

The Cultivation of Intercultural Awareness in High School English Teaching

CHEN Yuanhua^{[a],*}; LIU Ying^[b]

^[a]Human Resource Department, China West Normal University, Nanchong, China.

^[b]School of Foreign Languages, China West Normal University, Nanchong, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

As we all know, language is an important carrier of communication and culture. Teaching English in high school should not only be regarded as a process of teaching basic linguistic knowledge on the surface, but also an indispensable way of learning culture for students. Language and culture can't be separated from each other. It has been proved that cultivation intercultural awareness in English teaching can contribute to student's intercultural communication abilities in English. Although, educators have realized the necessity of cultural transmission when teaching English recently, due to different reasons, the effect of teaching English in high school is less than satisfactory.

In recent days, many educators put forward to an idea that English teachers in China play several roles at the same time in English teaching. English teachers must consider themselves as cultural transmitters. Only when they realize their identities and how important roles they play in English teaching process, will English teaching can be done more effectively and smoothly.

Key words: Language; Intercultural awareness; Cultivation; English teaching

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1. INTRODUCTION

With the development of economic globalization, people from different countries with different languages and cultural backgrounds have to communicate with each others. There is no doubt that English is one of the world's widely used language when dealing with global affairs. In China, teaching or learning English has been focused on for a long time since 1978, for the needs of reform and opening up policy. However, as a significant element of English teaching and learning in school, culture and intercultural communication often tends to be neglected. As a result, the effect of English teaching and learning in China is less than satisfactory. For example, many students who have learned English for more than 10 years since their primary school, they still can't talk to foreigners whose mother tongue is English. On the contrary, based on my owe experience, a Canadian student who has only studied Chinese as his second major in Regina University can talk with a Chinese in Mandarin nearly frequently, at least the communication between the Canadian student and Chinese can be carried on. This contrast is not an exception.

The reasons why English teaching effects in China are not satisfying are complicated, but without a doubt, the absence or deprivation of intercultural awareness when teaching English in China is obviously a big problem. In order to improve English teaching quality entirely and increase student's practical ability in using English substantially so that they can adapt to the social development, all the parties involved should pay attention to fostering intercultural awareness in teaching English in high school and make students be equipped with multicultural tolerance in practical communication (Zhou, 2010). At present, the college entrance examination still takes effects on teachers and students deeply. No matter how the education policies are changing, in recent years, English as an important college entrance examination subject still the focus of attention of all parties involved.

Generally speaking, it is because the big pressure of the examination, many English teachers in high school only concentrate on basic English grammars so that their students can get high scores. On the contrary, the culture issues are always neglected. As for students themselves, boring grammar teaching and endless testing training may leads to their passive attitude in learning English, and the lack of culture teaching is harmful for students to truly understand what a native speaker is saying. For example, A lady may say I need to powder my nose. If the listener only understands this sentence with each word's meaning, he surely will make mistakes. But if the listener knows this is a euphemism, an American slang, there will not be misunderstanding. As a result, when those Chinese students need to communicate with others in English after graduation, they may have big problems to communicate with foreigners by using English. Take College English Test 4 and College English Test 6 as another example, nearly all university students are familiar with these two English test. Compared with other English tests which they faced before they were enrolled in the university, these English tests are more flexible in questions setting, especially, there are many cultural factors in listening comprehension and translations parts. It is because many students lack of knowing culture of other countries and nations, there are big problems when they need to deal with those questions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Definition of Culture and Communication

Culture is a complicated concept. There are too many definitions and every definition has its original perspectives and ideas. Here I want to list one of those definitions. It consists of three parts: information culture, behavior culture and achievement culture. Information culture means some knowledge about society, geography, history and so on which are acquired by the local people. Behavior culture which is regarded as one of the most important factors of successful communication, refers to people's lifestyle, behavior, attitude and value. Achievement culture is art and literature achievement, which is the traditional concept of culture (Huntington, 2010). No matter what culture is, it is obvious that the relationship between language and culture can't be separated, for they influence each other deeply. Communication is contact between different person and person (Wu, 2004). In this process, Information and emotion can be conveyed and accepted so that people can understand the minds of each other. Language as one of the most vital carriers of communication, plays an important role in transmitting information between sender and receiver. At the same time, cultural background is a necessary element of the decoding process which is working between sender and acceptor.

