



Research Article

ISSN : 0975-7384
CODEN(USA) : JCPRC5

On the cultivation of intercultural communicative awareness in college English education

Jing-wei Shu

Department of Foreign Languages, University of Science and Technology Liaoning, Anshan, China

ABSTRACT

With the globalization processing, intercultural communication and communicative failures have become more and more frequent. Cultural differences have become the major source of communicative failures. So it is necessary and important to raise intercultural communicative awareness. The author first analyzed the necessity of raising intercultural communication awareness, then discussed the principle of cultural education and finally suggested the ways to cultivate intercultural communicative skills in college English teaching. The paper aims to raise intercultural communication awareness and help communicate successfully across different cultures.

Key words: College English education; Culture; Intercultural communicative awareness

INTRODUCTION

With international communication deepening and processing, communication between different countries and cultures become more and more frequent and prominent. Cultural interactions and cultural diversity have been becoming visible everywhere, which raised an unavoidable question: how to attain successful intercultural communication? Language educators and sociolinguists have focused lots of attention on the problem. Obviously, language knowledge alone doesn't do and mastering such basic skills as listening, speaking, reading and writing doesn't do either. Thus, it is important as well as necessary to study how to raise students' intercultural awareness in college English teaching.

Many Chinese scholars and linguists shared their views in the area. Opinions toward the cultural education in foreign language teaching in China can be characterized by Chen's circular trilogy : prohibition-selection-substitution.

Prohibition, driven by the intention of protecting home culture and maintaining its own traditions, completely prohibits people from learning anything from foreign cultures. Substitution, motivated by a desire for radical changes and a blind worship of foreign cultures, aims to take over everything from foreign cultures. Selection, as a response to the failures of these two extremes, suggests that China should select what she needs from foreign cultures [1].

From Chen's explanation, we can know the three important development periods of culture education in China. Prohibition, which means we learn nothing from foreign cultures, will isolate China from the outside world. Substitution, which means learning everything from foreign cultures, will make our own culture invisible. Compared with prohibition and substitution, selection is more preferable. With the policy of reform and opening-up taking into effect in 1978, there have been growingly increasing international contacts between China and the outside world. The intercultural communication failures have shown the importance of cultural education in college.

The culture education in foreign language programs in the western countries is also very popular. Lots of studies and

researches have been done in the field. Michael Byram, a famous educational expert in the field of foreign language and culture education, discussed it in his well-known book *Cultural Studies in Foreign Language Education* in 1989. Byram came up with the notion of “cultural studies”, which was called “the hidden curriculum of foreign language teaching” [2]. He redefined the notion of cultural studies in his book named *Culture and Language Learning in Higher Education* in 1994. According to Byram, four fundamental components should be included in foreign language teaching, which is language learning, language awareness, cultural awareness and cultural experience [3]. The interference of the native culture should be eliminated when it comes to teaching the target culture. Teachers should set up an absolutely fresh culture input environment for the learners. Besides, Teachers should combine the use of learner’s native language and the use of foreign language through comparative analysis. Only with this kind of combination will it be possible to raise intercultural communication awareness.

THE NECESSITY OF CULTURAL EDUCATION IN COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING

Connotation of Culture

As we all know, culture is such a broad notion that it is extremely difficult to define it strictly and accurately. Culture is a kind of civilization which can include belief, knowledge, art, custom, morals, law, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as members of society [4].

In spite of such a wide range, what the foreign language educators place their focus on is the feasibility and validity in the teaching the target culture. With the feasibility and validity in intercultural communication, people from different parts of the world can keep the lines of communication open.

Culture is generally believed to exist in two, levels, namely, covert and overt culture. The former is invisible and can not be perceived like thought, custom, and value, etc; The latter is visible and can be described like arts and architecture. Covert culture is the connotation of the overt culture, and it works as a cognitive orientation. Overt culture is the denotation of covert culture and it functions as descriptive framework of the national cultural entirety [5]. In college foreign language teaching, the focus is put on the covert culture, which aims to provide students with intercultural communicative skills.

The relationship between language and culture

As is known to us all, language and culture are so intertwined and interwoven that teaching language while paying no attention to its culture would be bound to fail. Thus, developing intercultural skills should be an indispensable part in foreign language teaching. Liu Fengxia, a language researcher, once pointed out that it was not enough to cultivate the learners’ linguistic competence in foreign language teaching, which used to be the practice of foreign language education in China [6]. Learners can not learn the language well without understanding such cultural factors as the customs, social norms, history, the life and the institutions of the country and the ways of thinking and life of its own native speakers.

