

Sino-English Culture Difference and Teaching in Foreign Language Education

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Abstract

In the foreign education, the importance of teaching of foreign culture has been widely recognized. How to teach culture in foreign language education is faced by language educators all over the world. The question is very complicated since the answer relies on our understanding of the relation between the home culture and foreign culture, the relation between language and culture. This article deals with the deep connotation of English culture. It sets forth the differences between Chinese and English culture in such aspects as attitudes to compliments and business activities. It also concerns several options for the teaching of foreign culture in language programmes. As a conclusion, it points out that the English teachers in China should focus on cultivating the students' cultural creativity in foreign language education.

Keywords: Sino-English, Culture difference, Culture teaching, Cultural creativity

1. Introduction

In contemporary China, the tendency of foreign language learning is unprecedented. Language can't exist without culture. The language of one country is just like a mirror that reflects its national culture. Therefore, the cultural differences between Chinese and English have become a major part in English teaching. Culture can be explained as what the society thinks and does and language is the expression of the ideas of a society. So, language is actually a kind of expression of the culture.

2. Differences between Chinese and English cultures

In the Chinese culture, the ability to preserve self-denial is marked as a sign of virtue in modesty. Yet, when Americans' compliments are rejected by Chinese, Americans tend not to value Chinese self-denial as a sign of modesty. Instead, some Americans may feel embarrassed as if they had made a wrong judgment, while some others are more likely to assume that self-denial is a strategy used to elicit more compliments. Although Americans try to be friendly to Chinese, and Chinese try to be modest in front of the Americans, their cross-cultural encounters can still possibly end up in a communication breakdown.

In addition, Americans put more emphasis on their business reputation; naturally, it's fairly easy for any of the customers to go back to the store to return what they bought. Usually, the shop assistant could give the money back without asking any questions if the purchasing is within thirty days. Otherwise, in China, it would be a little difficult for a customer to return products. Americans do pay special attention to attracting old customers. Usually, the old are richer than the young, which is quite different in China. Young people in China are more generous in shopping than the old.

From the aspects above, we may draw the conclusion that Americans have developed their way of thinking due to different historical and geographical backgrounds. The form and the way of acceptance and comprehension in their language expression have a striking difference from those of our Chinese people. Just like a linguist Edward Sapir says: "There is a language environment and each of the speakers of the foreign language belongs to one range of people, separated from their range based on their physical difference."

3. Culture Teaching

There exist many differences in culture, the importance of teaching foreign culture has been widely recognized. In the teaching of English as a foreign language, there are roughly three options for teaching foreign language and culture: Explicit cultural studies; Communicative language teaching; Inter-culture communication.

3.1 *Explicit cultural studies*

As for explicit cultural studies, there are several advantages:

- (1) All foreign language programmes are limited to certain duration, so adding explicit content about a foreign culture to a language programme may be less time-consuming;
- (2) Explicit cultural studies can lessen learners' confusion arising from unfamiliarity with a new culture;
- (3) Explicit cultural studies offer a base for developing knowledge of foreign culture.

However, teaching culture explicitly also seems to contain some problems in both theory and practice, the vital weakness and controversies are:

- (1) Content about foreign culture can only be relatively explicit. Among the various components or aspects of culture, some are less explicit than others;
- (2) The varied degree of "explicitness" raise a pedagogical question, namely, how to teach culture in a manageable manner. This relates to the wider pedagogical problem of how a complex notion should be treated pedagogically. This problem can not be easily handled;
- (3) Although it is commonly declared that language and culture cannot be separated, how to integrate teaching of culture and teaching of language remains unsolved.

3.2 *Communicative language teaching*

Through explicit cultural studies added to language programmes, foreign language educators attempt to equip learners with the necessary knowledge about foreign culture. There is a philosophy of "learning by doing" behind communicative language teaching. Through adopting of the communicative approach in foreign language classrooms, language teachers teach the new culture implicitly to learners in the process of learning to use the language.

The advantages of teaching culture implicitly can be seen in three main ways:

- (1) The emphasis on the social function of language through focusing on communication in language teaching naturally integrates with the teaching of culture and language. In other words, the teaching of culture is not artificially attached to teaching of language as we have been in explicit cultural studies. Language and culture are inter-related in the sense of how language forms convey the content of a culture as well as how the culture impact on the use of language;
- (2) It is doubtful that all knowledge about a foreign culture can be explicitly described or reproduced as explicit teaching content in a language course. The proposition of learning through doing seems to fill the vacuum of how to teach implicit knowledge entailed in language use. The communicative approach offers language learners a chance to perceive implicit knowledge about a foreign culture by experiencing the use of language for themselves;
- (3) Communicative language teaching advocates the importance of teaching content as well as teaching activities. In addition, language learners' autonomy and their communicative needs are given special attention in the teaching. So far as foreign culture is concerned, the aspect of culture which a language learner must know depends on the learner's needs. The identification of individual communicative needs provides a useful reference in defining the domain of teaching culture so that the arduous task of teaching foreign culture can be managed in a time-limited language course.

3.3 *Inter-culture communication*

Inter-culture communication involves three levels. In the first place, at the interpersonal level, each person stands alone. The process of communication is monitored by each participant. From the angle of the individual's perspective, each participant's personal perception is formed by the individual experience in the context of a particular culture. Each participant will behave according to the way in which he or she perceives the external word. Hence "the values and beliefs instructed by culture meet incoming human and environment data, and the reconciliation that takes place yields perception" (Rohfllich, 1983:199). Individual perception strongly affects each participant in inter-cultural communication.

