

How to Enhance Culture Teaching in English Language Classes

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Abstract—Language is closely related to culture. Language expresses and embodies cultural reality, in the meantime, culture exerts enormous influences on language. Therefore, language learning is often culture learning. The author, based on the negligence of culture teaching in English language classes, illustrates the influences of cultural knowledge on reading, translating and intercultural communicating, and proposes suggestions on culture teaching in English language teaching (ELT).

Index Terms—culture teaching, influences, suggestions

I. INTRODUCTION

In China traditional ways to teach English tend to focus on language itself but ignore culture. Especially under the pressure of college entrance examination, CET-4 and CET-6, exam-oriented teaching is dominant and culture teaching is excluded. As a result, it has been observed that many learners who learn English as a foreign language (EFL) are severely deficient in cultural knowledge, although they got high scores in exams. In recent years, foreign language teaching has got more attention than ever before. More and more foreign language teachers are aware that second language learning is often second culture learning and cultural competence is an integral part of language competence. So it is of great importance to give students culture teaching in ELT. This paper illustrates the influence of cultural knowledge on reading, translating and intercultural communicating, and gives suggestions on culture teaching in EFT.

II. INFLUENCES OF CULTURE ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE

A. *Relationship between Language and Culture*

Many experts have talked much about the relationship between language and culture. Chinese professor Hu Zhuanglin has presented “It has long been recognized that language is an essential and important part of a given culture and the impact of culture upon a given language is something intrinsic and indispensable.” (Hu, 2001, p.20) In practice, there is a close correlation between language and culture, language is the carrier and reflection of culture. Meanwhile, culture, in a broad sense, including language, imposes great influences on language. Therefore, we must attach more importance to culture teaching in ELT.

B. *Culture and Reading Comprehension*

“Reading comprehension means extracting the required information from the text as effectively as possible. There are two broad levels in reading: i) visual signals from the eyes; ii) a cognitive task of interpreting the visual information, relating the received information with the reader’s own general knowledge, and reconstructing the meaning that the writer hand meant to convey.”(Wang, 2000, p.53) To achieve these two levels of reading is by no means an easy job. Besides linguistic knowledge, readers have to know some cultural background knowledge.

The role of cultural background knowledge in language comprehension has been formalized as schema theory. According to this theory, comprehending a text is an interactive process between the reader’s cultural background knowledge and the text. Efficient comprehension requires the ability to relate the textual material to one’s own knowledge. (Carrel, 1983) In some cases, we may read an article with some new words or new structures in it, but we can guess the meaning of the article based on our knowledge about the topic without too much difficulty. It can be seen that one’s cultural knowledge plays a more important role than new words and new structures in reading comprehension.

However, teaches usually emphasize much on linguistic knowledge and pay little attention to cultural background knowledge. So students are encouraged to expand their vocabularies and to gain greater control over complex syntactic structures so as to improve reading comprehension. Consequently, many EFL learners are unable to read effectively, and frequently fail to comprehend sentences or texts, although they know each word and each sentence structure. It is commonly acknowledged that without learning culture relative to a given topic, thorough comprehension will be difficult or impossible.

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that linguistic deficiency is but one of the factors that might have caused students’ poor reading comprehension. It is the lack of cultural background knowledge that is the major element

affecting their comprehension. Therefore, in English language classes teachers should introduce relative cultural knowledge so that students equipped with such knowledge will be able to guess meaning from the printed page. As Goodman once said reading was “a psycholinguistic guessing game”. (Goodman, 1970, p. 259-271)

C. *Culture and Translating*

Speaking of translation, many EFL learners tend to hold that it is a mere inter-lingual transformation. But it's not the case. As discussed above, language is the carrier of culture, so translation is in nature and inter-cultural activity. Nowadays, translation is even regarded as intercultural communication or acculturation by many experts. Culture plays such an important role in translation. So cultural teaching should never be neglected in translating courses.

