

# The Importance of Culture Factor in Foreign Language Teaching

Changjuan Zhan

School of Foreign Language, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao, Shandong, China

**Abstract**—In this essay, the relationship between the language and culture is explained in certain ways. In English teaching, the importance of culture permeating is put forward, and in another way how this method is carried out. Only the target culture and national culture are combined together, can the corresponding policy be employed in teaching. In order to achieve the purpose of communication in teaching process, learning is more important.

**Index Terms**—English teaching, culture difference, material and permeating

## I. INTRODUCTION

Foreign language studying does not only mean learning the language, but the most important is that one should know well the foreign culture, conventions, the living style, history and culture background. The cross-culture communication is developing and being used more and more in language studying. Strengthening culture contents has become the important way in foreign teaching reform. Learning the foreign culture is not only widening our perspective but helpful in our knowing more about the meaning of the language. The anthropologist E.B.Tylor in England said: The culture is a complicated globality. It involves knowledge, belief, art, law, customs and habits of the people as a social member to gain all the abilities. It is defined as: what is it -the society's doing and thinking. As the development of the social linguistics, culture linguistics, pragmatics and the subject of cross-culture, foreign language teaching is not only the language teaching but it should include culture teaching. Learning the different culture does not mean you must accept the culture and not mean you have the responsibility to conduct your behavior according to the culture model. On the part of the relationship between culture and language, both of them close together on the one hand, but differ on the other hand. Culture factor permeates into all the aspects of the language, and the language itself accumulates numerous culture sediments in the history. Language is a part of culture and its carrier. So the linguist and the teacher advocate the idea that the culture background is permeated into the language teaching. Knowing further about the culture contents expressed by language is the necessary part in changing language knowledge into sociable ability. The culture background knowledge plays an important role in the students communicating with each other in foreign language. Because of the different national history, culture tradition, social system, living surroundings and conditions, the different culture background appears, and as a result the different turn of expression comes out. In order to learn English well, the students must study the national culture background and the difference from that in China.

## II. CULTURE VARIATIONS

### A. Title and Greeting

The expert in studying language has been debating the old problem about the functions of the language and which function is the most important. One point is acknowledged that the language works as the role to transmit information and exchange the feeling. Yet, the two different functions are opposite, for one way, the Western culture stresses on the information transmission and in another way the Eastern culture pays more attention to the relation's auspicious. For the simple example, when the Chinese meet each other, they have the habit to greet "Where are you going?" This means you two have the close relationship and you care about him. Some specialists guess a lot about the special greeting and study it a lot. In Western, if you greet the other by the place, he will be very angry and will be curious about the question. We can arrive at the conclusion that in different culture backgrounds, people have the different life-styles and different customs. In cross-culture communication, because of the talker's different culture backgrounds, they are used to talking in their own way and accordingly take in the words from the foreign people. The talker will consume that the other person is contrary to this criterion on purpose and consequently figure out the meaning according to their own culture background. Therefore, they will draw the wrong conclusion that may result in the conflict or obstacle in communication. So we should compare the different culture backgrounds in language activity by the way of language formation, in order to improve the students' context consciousness. The students are supposed to know how to use the language in certain event such as age, sex, social status, occasions and intimacy. When the students communicate with the others, they should master the social policy in order to overcome the problems which appear in our daily life. We dare not to forget that in China or in English, communication has double directions. Cross-culture communication is not only limited to the understanding of the object but also it involves the sharing of culture and effect of the culture.

Therefore, in English teaching, we should learn the culture knowledge and culture background, in another way, also the construction of the two different cultures.

#### *B. Thanks and Praise*

“Demean oneself and respect the others” is traditional phenomenon in Chinese culture in order to show our politeness, in such way, when we hear the other thinks well of us, we would demean ourselves. For the English people, they have no such habit, faced with the praising, they used to say “thank you!” Consequently, the second language learner is easily influenced by his affection in studying process. The affection is an attitude toward the objective thing which is up to one’s demanding. The psychology studies show that: the affection is an important factor that can influence the teaching quality, and also a set of complicated psychological factors. Besides, in communication with English-speaking people, we also pay attention to the intonation which is difficult for the second-language learner. Many native English speakers find that it is difficult for them to understand the Chinese speaking English, and the important reason is intonation. The function of intonation, in English –teaching, is usually referring to the telling from the structure of sentence, showing the hiding meaning or showing your feeling. In teaching, we also need to find the deep meaning of the sentence which means the code of the language sign and reasoning of the meaning of the dialog, the former is “explicit expression” and the latter is “recessive expression”. If we refer the intonation which reflects the thinking as the important object exactly to logical intonation, on this ground, we call the intonation which possesses the keen feeling as emotional intonation. If the students can know this very well, they can judge the real meaning of the person whose native language is English.