2.2 The Definition of Intercultural Communication and Intercultural Awareness

Intercultural communication is the communication between native speakers and non-native speakers, and also the communication between people who have differences between language and culture. Intercultural communication is often discussed with reference to the participants' culturally different knowledge, its impact upon their conversational styles and the accompanying effect on success or failure in communicating across cultures (Uryu, 2009). Here it shows there have relationships between culture knowledge and communication. Hu (1985) mentions that intercultural communication is a frontier discipline that involves anthropology, sociology, linguistics, socio-linguistics and folklore. At the same time, intercultural communication is one of the most important components in intercultural communication competence. When a Chinese is communicating with a foreigner, this process can be called intercultural communication. Intercultural communication is as old as the appearance of different languages, however, as a subject today that more and more people start researching, it is still a new subject which needs people continue studying in the future.

Intercultural awareness is a kind of awareness. It concludes the perspicacity, scientificity and consciousness of dealing with the differences and conflicts between cultures when intercultural communication happens (Bi & Zhang, 1991). Intercultural awareness is necessary and helpful for people who have different languages and cultures to communicate with each other, for some misunderstandings or mistakes will not appear. In some intercultural communication occasions, cultural mistakes are thought much more serious than grammatical mistakes. It is because those cultural mistakes may lead to unhappiness and awkward between two communicated sides. Others think intercultural awareness consists of three components: knowledge of aspects of the target culture, cultural abilities and awareness of intentional learning (Yang, 2006). In a word, Intercultural awareness is a complex. Learning and knowing the culture of target language is good for promoting intercultural awareness so that both sides can consider each other's culture and avoid cultural conflicts and obstacles.

3. THE CULTIVATION OF INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS

3.1 The Principles of Cultivation of Intercultural Awareness

Teachers who teach English in high school should not only focus on language itself, but also the culture which is hidden in language. When teachers implement English teaching, they have to obey some rules and principles to

foster the cultivation of intercultural awareness so that students may acquire and using English in a practical and effective way.

The first principle is developing principle. It is well known that everything in this world is developing constantly, language is no exception. Taking a word “you” for example, around the time of Shakespeare, the meaning of the word “thou” was equal to the word “you” today. But now, we nearly only use the word “you” instead of “thou”. Another example is still about vocabulary. The word “pneumonia” means “head cold” also in Shakespeare’s dictionary (Huang & Flexne, 1985). Except the changes of words’ meanings, the appearance of new words also can prove that English is developing all the time. With the development of every aspect of society, many new things and concepts have been put forward. For instance, “flag down fare” means the original price of taking a taxi. There is no doubt, the expression is accompanied by the operation of taxi business. It is precisely because of the developing attribute of language, teachers should continue acquiring and learning English when teaching it in high school.

The Second principle is practical principle. What is practical principle? It means the content of culture that English teachers give to guide students should be consistent to the content of language that students are learning. For example, when a teacher is teaching greetings, he or she should emphasize on different ways to greet so that it may adapt to different occasions. When greeting an American young boy who is your acquaintance in a casual occasion, “What’s up” or “How are you doing” are much better than “How are you”, or “How do you do?” Except teaching greetings, teaching the precise English expressions of movies, dishes, countries and festivals are also should be acquired by students in their daily life, and suit this principle.

3.2 The Methods to Cultivate Intercultural Awareness

Methods to cultivate intercultural awareness are diverse. When teaching different parts of English, teachers should make use of different methods.

