On a Contrastive Method of Teaching Culture in ELT Classroom for College-Level Students

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Abstract

It has become an agreement that language teaching is reinforced when ESL teachers have an awareness of incorporating culture teaching in the classroom. Language and culture are intertwined. In any language, it is more than just words that convey meaning. All cultures have their preferences, practices, values and traditions that interwoven with the language. From the humanistic perspective, the education of different cultures aids students in getting to know different people, which is necessary for understanding and respecting other peoples and their ways of life; therefore contrastive study between the two languages and cultures is imperative for ESL teachers. Students would master the second language better, if teachers have an adequate understanding of both native and target culture and actively spread it. The aim of language teaching is more than the manipulation of syntax and lexicon but to foster well-rounded students that can understand and respect other cultures at the same time spread Chinese culture to promote the communication and interaction between China and western world. In terms of methods of teaching culture in college-level ESL classroom, it would be more effective that teachers design a series of students “hands on” activities. Teachers can make those cultural features an explicit topic of discussion rather than being taught implicitly, imbedded in the linguistic forms.

Key words: Language and culture; Contrastive study; Culture instruction activities
intercultural communication in the target language for a
foreign language student. “We can predict and describe
the patterns that will cause difficulty in learning, and those
that will not cause difficulty, by comparing systematically
the language and culture to be learned with the native
language and culture of the student.” (Lado, 1957)

What is more, from a humanistic aspect, the study
of different cultures aids students in getting to know
different people, which is a necessary prollusion to
understanding and respecting other peoples and their ways
of life. It broadens students’ horizons when language
education combined with the instruction of the similarities
differences in the life of various cultural groups. Nowadays, most of the Chinese college students live in
a monolingual and monoculture environment, who are
prone to draw premature and inappropriate judgments
due to the gap of cultural knowledge. This can inhibit
the learning enthusiasm and even cause them to hold the
view that the foreign people whose language they are
learning as very strange and even ill-mannered. There
are mainly two current views on language and culture
teaching. One emphasized on the impart of cultural
facts, which are composed of mines of information, i.e.,
immersion in literature and the arts, and the superficial
information, which may focus on the festivals, customs,
habits, and everyday life (Kramsch, 1993). All that it
provides is just facts without the deep understanding of
the meanings behind. The other standpoint, taking a step
forward, embeds target culture into a known framework
and establishes connections between one’s own and
the target country. However, this approach also has its
limitation. Without analysis and understanding in depth,
the students who have already acquired their own Chinese
pattern of assumptions, beliefs and mindsets are apt to
favor one over other groundlessly. This paper is dedicated
to improving the later approach to integrating culture into
ELT classroom.

**CULTURE AND LANGUAGE**

As a matter of fact, the idea of teaching culture is
nothing new to second language teachers. As early as
sixties, Nostrand’s (1966) paper on “describing and
teaching the sociocultural context of a foreign language
and literature” put forward the idea as a challenge by
suggesting two educational purposes of FL teaching:
“cross-cultural communication and understanding”. To
date, the development of the social sciences resulted in
a more widespread understanding of culture, and a rising
focus on the interdisciplinary study with anthropology
and sociology. More and more linguistics and scholars in
other disciplines pay special attention on the relationship
between language and culture. Many ethnographers such
as Buttjes (1990) have tried to present that “language and
culture are from the start inseparably connected” (Buttjes,
1990, p. 55). As the evidence, he summarized: 1. Every
society sets up the ways in which children are involved in
particular situations, and this, in turn, influences the form,
the content and the function of children’s utterances; 2. the
primary concern of the person who takes care of the child
is not with grammatical input, but with the transmitting of
sociocultural knowledge; 3. the children also acquire the
pattern of behaviors and the kinesics of his or her culture,
in addition to language (ibid).

Culture, undoubtedly, is complex. It is multi-layered
and multifaceted. Some scholars have likened it to an
iceberg of which only the top is visible while a massive
part remains unobservable below the surface of the
water. Others have compared culture to an onion (Geert
Hofstede, 1991, p. 1) with its many layers. After one
layer is peeled, another layer lies beneath, waiting to
be examined. Both metaphors powerfully illustrate the
complexity of culture.