#### *C. Nice Nelly and Privacy*

It is the common phenomenon in using the nice Nelly in English and Chinese, but it shows in different ways. For example, in Chinese when a woman is going to have a baby, she would say: “I have” in euphemism, but in Western countries, it is viewed as a piece of news which is open. Also, in some occasions, we use euphemism: “pass water” is a euphemism for urinate; “pass away” is a euphemism for death. It is clearly to show that difference of culture in English and Chinese. Besides this rule, “privacy” has the different definition in different cultures, and has the different values. For the English people, the definition of privacy is extensive, however, in Chinese culture, some behaviors which are acknowledged as politeness are viewed as invading the person’s privacy. For example, Chinese people greet to ask: the name, the age, the paying and the members of the family, but in English culture, such problems are banned. When Chinese people meet with each other on the way, they would greet: Where are you going? Or what are you going to do? In the foreign culture, it is not mentioned because they think such questions are involved the so called privacy, so it violates the communicative rules. In teaching, all the rules are theoretical; the students are asked to catch them in practice. The college English is a kind of practical one, and the important part is the students who are supposed to learn the characteristic, purpose, action cycle, measure and matters of practice. The learner is the specific practitioner, so he himself is demanded to try and nobody else can take the place of him, in turn, he can not take the place of the other. No matter how much the teacher possesses the knowledge, if the learner is not willing to study independently, the knowledge can not transmit from the brain of the teacher to the brain of the students. The key factor of success is the teacher’s method in teaching, and the students must know the importance of studying independently. Besides, the college English is a subject of language—language and culture. The students would consume that English studying is only master the phonetics, vocabulary and grammar, and so if they know such knowledge they can understand English very well. In most cases, it is not wise to learn the ostensible meaning; when we think the students are not good at English, not only because of their lacking the English systemic knowledge, but because of their not knowing well about the using English in certain social surroundings. The students will be satisfied with the need only if they understand the English using in different communicative activities.

#### *D. Personal Right Autonomy*

Personal right autonomy is referred to the personal freedom of action, right and independence. For the English nation it is thought polite to respect the personal behavior in social occasions, but on the other hand, for the Chinese nation, because of the influence by the feudal thought, it is difficult for them to catch the personal value in western culture. For example, the Chinese will not view such behaviors “offering certain gifts, service, and invitation” as the interning with the personal right, but as the caring and sincerity. So in teaching the teacher should design the structure of class in order to cultivate the students’ culture awareness. When we study English, in one way we pay more attention to the content and the purse, besides the language skill, knowledge, attitude and strategy, we also pay attention to the language awareness. Because the language and the culture connect with each other intimately, culture is the surroundings of language which is important for us to understand the given language. For the students, they must learn more information about the language which they are studying, so the teachers are asked to have higher artistic appreciation. The teaching purse is designed that the English teaching is converted from cultivating the skill to stressing on the students overall quality. It involves that the students not only know the language very well but also know its culture, history, people and life-style, and in certain ways when we know the language itself, in turn, we must know how to use it in practice rightly. This needs us firstly to learn about the difference between the two languages in certain occasions, such as in theory and in practice. Language teaching is to teach the students how to use the right language form to accomplish some tasks. It means that we should follow the personal language ability developing process, and offer them

some natural surroundings in order to make them form the language ability and language habit.

#### E. *Color and Number*

The different nations show different interests in color, so there exist the different expressions. For instance, in Chinese “青衣” is black dress, not blue dress in English; “青玉” is gray jade not blue jade. Another example is: Paul was in a blue mood, so in Chinese and in English different expressions appear. The same color in different brains can cause different connection and carry different national culture information, such as in China, because the people like the color “red”, they use the color to express good luck and honor roll, but in Western countries, they don't like the red color as much as the Chinese. In English, the word ‘red’ is used to refer to deficit, shed blood, violence and fire, which is seldom expressed by Chinese people. For example, the Chinese people translate literally the drama “The Red Lantern”, but for the Western people who know Chinese little, they can associate “the red light districts”. Another example is the Chinese famous works “A Dream of Red Mansions”, however, David Hawkes translated it into “The Story of the Stone”, in which he avoided the color red. In China, another typical color is yellow which is referred to as the imperiality, so the emperor's statement is called as imperial edict, and the emperor's dress is called as the imperial robe. Yet, in English culture, the color purple is compared to throne and kingship, for example, “raise someone to the purple”, “to be born in the purple”. Therefore, from such examples we can conclude that if we master the difference in color, it is helpful for us to understand the English national culture value. The second-language learners are easily influenced by personal affection and native culture in studying process. It is pointed that studying the other's culture does not mean that you must accept the culture in teaching, not mean that you guide your behavior according to the culture model. At present, the college students in our country have such habit as celebrating the western-festivals which is not blamed, but some foreign festivals don't agree with the Chinese culture tradition. So if you don't choose to celebrate the festivals only to follow the fashion, you will get into trouble or dispute. To take April Fool's Day as an example, it is a typical western-festival, in the day you can make phone of your friends. If you succeed in cheating your friend, you become the winner and your friend becomes an April Fool. So the teacher must warn the students not to introduce the foreign festivals at random, not conduct the behavior according to the target culture in studying English.

