

A Study of the Teaching of Culture in College English

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Abstract—Language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication. It is closely and intricately related to culture. It is part of culture. And as carriers of culture, language reflects culture. This essay dwells on the digging of the relationship between the language teaching, especially English teaching, and culture teaching today, and tries to find a more suitable method of language teaching as well as culture teaching.

Index Terms—language, culture, communication

I. LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

A. What is Language?

Before we define the language, let's look at the definitions below: Language, according to Finocchiaro, is a system of arbitrary, vocal symbols which permit all people in given culture, or other people who have learned the system of that culture, to communicate or to interact. Mario Andrew Pei defines language is a system of communication by sound, operating through the organs of speech and hearing, among members of a given community, and using vocal symbols possessing arbitrary conventional meanings. Saussure says language is system of signs that express ideas. Francis holds language is an arbitrary system of articulated sounds made use of by a group of human as a means of carrying on the affairs of their society. Salzman thinks a language refers to any one of several thousand systems of oral communication used by different human societies.

However, we can see that none of the above definitions is sound. Nevertheless, from the definitions above, we can draw a broad agreement that language should possess the following characteristics, that is, arbitrariness, duality, displacement, productivity, cultural transmission, and interchangeability. In other words, these are the “design features” of human language. And of which cultural transmission is what we will discuss. If we put it into another way, that is, just like the traditional habits, language is part of human genetic endowment; language can mirror the culture of people who speak it. So, when we study a certain language, we should also cast some lights on the culture it carries.

B. What is Culture?

1. Definition of Culture

Scholars have all tried to define culture in a satisfied manner, but all failed. As early as 1952, Kroeber and Kluckhohn listed 164 definitions of Culture that they had found in the anthropology literature. Tylor treats Culture as a complex whole of our social traditions and as prerequisite for us to be a member of the society. And Hoebel and Frost defined Culture as “integrated system of learned behavior patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society and which are not the result of biological inheritance.” (Hoebel & Frost, 1976)

While Brown's definition “Culture might be defined as the ideas, customs, skills, arts, and tools which characterize a given people in a given period of time.” And Haviland calls it a set of rules or standard shared by members of a society which when acted upon by the members, produces behavior that falls with a range that members consider proper and acceptable. Bates and Plog proposed a descriptive definition, “Culture is a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of a society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that transmitted from generation to generation through learning.” (Bates and Plog, 1990) This definition includes not only patterns but also patterns of thought, artifacts, and the culturally transmitted skills and techniques used to make the artifacts. And their definition contains most of the major territory of culture on which scholars currently agree. With the basis of this definition, Porter and Samovar advanced another definition: Culture is the deposit of knowledge, experience, belief, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religions, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and artifacts acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving. (Samovar & Porter, 2000)

These definitions above demonstrate that culture is a large and evasive concept. It refers to the total pattern of beliefs, custom, institutions, objects and techniques that characterized the life of a human community. It regulates people's lives in almost every aspect.

2. Characteristics of Culture

Firstly, culture is holistic. As a holistic system, culture can be broken down into several subsystems, including a

kinship system, and education system, a religious system, an association system, a political system, and so on, but they are all intimately interrelated.

Secondly, culture is pervasive. Culture penetrates into every aspect of our life and influences the way we think, the way we talk, and the way we behave. Culture combines visible and invisible things around us. Culture is the sum total of human society and its meanings.

Thirdly, culture is dynamic. Cultures are constantly changing over time. According to Porter and Samovar, cultures change mainly through mechanisms. And the four major mechanisms account for the change of cultures are: technical invention, disasters, cultural contact, and environmental factors.

Finally, culture is learned. Because culture is a shared symbolic system within a relatively large group of people, the only way for group members to integrate into, reinforce, and co-create this shared symbolic system is through a learning process. We begin to consciously and unconsciously learn our culture on our early life through the process of socialization or enculturation. The interaction with members living around us is the most common way. Other sources for learning a culture include schools, mass, art, folk tales, myths and proverbs.

3. Classification of Culture

There exists various ways of classifying culture. For example:

(1) High culture, popular culture, deep culture (Hu, 1988)

a. High culture includes philosophy, literature, fine arts, music and religion.

b. Popular culture includes customs, habits, rites and rituals, ways of living and all interpersonal behavior.

c. Deep culture refers to the conception of beauty, definition of sin, notion of modesty, ordering of time, tempos of work, patterns of group decision-making, approaches to problem-solving, roles in relation to status by age, sex, class, occupation, and kinship, body language and so on and so forth. Deep structure is closely related to what may be termed the national temperament of a people.