The first way is called elaborating method. The traits of this method are straight and detailed. For example, When students are learning a text about Christmas, on the one hand, teachers should teach the basic grammar knowledge, like vocabularies, sentences, pronunciations, expressions and so on based on the text itself. On the other hand, the culture issues about Christmas are also important contents for teachers to teach. Such as the origin of Christmas, the different celebrating customs in the world and so on.

The second way is called comparison method, which is to compare different language cultures between Chinese and English. For instance, in traditional Chinese culture, tiger is regarded as the king of animals, however in western culture, instead, lion is the substitution of tiger.

The English expressions “a lion in the way”, “beard the lion”, “twist the lion’s tail” emphasize on the “lion”, on the contrary, if we interpret them in Chinese, “lion” will be replaced by “tiger”, although the meanings are still unchangeable. Another example is also related to animals. In China, dragon is seen as the holy and royal symbol of Chinese nation, however in western countries, dragon is a fierce and unlucky animal.

Here, a famous case in intercultural communication must be referred. Instant noodles are popular around the world. In China, there is a brand called “White Elephant” which are sold well, however when it exported to America, it can’t be accepted by the local persons. After some investigations and analysis, people find that the translation of the name of the brand in English “White Elephant” has negative meanings, it means useless things. On the surface, these differences are differences between languages, however, in reality, it is more likely the difference between cultures deeply.

The third method is called imitation method. In high school, whether English teachers or students may not have many chances to communicate with native English speakers. What teachers and students only can do be to utilize class to practice English. In this imitation process, some original movie clips are a good target for students to imitate. When students are trying to play roles in a presupposed occasion, not only language can be practiced, but also culture can be experienced at the same time. For example, two students are calling each other, the expressions, like “Who is it”, “Its Kate”, “May I speak to Michael?”, “He’s not available right now, can I take a message?” is targets of wording for students to learn. Unconsciously, students may experience the culture of English on this occasion.

The fourth method is called digging method. In China, there are many kinds of English textbooks in different versions, in which teachers can dig some cultural phenomenon. For example, in Unit 1 of English textbook which is published by People’s Education Press for grade one in senior high school, friends are what this unit emphasizes on. Teachers should dig something deeply concerning to culture, such as how foreigners make friends, why those two boys get along with each other is such a way. If teachers and students have more and more questions when teaching and learning English textbooks, both of them are cultivating and promoting their intercultural awareness.

The fifth method is called activity method. Compared with other methods which have mentioned above, the method is a lot more colorful. Teachers can make use of many tools and activities to create chances to let students learn English and cultural background, such English corner, an English speech contest, English song contest, English movies imitation contest and so on. Compared with English teaching in classrooms, these activities are much more interesting, and therefore more appealing

to students. Through the plentiful activities, students may not only promote their language competence, like speaking and listening, but also the sensitivity and tolerance of different culture, and that is what educators want to see.

CONCLUSION

It is because of the economic globalization, people from different countries and areas with different cultural backgrounds must communicate with others. Under the circumstances, intercultural communication become inevitable, therefore, not only English teaching and learning is necessary, but also cultivation of intercultural awareness in the process is also should be focused on, for it is good for intercultural communication. In many ways, Teaching English is not only the education in the area of language itself, but also a process of cultural sharing and transmission. Language is inseparable from culture. Language is the carrier and culture is the pedestal of language (Shu & Zhuang, 1996). It is clear that culture has inseparable relationships with language. The crux of intercultural communication is in how people adapt to other cultures (Bennett, 1998). In order that people can adapt to other cultures, the first step is to make sure they can get intercultural awareness. Particularly, in high school, the old way in English teaching, by which teachers only teach grammar knowledge is out of fashion, for it will no longer suit the pace of society's development. Compared with the older teaching model, teaching English in high school with emphasizing the importance of cultivation of intercultural awareness is much more prevalent nowadays. In the future, this kind of English

teaching philosophy still will need teachers, students and other parties to pay more and more attention to.

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