pay attention to such differences when necessary.

4.3 Discourse Teaching

The discourses in *Integrated Skills of English* contain a lot of useful information. Each unit includes a passage in the part of “reading comprehension” as well as an additional reading material in “read more”. What’s more, the final part “cultural information” also provides students with a short passage. Facing so many reading materials, teachers should always remember that when doing pre-reading tasks, it is rather important to introduce the relevant allusions and idioms in a discourse to students together with the background information such as history, geography, local customs and life styles. Unit two in Book two can be taken as an example. The passage with the title “Football” contains a lot of cultural information including some historical figures like Oliver Cromwell and Queen Victoria; a geographic term like the Roman Empire; some sports knowledge like the origin of American football—Rugby, differences between rugby and football, the introduction of the World Cup; and the comparison between American public school (free school) and British public school (actually private school). Surprisingly, students took more interest in teachers’ explanation of the cultural background than in the language points. The fact that students lack the instilment of cultural knowledge in English class and their eagerness to learn it reveals that culture teaching is as important as language teaching and sometimes should be paid even more attention to. The emphasis on language skills only can not ensure that students will succeed in cross-cultural communication with native speakers.

As for the analysis of structural features in discourse, teachers can make use of the above-mentioned passages in each unit in order to help students to better understand the different discourse structures. It would be quite necessary for teachers to explain to students different structures that actually result from the different thinking patterns between Chinese and western people. Western people are accustomed to linear logic, and therefore, this kind of reasoning is also reflected in their writings featured by linear structure. Nevertheless, Chinese people tend to consider things in an indirect and circular way, which determines that the basic mode of discourse structures is spiral. If teachers only impart linguistic knowledge to students, the essays written by students may have the Chinese structure although the language in it conforms to the English expression. From the viewpoint of English native speakers, they may think that such writing can surely make readers confused that merely adopts the way of beating around the bush. That’s why when teaching discourses, it is a must for teachers to intentionally interpret the cultural connotation in discourse structures with the purpose of helping students understand the English language and articles accurately and then produce idiomatic articles that conform to the English expressions.

4.4 Translation Teaching

Students often find it rather difficult to deal with the translation exercise in English learning. The reasons may be various, one of which could result from the differences between Eastern and Western culture. Teachers need to lead students to dig out the cultural implication of the original sentences, teach students to analyze and understand them from the cultural perspective, with a view to perceiving the differences not only between linguistic expressions but also between English and Chinese cultures. Another point teachers should bear in mind is that cultural default merits students’ attention. Cultural default has striking cultural features, so people with different cultural background may have great difficulty in

understanding sentences containing such phenomenon. Students are supposed to combine the cultural connotation in discourse and the information outside discourse, especially in the translation of Chinese and English metaphors. Example 1:

Original: The teenagers don't invite Bob to their parties because he is a **wet blanket**.

Version: 青少年們不邀請鮑勃參加他們的聚會因為他是一個令人掃興的人。

“Wet blanket” in the original is used metaphorically because this expression alludes to smothering a fire with a wet blanket. It refers to a person who discourages enjoyment or enthusiasm. However, in Chinese, there is no such metaphorical usage. If literal translation is adopted by retaining the original image, the Chinese readers will be confused and have no idea about such version as “他象一塊濕地毯”.

Example 2: Mary and her mother are **as like as two peas**. Like example 1, free translation should be adopted again “瑪麗和她媽媽長相很像”. In English, if people are compared to “peas” (豌豆), it can leave a vivid impression on readers. However, it is considered irreverent in Chinese culture to use such comparison.

Another example, it is known that Korea, Chinese Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore are viewed as Newly Industrial Economies and compared to “亞洲四小龍”. If we adopt literal translation by rendering the Chinese expression “亞洲四小龍” into “Four Asian Dragons”, this version will bring about misunderstanding to westerners. This is because the word “dragon” in East and West evokes quite different associative meaning. “Dragon” in ancient Chinese legend is a magic animal that can bring rainfall and punish demons. However, “dragon” in the west is a negative word which symbolizes something evil. Therefore, the westerners have trouble understanding why the four economic countries in Asia are regarded as the four devils. Instead, they tend to believe that the word “tiger” symbolizes hope, ambition and perseverance. The correct version “Four Asian Tigers” can better achieve the cultural equivalence.