According to Richards, Jack & Theodore S Rodgers, to know how to create a grammatically acceptable sentence is one thing and to know whether a sentence is in line with social norms and whether people actually use the sentence this way is quite another [7]. In other words, people should learn about its codes as well as its culture of the native language in order to know how to use language accurately and appropriately. People should take into account the native culture while communicating with each other, which is the higher requirement for language learners. The failure to do so will definitely leads to the failure of the conversation [8]. From this perspective we can know that linguistic knowledge skills such as listening speaking, reading, writing and translating abilities are the basis for the successful intercultural communication while cultural awareness will finally ensure a successful conversation. Taking driving a car for example, learning a language without understanding the culture is like learning how to drive a car by watching a driver’s manual without getting on the road [9]. We should learn the foreign language as well as its culture. So the daily natural interaction with people and situation in their culture instead of in classroom has shown its importance. Only in this way can we learn the real live language. Only in this way can we understand the native speakers’ real intentions and beliefs behind words and phrases and the humorous implications. Only in this way can we make a successful conversation.

PRINCIPLES OF CULTURAL EDUCATION

Grading principle

Cultural awareness can be developed in a long period of time. The teachers should be patient with the progress in developing cultural awareness. Always bear in mind that cultural awareness is acquired step by step when assessing learners’ ability. Learners are also different from each other because of their belief, life experience, family background and the influence by the people around them. So the progress in cultural awareness is also different. Thus, we should also keep the individual differences in mind while grading.

Assimilative principle

It is not enough just to help the students understand the target culture in culture teaching. The most important thing is to help them improve their cultural quality.

Developing cultural skills while learning a foreign language can not only enrich their understanding of the home culture but also can improve their behaviors. In other words, while the learners attempt to adopt and incorporate the useful elements of the target culture, they can understand and conserve their own culture better.

As we all know, different place has different culture and what is appropriate in one culture is not necessarily appropriate in another one. Moreover, every culture has something in common and the commonness helps the learners to assimilate and absorb something from each other and help each other to develop, forming a new world culture together [10]. It is necessary for every culture to assimilate a good amount of beneficial elements from foreign progressive cultures in order to nourish itself. This is especially true in this special age when nearly every inhabitant on the earth is interconnected and communication among people from different cultures is growingly frequent.

Of course, we do not transplant everything from the foreign culture without caring about whether it is suitable to our real situations or not while applying the assimilative principle. It is obvious that it is of no good and significance.

Comparative principle

People can distinguish different things by contrasting, which can be also applied to culture education in college foreign language teaching. Learner can apply comparative principle so as to make comparisons between the target culture and the home culture by which they can find out the similarities and differences between the two cultures. One thing that should be kept in mind is that it is not the ends but the means to improve intercultural communicative skills [11]. As a language learner and a communicator, we should be familiar with the commonness and differences between the two cultures including thought patterns behavioral patterns values and the like. Just as the saying goes, do as Romans do. It is important to adopt different methods while dealing with different people.

CULTIVATION OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS IN COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING

Even though English has been taught in China for a long time, even though cultural confliction has occurred frequently and even though culture is emphasized a lot in college English education, we still need the talents with the combination of language and culture. So it is necessary for us to discuss how to cultivate the intercultural communicative skills in college English teaching.

Creating intercultural communication surroundings

We can use all kinds of resources to create intercultural communication surroundings such as decorations of classroom, displays of all kinds like posters cartoons maps newspapers and exhibitions and so on, which can help create a tangible and visual presence of the target community.

In our college English classrooms, we can use all the resources available in a culture lesson. We can ask learners to do some preparing work such as decorating classroom with the teachers' help. Taking Christmas, one of the most important festivals in the western world, for example, it is wise to put Christmas trees in the classroom, to prepare typical Christmas presents, to sing songs on Christmas and so on. The students will develop the awareness of attempting to communicate with the English native speakers in the target language culture gradually. It is quite obvious that the learners will also have the aspiration to learn a lot more about the target culture by taking and discussing with their mates and teachers or appealing to some other cultural references. The kind of teaching and learning process should be incorporated in intercultural communicative activities, which has played an important role in foreign language teaching. On the other hand, it is also an application of the task-based language teaching theory. As a result, we can use the technique to arouse the students' interest in the language learning and curiosity about the foreign target culture, which will definitely contribute a lot to the acquisition of the target culture as well as the target language.

Providing cultural information resources

Some techniques have been developed and adopted in order to provide students with cultural facts. First of all, we use can make full use of the textbook. In many China's universities or colleges, most of the English teaching materials are written by native English speakers and a great many teaching materials cover well-written English cultures and English language. Now that the teaching contents are all from the authentic materials, the teachers can use them to explain the target culture and linguistic information. Linguistic knowledge can be taught and the students' cultural awareness and intercultural communicative ability can be cultivated at the same time on the condition that the materials can be made full use of [12]. The teacher should also bear in mind that the target

language knowledge and the target culture can be taught at the same time. They do not conflict with each other. "Cultural-related idioms, tales, allusions, metaphors and proverbs may reflect different cultures and different cultures entail different language expressions" [13]. In addition to the English common expressions, tales, idioms, proverbs, allusions and metaphors can also be the important element of the English language. They can reflect the culture of the society directly or indirectly. The appropriate adoption of the tales, idioms, proverbs, allusions and metaphors can mirror one's command of the language as well as the culture even though they are difficult to understand and more difficult to use appropriately. The tales of the ancient Rome and Greek and the citation from the Bible are also filled with cultural elements and values. The reader will have difficulty in grasping the author's inner intention if he or she lacks knowledge in language as well as culture because they are frequently filled with cultural elements and spoken or written in the form of just a few words or sentences.