Secondly, at the interpersonal level, communicative interaction brings together two or more participants who have different beliefs, value systems and norms of behavior. The act of communication involves a mechanism for interpreting or translating meaning. Whether or not participants can understand each other depends on the context in which they share personal, social and cultural experiences and on the awareness of variations of communicative style or strategy derived from culture.

Finally, at the third level—the synthetic level—the results of interpersonal contact are gathered and analyzed. Hence the dynamics of interaction are eventually worked out on the basis of an analysis made at both intrapersonal and interpersonal levels.

According to Damen' view, there are several “patterns” involved in inter-cultural communication. The patterns of culture include material, subjective orientations and social/communicative styles, which are filtered through the individual's values, assumptions, beliefs and perceptions. Since cultural patterns are not shared by all members of a cultural group in exactly the same way, any participant in communication only represents partial public and personal patterns rather than a whole culture.

In the light of inter-communication, foreign language education has taken advantage of the existing ways of teaching foreign culture, that is, both explicit cultural studies and communicative language teaching. If the learner can develop ability through inter- culture communication and inter-culture understanding, if he or she is powerful enough to break ethnocentric veneer and to realize the “cultural and linguistic blind spots” due to a monolingual state, perhaps the learner has developed a creative power for change. That is to say, if Chinese learners have developed a creative power for change, then we can say they have the cultural creativity. The development of this creative power for change implies a continuing and dynamic progression from known to unknown, from existing experience to new knowledge, from new knowledge to understanding, and from understanding to new perception.

4. Cultivating the students' cultural creativity

In order to cultivate creative individuals who are able to bring about changes through interacting with foreign culture, three dimensions to the learning of foreign language education can be proposed:

- (1) Learn to know: Foreign language education must first provide students with an opportunity to learn to know about a foreign language culture. Learning to know is a primary step in understanding the inter-relations of various aspects of a foreign culture and the contexts, in which these aspects arose. Through foreign language education, students must develop an ability to discover and to know new things.
- (2) Learn to do: To make changes to society implies taking action. The evaluation of what is useful and valuable and what works or not in the Chinese context can only be made through experiments and practices. A beneficial change *from* learning from a foreign culture can only be achieved through doing something rather than simply knowing something. Foreign language education must also provide an opportunity of learning to do some new things in the light of foreign culture.
- (3) Learning to interact: foreign language education enables students to learn to know a foreign culture and to do things in the light of this knowledge. Meanwhile, as part of education, it also fulfills the task of transmitting home culture. This implies that foreign language education itself creates a process of interaction between the home culture and the foreign culture. Foreign language education at the same time should be an opportunity to learn to interact with foreign culture and also with its members where this is possible.

These three dimensions of learning are not separated from each other. They overlap and are inter-related.

By focusing on cultural creativity, we have at least made several changes compared to the existing situation of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) education in China:

- (1) Knowledge and ability, which are seen as equally important, are naturally connected in learning;
- (2) The teacher's role in teaching and the learner's autonomy are taken into account;
- (3) The means and ends of learning are clarified;
- (4) A synthetic and broad view of culture, namely, culture as knowledge, behavior and meaning is adopted in three-dimensional approach to learning;
- (5) The relationship between language and culture, and the change in individual through learning language and culture, are considered in the practice of teaching. This requires extensive reform of the existing EFL curriculum, the details of which are certainly an important area for Chinese EFL teachers to consider.

How to develop the learners' cultural creativity? It is a matter of how to help the Chinese EFL learners gain knowledge. The initial step is from ignorance to awareness of foreign people and foreign countries. When learners know little about foreign people and foreign countries, they assume that the ways of life of people in foreign countries are exactly the same as those in China; As a result, they use Chinese norms of behavior to

interpret foreign people's thinking, behavior and even appearance. Chinese EFL learners need knowledge about foreign culture. They must *learn to know* about foreign culture through EFL learning. Information about foreign people, their ways of life, their countries and the achievements of their civilization is needed in EFL classrooms. Knowledge about culture can hardly be "handed over" to learners. *Learning to know* depends crucially on the learners themselves who abstract the knowledge of culture from the information provided. Hence more attention should be paid to the learners' own ability to achieve knowledge of a foreign culture. Learners should be encouraged to commit themselves to independent perception, analysis and synthesis.

Therefore, to develop learners' cultural creativity, we must be aware of several steps in bringing about change in learners. Firstly, we have to provide information about foreign culture and to help learners turn external knowledge into their internal knowledge. Secondly, we have to help learners understand foreign culture and their home culture on the basis of previous experience and new knowledge. Finally, from knowledge to understanding, from known to unknown, we have to encourage the learners to develop an independent ability to perceive "their previous perceptions" so that they establish a dialectical relation with reality.

5. Conclusion

Since cultural creativity attempt to link knowledge and ability, it sheds on some light on how to handle two contradictions in implementing English as Foreign Language syllabus and pedagogy in classroom, namely, a) the relation between teacher and learner; b) the relation between content and process. Consequently, it creates a more challenging task for Chinese EFL educators in developing new teaching materials and methods.

In one word, the idea of developing learners' cultural creativity is a constructive approach for how to teach culture in foreign language education in China.

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