There exists the difference of number in two cultures. If the Chinese people translate the number literally, maybe it can cause misunderstanding, and vice versa. For example, the translating “one center, two basic points” in English is difficult to understand for Chinese people. Another example is that these days because of the influence of economic development, many Chinese people like the number- eight- which stands for “make a fortune”. If you translate this literally, many English people will feel confused. So in teaching, we can take some methods to make the students know more about the culture awareness. Besides the book, the teacher should teach certain relevant content about culture information, practice and also pay attention to its epochal character. In addition, the students must read the works about the target culture such as the literature, the history and the religion.

#### F. *Values*

Because of the elements of society and culture, the values of different nations can play a role in the cross-culture communication. Different nations possess different values, which is difficult for us to understand the special things such as the dog in England and dragon in China. We translate “lackey” into “running dog”, which causes confusion for English people. Another example is that in China, mouse is used to express timid, but in English the same word is used to expressed poor (as poor as a church mouse). If the Chinese people want to say someone is poor, they can express “as poor as being washed away”. In English, timid is also pictured to animals “as timid as a rabbit” or “chicken-hearted” and “pigeon-hearted”. In order to cultivate the ability of comprehension in English, we should pay more attention to the difference of value in the different nations. Recent years, as the rapid pace of the reform and the fluent communication with other countries, the cross-culture is referred to even at home because of the improvement of the social information and the internet. According to the demand and change of the time, many teachers show more and more interest in studying the culture difference of cross-culture which is important in English teaching. This is because in teaching the teacher not only teaches the students knowledge but also cultivates the students' communicative and cross-culture communicative ability. Mastering English pronunciation, grammar rules, certain sum of vocabulary, doesn't mean you learn English well. In English teaching, it is very important to employ the method of permeating.

### III. TEACHING METHOD OF PERMEATING

#### A. *Participants*

The English teachers should combine the language knowledge with the vocabulary, sentence structures, so as to teach the nation's lexeme and its usage. Teaching combining with the culture background means that we should know well the significance of the culture and its terms in using. Moreover, the teacher can compare the culture of vocabulary in both languages, emphasizing on the difference and its specific usage. The students are asked to make up dialogs, short plays, sketch and cross-talk about request, inquiring, advice, apology, appointment and to say good-bye so as to train their communicative ability. Meanwhile, the students are conducted to observe their role identity, precise of words and communicative trait in order to succeed in social intercourse. This demands that the teacher must improve the teaching method, joining the language teaching with the culture teaching. Up to such scratch, the students can understand the

foreign culture via television, video and film. Of course the students are supposed to attain such purpose gradually by reading some books about the program which leads them to accumulate certain knowledge on the culture background, social convention and relations. Then the students can watch the program together and afterwards the students can play the role or discuss the contents with precise culture. Besides, the foreign teacher can play an important role in certain lectures to permeate the culture. The students are assembled to watch the given film or listen to the lectures in order to understand the foreign culture. In another way, the students can make conversation with the foreign teacher face to face to learn the knowledge which they have no idea in class. From the foreign teacher himself' obstacle in cross-culture communication, the students in one way rich their knowledge and in another way rich their studying means to communicate smoothly. Take the idioms for an example. People from different countries speak different language, keep different value systems, and have different ways of looking on things, which generates culture differences. However, due to the lack of knowledge culture differences, many people fail to understand each other during the actual communication activities. Idioms have an inseparable relationship with a nation's geographical environment, religious beliefs, historical background, traditional customs, and so on. Therefore, there are definitely some differences between English idioms and Chinese idioms. Studying the culture differences between east and west can decrease or avoid unnecessary conflicts when we do idiom translation.

Culture differences should be handled properly in line with the principles of mutual respect, seeking common ground. Another effective way in teaching is body language which is non-language communicative way. In teaching the teacher should pay more attention to the different body language because of the different cultures, so as to avoid the failure in communication. Studying the body-language carefully is helpful for us to succeed in cross-culture communication, in another way to reveal the difference and the conflict between the two different cultures.