Considering the active role of people in their culture,
Patrick R. Moran defined culture as: Culture is the
evolving way of life of a group of persons, consisting of
a shared set of practices associated with a shared set of
products, based upon a shared set of perspectives on the
world, and set within specific social contexts. (Moran,
2004)

Byram (1988) argued that language has no function
independent of the context in which it is used, thus
language always refers to something beyond itself:
the cultural context. In an important contribution to
the discussion of the cultural component of language

teaching, Claire Kramsch differentiated two definitions
doing culture, one from the humanities, and the other from
the social sciences. The one focuses on artifacts of
everyday life, and the mechanisms for their reproduction
and preservation through history. (Kramsch, 1996) The
other refers to “the attitudes and beliefs, ways of thinking,
behaving and remembering shared by members of that
community” (Kramsch, 1996).

Since language is a direct display of culture, a society
cannot be totally appreciated or understood without
knowledge of its language. The other element of culture is
the history of civilization. Traditionally representing the
“culture” element in ELT classroom, it includes history,
literature, geography, and achievements in the sciences
and the arts. Since they represent the heritage of a nation
and thus must be acquainted by the students who expect to
understand a new target language and culture.

As McKay (2003) advocated that culture affected
language teaching in two ways: linguistic and
pedagogical. Linguistically, it has an influence on the
semantic, pragmatic, and discourse levels of the language.
Pedagogically, it impacts the choice of the language
materials because language materials with cultural content
and the cultural-based teaching methodology are to be
taken into consideration while deciding upon the language
materials.
## CONTRASTIVE LINGUISTICS AND CONTRASTIVE STUDY OF CHINESE AND WESTERN CULTURE

Contrastive linguistics (showing in what ways the two respective languages differ, in order to help in the solution of practical problems, e.g. translation), since its appearance by Robert Lado in the 1950s, has often been linked to aspects of applied linguistics, e.g., to avoid interference errors in foreign-language learning (Wikipedia).

Contrastive linguistics has been applied in translation course for many years. Belonging to different language families with great differences, the Chinese language and the English language do share some similarities; for example, “subject + Predicate + object” is a basic sentence pattern in both languages, while there are many differences on every level of the languages. Those contrastive studies arouse the interests of the students to ponder these matters further by themselves, thus enhancing their translation ability.

The task of the cultural anthropologists, linguists and the sociologists is to identify these differences develop materials based on those differences; the task of the foreign language teacher is to be conscious of these differences and to be ready to teach them; the task of the student is to learn them. The study cannot be understood by a purely linguistic study and rejected by many as an applied discipline. In spite of the criticism of applied contrastive linguistics, contrastive studies were continued, and their scope was broadened. Although Lado included a comparison of cultures, early contrastive studies focused on what has been described as micro linguistic contrastive analysis. With the broadening of linguistic studies, contrastive studies became increasingly concerned with culture contrastive analysis.

Contrastive Culturology is newly coined. Yang Zijian’s paper On the Establishment of Contrastive Culturology (1994) advocates the necessity of establishing Contrastive Culturology in China to foster intercultural communication and develop Chinese culture. As a matter of fact, the contrastive study of western and Chinese culture can date back to more than a century ago. Most of the studies are done by Chinese scholars (such as Liang Suming, Fang Dongmei, Qian Zhongshu, Jin Kemu, Huang Jianzhong, etc.), due to the dominance of western culture and the deficient introduction of Chinese culture. However, those studies have been fruitful and given ESL teachers abundance resources. Contrastive method should also be brought to ELS classroom. Forasmuch as culture is so pervasive and subtle, we often take native culture for granted and have some stereo type of other cultures. The comparison facilitate the understanding of other culture as well as instill the students the knowledge which part of Chinese culture can carry forward and which part should be improved through learning the other culture.

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### CULTURE TEACHING ACTIVITIES IN ESL CLASSROOM

Without the study of culture, foreign language instruction is inaccurate and incomplete. In many regards, culture has been taught implicitly, imbedded in the linguistic forms that EL students are learning. To lead students being aware of the cultural features manifested in the language, teachers can make those cultural features an explicit topic of discussion and provide well-prepared and in-depth analysis on it. Culture is a dynamic evolving way of life instead of static and unchangable facts, which made it really difficult to give a panorama of every culture. 