Organizing cultural activities

In order to develop intercultural communicative skills in college English teaching, the teacher can organize the interesting activities such as festive celebrations, lecture, short English drama and video-taped interviews and so on. They can not only arouse students' interest in the language but also in culture. While holding these activities, the learners will surely make some linguistic or cultural errors or mistakes. The teacher is always ready to help them solve the problem especially culture-related problem. The learner will surely make faster and greater progress by comparing and contrasting each other's linguistic and cultural mistakes.

CONCLUSION

Based on what the author have explained above, we must be clear about the necessity, the principles and the techniques of culture education in college English teaching. Given the fact that culture education is a complex process in China's higher institutions, it should be planned carefully and implemented systematically.

The author has presented the principles and techniques of culture education in the paper, which doesn't mean they are the only ones in theory but the only ones in practice. One of the most important things in English language teaching is to set up a rational and possible approach to the teaching of intercultural communicative skills. So the teacher must have a clear picture of the nature of the foreign language, culture and the native speaker.

When it comes to foreign language teaching, the teacher must be able to combine the knowledge of language and culture effectively. The teacher must keep in mind that he or she is both a language educator and culture educator. The teacher must be able to change its roles in language teaching at the different stages from a model, coach, elicitor, guide, co-researcher, listener, witness and co-learner as well" [14]. To put it in another way, the teacher should be the controller of the class, the assessor, organizer, participant, prompter, tutor, resource person and investigator.

Different roles depend on different teaching strategies and different attitudes or outlooks on the teachers' part. In other words, Teachers have to be versatile, able to elicit or present cultural information, model or coach cultural behaviors, conduct or guide cultural analysis and research. Teachers have to be able to come into the students' worlds by listening, sharing or experiencing their experiences as culture learners in order to help them get out of their worlds into the target language and the target culture. What's more, teachers have to be the life learners of the language including the native culture and the target culture as well. As a result, teachers' role may vary from one stage to another or from one activity to another within the classroom in some degree. When playing these multi-roles, our effectiveness as language-and-culture educators will be highly enhanced if the teacher could keep a good balance among them and make rapid changes according to the specific situation.

The teachers need also to pay much attention to two flaws according to China's current cultural education in college English teaching. One is the overgeneralization of the target culture into all the western cultures such as American and British cultures. They are just the important part of the English culture but not all. The other is the exclusion of Chinese culture [15]. The belief that Chinese culture must be excluded from college or university English language education and that it will stand in the way of learning the target language and culture is completely wrong. We should abandon them. The goals of college English language education will be reached satisfactorily with the teachers' awareness of teaching language and culture simultaneously, with the correct attitude towards the target language, target culture and its people and with the mind of careful integration of language and culture.

REFERENCES

- [1] Chen Shen, "Language and culture education in foreign language teaching. (M)" (in Chinese), Beijing: Beijing Language and Culture University Press, 1999, pp. 86.
- [2] Michael Byram, "Cultural studies in foreign language education. (M)" Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters,

1989, pp. 213.

[3] Michael Byram, "Culture and language learning in higher education. (M)" Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters, 1994, pp. 65.

[4] Sana Reynolds Deborah Valentine, "Guide to cross-cultural communication. (M)" Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2004, pp.156.

[5] Hu Wenzhong, "Cross-cultural communication and English learning. (M)" (in Chinese), Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 1988, pp. 61.

[6] Liu Fengxia, "Intercultural communication-theory and practice. (M)" (in Chinese), Beijing: Peking University Press, 2005, pp. 154.

[7] Richards Jack & Theodore S Rodgers, "Approaches and methods in language teaching. (M)" Beijing: Beijing Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2000, pp. 78.

[8] Hedge Tricia, "Teaching and learning in the language classroom. (M)" Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language education Press, 2002, pp. 78.

[9] Anderson Neil, "Exploring second language reading --- issues and strategies. (M)" Beijing: Foreign language Teaching and Research Press, 2004, pp. 98.

[10] Zhang Hongling, "Cross-cultural foreign language teaching. (M)" (in Chinese), Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2007, pp. 82.

[11] Hu Chao, "Intercultural communication --- a practical coursebook. (M)" Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2006, pp. 142.

[12] Allen, E. D. and Valette, R. M, "Classroom techniques: foreign languages and English as a second language. (M)" New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977, pp. 46.

[13] Dai Weidong & He Zhaoxiong, "A new concise course on linguistics for students of English. (M)" (in Chinese), Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2002, pp. 69.

[14] Moran. R. Patrick, "Teaching culture perspective in practice. (M)" Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2004, pp. 132.

[15] Zhang Gongjin & Yu Shiqing, "Course in cultural linguistics. (M)" (in Chinese), Beijing: Science and Education Press, 2004, pp.69.