(2) Material culture and spiritual culture

a. Material culture refers to tangible items such as cars, watches, television sets and houses.

b. Spiritual culture refers to intangible items such as values, norms, beliefs, customs, etc.

C. *The Relationship between Language and Culture*

From the above review of the language and culture, we can get an idea of the relationship between them. That is,

(1) Language is part of culture. Language is both a component of culture and a central network through which the other components are expressed. Just as H. Goodenough says "a society's language is an aspect of its culture. The relation of language to culture, then, is that of part to whole." (Goodenough, 1964)

(2) Language reflects culture. From language of a nation, people can learn some cultural features of this nation. And in a broad sense, language is the symbolic representation of a people, and it comprises their historical and cultural background as well as their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking.

(3) There is another sense in which language is not a passive reflector of culture. Actually, cultural features vary not only synchronically from speech community to speech community, they also change diachronically within the same speech community, and this change also reflects change of language, which will cope with the change of society actively.

In a nutshell, this theoretical survey tells us that there is a very intimate relationship between language and culture, maintaining that they are inextricably related so that people can not understand or appreciate the one without the knowledge of the other. That is why the emphasis should be put on culture in foreign language teaching.

II. THE PRESENT SITUATION IN COLLEGE TEACHING

The learning of language and the learning of culture are obviously two different things, and at the same time, they are closely inter-dependent. The linguistic system is part of the social system. Neither can be learned without the other.

When we mention English teaching, we will at once associate it with "deaf English" and "dumb English". A good case in this point is that students don't know to answer such questions as "what do you usually have for your breakfast?", because they don't know how to express "稀饭" and "馒头" in English. And some other reasons make the situation worse. In my opinion, the main reasons are as follows:

(1) Incorrect goal of teaching: Chinese students of English have long been trained the way to pass the entrance examination to college in middle schools. They are quite skillful at grammar rules. But to most students, their ability of using English to communicate is rather weak.

(2) Impractical of content of teaching: the textbook is too old in some way. And most texts are about literature and politics, seldom about practical content. This is one of the reasons that the students' ability of writing is rather poor, though grammar is good to them.

(3) Inadequate knowledge of culture: till today, some of the language teachers and scholars still have not been able to pay enough attention to the role of cultural knowledge in language learning. What have been emphasized mostly are the students' motivation, the teachers' skills etc. One very important component in college English teaching has been neglected. That is, the awareness of the role of cultural traits in foreign language acquisition. It's unthinkable and very hard for one to master a foreign language and communicate very well with its native speakers without a good

knowledge of the people's cultural traits and cultural standards, because each language contains a certain amount of cultural features that other languages don't have. Lack of cultural knowledge will make communication difficult and result in many mistakes.

Surveying the present situation of English teaching in college, we can find that half is satisfactory and half is worrying. Today, more and more people begin to be interested in English; college students pay much time and energy on English, and they have made great achievements in different kinds of English examination. But, what we have to worry about is that many students can not use English properly, and are lack of cross cultural communicative competence, they make mistakes frequently. So many disadvantages that emerge in the students' learning English make our English teaching workers have to introspect deeply.

III. CONCLUSION

From all the discussion above, we can see that, under the situation of cultivating the students of cross-cultural communicative competence, the traditional teaching method that the teachers teach and the students recite before the examinations should be changed. On the one hand, language and culture are so closely inter-dependent that neither can be learned without the other. On the other hand, great differences exist between the high-context Chinese culture and the low-context Western culture. There is no point in neglecting these differences if we want to learn English well. Furthermore, in order to integrate culture into college English Teaching, some basic principles should be followed. That is,

- (1) cultural objectives and activities must be included in lesson plans
- (2) cultural components must be tested in examination
- (3) the teaching of content must be emphasized as much as the teaching of form
- (4) students need to be taught to understand to experience and to process culture
- (5) the target language should be the primary vehicle used to teach culture

In a nutshell, we must recognize the importance of intercultural awareness in English language teaching and set it as one of the goals of teaching. In present English teaching, our English teachers should cultivate our students not only to express foreign things and cultures in English, but also can use English to introduce Chinese staffs and culture to the outside world, balancing English culture and Chinese culture development in the process of language teaching. Thus, we have to carry out cross cultural input, which means turning the course of language teaching to the course of gradual comprehension to the target language culture and mother tongue culture, making English teaching and practice match.

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