#### *B. To Motivate the Students' Interest*

The students have studied English for many years, but the result is not satisfactory. The reason is that the teacher may not use the proper teaching method because of the present examination system. So in the university, we should find the way to change the condition, on the one hand, to change the past teaching method. Firstly, the teacher should cultivate the students' motivation of studying—the factors that influence the person's desire to do something. In second language studying, motivation can be fallen into two parts: one is instrumental motivation which is welcomed because it is helpful for the students to find jobs, read foreign newspapers and pass examination. Another motivation is integrative motivation—which is useful for the students to communicate with the people who have the different culture background. It is found that the students who have the integrative motivation learn the second language better because the motivation was developed earlier and it is not easily to be changed. In class, the students are put into two parts: one is those who are active to take part in the activities, however, another part is those who are negative on the English activities. So the teacher must find the better methods which are effective for both parts of the students. Higher education students are on the brim of finding job. Most of the job offering companies looks for communication skills in English as the most important criteria for the candidate. The global economic system has caused an increasing degree of communication among the cultures. Among the cultures communication is problematic since these systems of symbolic meanings are known to one group but unknown to other groups. It is very much important to improve the students' ability to make communication across cultures and it is very important to know these differences. The students, situated in a particular life status and equipped with certain innate mental and physical capacities, obtain in their interaction with the natural and social-cultural surroundings, including various events that they have experienced, knowledge that they have acquired, feelings and emotions that they have gone through, cognitive abilities that they have developed, and whatever that makes them differ from that they were and that will contribute to later processes of their experience acquisition. Verbal communication begins with the speaker's intention, which is brought about by his thoughts, assumptions, ideas, information, feelings, emotions, and the like, which he wants to share with the listener. For convenience, we use communicative notion to refer to what the speaker intends to employ language to express or convey to the listener. For many years, languages were taught using the grammar-translation method. Students were subjected to traditional grammar lectures on the correct formation of the pluperfect passive subjunctive, as well as written exercises requiring students to conjugate verbs to the point of absurdity. When the students want to express themselves, they often speak out the words in English but they think in Chinese. English is now wildly used as international language, it is the means of communication between speakers of different countries in different social context such as doing business, conducting scientific study or having a daily small talk. A variety of specific social factors in a speech community can affect second language acquisition such as age, gender, social class, and ethnic identity.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

As a result, second language learning is a process for the students to realize the certain national social culture system by large sum of listening, speaking, reading and writing to receive, produce and pass the language symbol. Vocabulary is the most central element in the social system of communication. Without an extensive vocabulary and strategies for acquiring new vocabulary, learners often achieve less than their potential and may be discouraged from making use of language learning opportunities around them. The purpose of studying language is communication, but our traditional teaching method is far away from it. Hudson put it this way—language is studied with mind which is because language

and culture are an entirety that can not be broken up. The students not only study language and culture but also study language in culture and culture in language. Among the cultures communication is problematic since these systems of symbolic meanings are known to one culture but unknown to other cultures. It is very important to improve the students' ability to make communication across cultures and it is important to know these differences. In the traditional system of studying progress little need for international experience was required. But now because of the globalization of language, in language teaching, the teacher must pay more attention to the culture teaching in order to improve the students' communicative abilities, therefore, to reduce the influence of the students' mother tongue. Different learning purposes decide different learning methods and no one specific method is suitable for a specific learner. So teacher training is another big problem in the countries where real information exchanges and authentic communication situation is insufficient. The lack of communication in a real situation with foreigners causes problems for both teachers and students. The idealist teacher should be fully competent in language competence, and a good command of the knowledge of linguistics and teaching methodologies. In our teaching, we can adopt the method which is popular in foreign country-Audio-Lingual Method and Communicative Approach that stresses on the language communicative property and culture property. If we do according to such methods, we are able to be successful in learning the second language. With the globalization of economy and science, the teachers and students communicate more and more with the foreigners, which requires the teachers and students not only learn more about the different cultures in different countries but also know how to express the different cultures in communication. For the Chinese students, the main task is to transmit the country's traditional culture, but not to imitate the other's culture blindly.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Elder Catherine. (1994). Language Proficiency as Predictor of Performance in Teacher Education. Paper presented at ACTA/VATME Conference, University of Melbourne. [http://ltrc.unimelb.edu.au/mplt/papers/02-1-4\\_Elder.pdf](http://ltrc.unimelb.edu.au/mplt/papers/02-1-4_Elder.pdf) (accessed 26/10/2012).
- [2] Hudson, R. (1996). *Sociolinguistics*. Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2,78-79.
- [3] Keaten, J.A, Kelly, L. & Finch, C. (2000). Effectiveness of The Penn State Program in Changing Beliefs Associated with Reticence. *Communication Education* 49, 135-141.
- [4] Thomas, J. (1983). Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure. *Applied Linguistics*, Vol.4, No.2. 90-103.
- [5] Yueguo Gu. (1990). Politeness phenomena in modern Chinese. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 14.235-240.

**Changjuan Zhan** was born in Longkou, China in 1963. She received her Bachelor's degree of English Education in Shandong Normal University in 1985.

She is currently an associate professor in the college of foreign languages, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao, China. Her research interests include applied linguistics and English language teaching.