Some people believe that words or texts in one language can be accurately translated into another as long as the translators use a good bilingual dictionary. Unfortunately, language is not this simple. Accurate and effective translating is a demanding and difficult if not impossible because many words are culture-bound. (Larry, 2000)

In addition, understanding cultural differences will be beneficial to translating as well. There are many cultural differences between China and English-speaking countries, without knowing them, perfect translation is impossible.

So successful translators must learn cultures of the target language and differences between their own culture and the target culture, which is essential to convey the meaning of the original appropriately and perfectly. Otherwise, translation is frequently bound to produce misunderstanding or incomprehension because of cultural orientations.

D. *Culture, Communicating and Intercultural Communicating*

Culture and communication are directly linked. “When cultures differ, communication practices may also differ. As Smith pointed out: In modern society, different people communicate in different ways, and the way people communicate is the way they live. It is their culture, ... Communication and culture are inseparable.” (Larry, 2000, p.95) Culture governs and defines the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted, just because culture conditions us toward one particular mode of communication over another, it is imperative that we learn the culture and the target culture as a first step toward improving intercultural communication.

And English, as a necessary and important tool for intercultural communication, has got more attention in China's classrooms. But unfortunately, traditional ELT has emphasized too much on the teaching of language components and neglected the input of cultures. As a result, when confronted with people from other cultures and are still unable to communicate appropriately. For they lack the culture and the target culture, and are used to thinking according to their train of thought, replacing the target cultural pattern with their own cultural pattern. That is to say, they use their own native cultural norms as criteria to communicate and value people in other cultures because of cultural difference unawareness. Then they are not immune to the uncertainty about the behaviors of both themselves and others in the interaction. Should they shake hands or bow? Should they offer a card or wait others to offer them first? How does the other view time and spatial relation? How does the other define status? Frequently the lack of such knowledge results in their failure to assess the potential consequences of their acts in intercultural communication. For instance, the seemingly innocent acts of showing the soles of feet to a strange in Korea or touching a woman they are introduced to in Saudi Arabia could send negative messages that hamper the rest of the encounter.

Especially as the world evolves into the global village, the importance of intercultural communication takes on added urgency. No nation, group, or culture can remain aloof or autonomous. Intercultural contact has been the manor concern today. Within such a global environment, each corner of the world has felt the impact of cultural diversity. Then cooperation among members from various cultures and co-cultures is inevitable, and interpersonal communication between various cultural backgrounds becomes more frequent as well. That is to say people are increasingly communicating across cultures. However, cultural differences will keep people apart. Different customs, values, ways of life, thinking and social norms, and the like may give rise problems in contact, and culture shocks or clashes are unavoidable when we are thruse into a strange culture. By then, how can we be the masters of such social situations? If we understand what members of a particular culture value and pay close attention to the differences between the target culture and our own one, appreciating similarities and accepting differences, we can deepen each other's understanding and clear up each other's misunderstanding. What's more, cultural shock, violence or conflicts arising from cultural differences can be reduced or even avoided. For culture can provide us with the skills and rules necessary to adapt ourselves to the world. (Larry, 2000)

It's true that we send and receive messages not in isolation, but in a specific setting or environment. That's to say, communication always occurs in contexts, and the rules for each context are culturally based. So cultural competence is a component of communicative competence. A successful intercultural communicator understands various types of cultures.

Now from these discussions above, we see that culture exerts numerous influences on EFL learning. Therefore, what EFL learners should be taught is far more than language components and skills, cultures should be included. Culture teaching is the last aspect to be neglected in ELT. Yet, how to conduct culture teaching in English language classes remains problematical.

III. SUGGESTIONS ON CONDUCTING CULTURE TEACHING IN ELT

Culture teaching, in a strict sense, is not an independent course, but an integral component of language teaching. Hence, developing cultural competence is essential in English language teaching. This part is to propose some suggestions on helping students acquire culture knowledge as follows.