Foreign language teachers can begin with the comparison of different dimensions and try to help the students promote their culture general ability. Wang Yuanhua (1986) said though Cultural development consists of constant changes along the history, there must be some common nationality traits unchangeable and continuous. There are four dimensions given by Wang Yuanhua (1986):

- Manifestation of national creativity
- Common national psychology
- Thinking mode
- Values

The dimensions present accumulation and tradition of each culture. To begin with, teachers may adopt a general view to contrast the two cultures, for example, referring to Western mode of thinking, Qian Xuesen (1986) said: “Abstractive thinking seems to be linear or branch-like, while referring to Chinese mode”, Shen Xiaolong (1990) said: “This is a circular dialectic mode of thinking with a strong plastic, flexible and stochastic nature”. Western medicine examines parts of the body through tests and X-rays while Chinese medicine puts emphasis on general physical condition which can be examined through pulse, complexion, tongue coating, etc..

Cultural activities and objectives should be carefully organized and incorporated into lesson plans to enrich and inform the teaching content. In terms of design the teaching activity, ELS teachers can lecture or present cultural material and engage the students to discuss or assign them to compare the two cultures in respects of Core values, World view, Outlook on Arts, Outlook on time, Modes of thinking and Linguistic expression. Some teachers and researchers have noticed it effective to present students with ideas or objects that are typical to the target culture but are unfamiliar to the students. Thus the students are given background information and clues which related to the objects and ideas so that they can incorporate the new information into their own world.
view. With the appropriate guidance, the students act as anthropologists, exploring and understanding the target culture in relation to their own. In this manner, students achieve a level of empathy, appreciating that there is its own coherence in each cultural pattern of behavior. As for those similar norms and traditions, teachers can ask students to illustrate the similarities and differences of them and try to explain the deep reason. For instance, discussion of common proverbs in the target language could emphasize how the proverbs are different from or similar to proverbs in the students’ native language and how differences might reflect their respective historical and cultural background. For some proverbs, we can find exact equivalence in Chinese, such as silence is golden; the palest ink is better than the best memory, while some do not have equivalence in Chinese. No one can deny that the translation do enrich Chinese. Which of them are easily accepted by Chinese, and which are not. EL Teachers can combine those language forms with thought-provoking questions. It has provided a way to explore culture in addition to analyze the stereotypes about and misperceptions of the culture, as well as a way for students to explore the values that are often represented in the proverbs of their native culture. During the process students get to know the target culture by reference of Chinese traditional and general culture.

It is also important to help students understand that cultures are not monolithic. A variety of appropriate behaviors are possible for any type of interaction in any given culture. Teachers must allow students to observe and explore cultural interactions from their own perspectives to enable them to find their own voices in the second language speech community.

Using authentic sources from the native speech community helps to engage students in authentic cultural experiences. Sources can include films, television shows, and news broadcasts; magazines; Web sites; and newspapers, restaurant menus, and other printed materials. Teachers should adapt their use of those materials to meet the age and language proficiency level of the college students. Film is a frequent choice, since it provides a more current and comprehensive ways to encapsulate many aspects of a culture. Literary texts are often carrying a wealth of cultural information and evoke memorable effects for readers. With specific goals in mind, texts that are elaborately selected for a given group of students can be very helpful in aiding students to gain insight into a culture. The teacher can engage the students in discussion of the cultural norms illustrated in them and what these norms might represent the values of the culture.

Culture capsules, developed by Taylor and Sorenson (1961), are one of the best-established and best-known methods for teaching culture, which are generally prepared out of class by a student but presented during class time in 5 or 10 minutes. It is a brief description of certain aspect of the target language culture followed by contrasting information from the students’ native language culture.

When integrating culture into ELT classroom, besides providing the students with some terms in order to talk about culture, what teachers should always have in mind is to raise their students’ awareness of their own culture and target culture, which is helpful for developing the understanding and empathy for other people and culture. Teachers should also foster intellectual and objective views for intercultural analysis that is helpful to develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture in terms of supporting evidence. What is more, the cultivation of an understanding of the culture from an insider’s perspective allows student accurately appreciating it. All these are better carried out in a systematical and structured way and adjusted in time according to the students’ feedback.

Foreign language education should be a humanistic pursuit with the intention to sensitize students to other cultures, to respect for the differences among peoples and appreciation of similarities among them. Thus, culture must be fully incorporated as a vital component of language teaching. The contrastive method with sufficient resources and cooperative learning environments can bring a contextual language and culture knowledge into college-level ESL classroom with the hope that it will keep students motivated and will result in positive attitudes, greater awareness, and academic success.

REFERENCES