In English teaching, teachers should be aware that it is up to them to point out the cultural differences to students while dealing with translation exercises, with the purpose of reminding them of the cultural differences between East and West.

4.5 Other Forms of Cross-cultural Education

In addition to the daily teaching activities, students' cross-cultural awareness can be developed in many other ways. Firstly, organize discussions on the cultural features of different regions and nationalities in China so that students can increase their general awareness. Such discussions can enable students to understand that cultural differences are a natural phenomenon and helps foster greater sensitivity to cultural details.

Secondly, use video films or English teaching films in class and follow it up with discussions. The systematic observation and recording of features of everyday situations can be done by teacher and students together while watching video films.

Thirdly, encourage students to develop interpersonal contacts with native English speakers. So far such contacts are far from adequate. At colleges where there are few native English or American teachers, inviting casual visitors or overseas students to class also helps. It is in such relaxed personal contacts that the students are apt to pick up some of the cultural information they would not be able to get otherwise.

Fourthly, include books on intercultural communication in the students' reading list and recommend to students some Internet websites relating to cross-cultural communication. These may serve as a summing up of, or a supplement to what students have noticed. Besides, give lectures on foreign customs and religious activities where possible, make comparisons between customs and habits of the Chinese with those of other peoples.

Last but not the least, the qualification of teachers will directly influence the effect of cultivation. If possible, English teachers ought to pursue further study abroad, where they can immerse themselves in the cultural atmosphere and experience the language and cultural differences in British and American countries. All these measures will definitely help improve students' cross-cultural awareness and further enhance their cross-cultural communicative competence.

5. CONCLUSION

Language teaching is of great importance in college English teaching, but culture teaching deserves our attention more. Teachers are responsible for grasping every opportunity to reveal to students the distinctive cultural customs in English-speaking countries along with the relevant mode of thinking and values. In this way, students will gradually deepen their understanding of linguistic phenomena in the process of grasping the foreign civilization. Winston Brembeck, the U.S. foreign language teaching expert once said, “To know another's language and not his culture is an excellent way to make a fluent fool of oneself”. All in all, only language study is not sufficient, the comprehensive English teaching

should constantly include intercultural activities, to give students the awareness and sensitivity they need to communicate competently in different cultures.

REFERENCES

- Byram, M. (1989). *Culture Studies in Foreign Language Education*. Clevedon: Multilingual matters.
- CAO, Qiping. (2000). Comprehensive Approach to Teaching-the Essence of Comprehensive English. *Journal of Anhui Normal University (Hum. & Soc. Sci.)*, 2, 260-263.
- CHEN, Shen. (1999). *The Teaching of Cultures in Foreign language Education*. Beijing: Beijing language and Culture University Press.
- DENG, Yanchang, & LIU, Runqing. (1989). *Language and Culture*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Hatim, Basil. (1997). *Communications Across Cultures*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.
- HU, Wenzhong. (2004). *Crossing Cultural Barriers*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- HUANG, Yuanshen, & Yu, Sumei. (2005). *Integrated Skills of English*. Beijing: Higher Education Press.
- JIA, Yuxin. (1998). *Intercultural Communication*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Kramersch, C. (1997). *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Pinkham, J. (2000). *The Translator's Guide to Chinglish*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Samovar, L. A., Porter, R. E., & Stefani, L. A. (1998). *Communication between Cultures*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Seelye, H. Ned. (1976). *Teaching Culture: Strategies for Foreign Languages Educations*. Lincolnwood: National textbook Co. in Conjunction with American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.
- Tomalin, B., & Stempleski, S. (1994). *Cultural Awareness*. New York: Oxford University Press.