A. *Raise Awareness of Culture Learning*

Although it is impossible to teach culture systematically in English language classes, it is possible for teachers to raise students' awareness of culture learning whenever chances emerge. By taking examples, teachers make learners recognize that language and culture are closely related, culture is an important part of English learning, and rich cultural knowledge will improve their ingrate skills in English language. Only when they have a correct recognition for the purpose of culture learning, will they have a positive attitude towards it.

B. *Develop Interest in Culture Learning*

As is well known, interest is the best teacher. It's believed that when learners' curiosity and interests are stimulated, the eternal motivation grows. To arouse students' interest in learning culture, teachers should try to introduce cultural knowledge in an interesting and naturally occurring context. Role-playing about some interesting stories, tales, fables, legends, or festivals in English-speaking countries will serve the purpose quite well. For instance, having introduced some basic knowledge of Christmas, teachers can guide students to celebrate the festival the way in which American people do.

C. *Creation of Intercultural Communication Surroundings*

The most direct way to acquire culture of the target language is to communicate with foreigners. However, the great majorities of the EFL learners have few opportunities to study, work or live in English-speaking community and to communicate with English native speakers directly, they can learn the target culture only in classrooms, or from books, or through mass media, so to create an intercultural communication surroundings is an effective way. For example, in the university where I'm working, a teacher whose native language is English is visited to the weekly-held English Home where students can easily get access to communicating with them directly. Besides, when western festivals come, people perform what westerners do.

D. *Group Discussion about Cultural Phenomena Embodied in Reading Materials*

Discussion is one of the best ways to help students acquire cultural knowledge. When processing the intensive reading and extensive reading texts, teachers should spend as much time as possible on the ideas, ethics, values or customs, and the like embodied in them and organize discussion. Making comparisons and contrasts between Chinese culture and the target culture is the common way to fulfill this task. Moreover, culture notes in textbooks also help us a lot. However, it needs to be pointed out that discussion shouldn't simply be the teacher telling students a body of information, but should be an interactive procedure, in which the teacher and students talk about a given topic. For one thing, the teacher ask students to deliver their ideas about a particular topic and give more sub-questions according to their response, for another thing, students are encouraged to raise their own questions about the topic or about the answers of students. Only in this way can discussion achieve the desired result, helping students understand the culture better.

E. *Utilization of Movies*

Video units and movies in English are now easily available, so the unitization of video movies has become increasingly important to EFL teaching. Students all have a strong desire to understand movies in the target language. Most movies are rich in linguistic contents and cultural backgrounds as well. Characters in movies provide and unrivalled variety of authentic speech and language is introduced in the context various communicative situations and between speakers of different kinds, therefore, students can learn how those people in the culture actually communicate in real situations. Meanwhile, the themes, conversations and actions in movies mirror the habits, beliefs, and customs of the culture, which can serve as good introduction about the various cultural characteristics in English-speaking countries.

F. *Encourage Students to Surf the Internet and Do Duty-report Activity*

Prior to each class, the teacher give students one or two topics related to cultural knowledge and encourage them to surf the Internet for some relative information. Then when the class meets, ask students to deliver their speeches and answer questions from their extrovert and communicative peers, followed by the teacher's summary on the cultural knowledge. In this way, teachers can cultivate students' awareness of learning culture via the Internet on their own.

These suggestions proposed above are only some of the feasible ones. There many others. It is up to the teacher to decide which way or combination of ways to used for particular cultural teaching.

IV. CONCLUSION

Research has shown that there is a close relationship between language and culture, second language learning is often second culture learning and cultural competence is an integral part of language competence. Lack of cultural knowledge

is frequently the major cause of many Chinese EFL students' poor abilities in reading, translating and intercultural communicating, and is also the most neglected factor in English language teaching in China. Therefore, culture teaching in ELT should be what teachers are increasingly concerned about. By using such strategies as watching movies, surfing the Internet, discussing, and the like, teachers introduce and differences between the target culture and the native one, which will greatly contribute to students' cultural competence.

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