



Coping with Cultural Obstacles to Speaking English in the Chinese Context

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Abstract

This paper aims to elaborate on socio-cultural aspects within our college context, together with political and historical ones that impede the development of students' spoken English and come up with workable solutions to the problems.

Keywords: Cultural obstacles, Individualism, Collectivism

1. Introduction

As communicative competence becomes pervasive in English class, the challenge facing spoken English will go beyond language. More diverse, perplexing and complicated features of cultural conflicts between collectivism and individualism will come to the surface. Experts single out the collectivistic culture as one of major factors which impede the improvement of students' spoken English in the Chinese context. Various negative features of Confucianism and collectivism, and other English environmentally negative factors in the school context discourage students from speaking English.

2. Various types of cultural barriers behind poor spoken English

Despite the fact that all the students have attended the national entrance examination and the majority of them have even passed college English test – Band 4, many of them continue to have communication difficulties, particularly in speaking and writing. If we consider cultural factors peculiar to China, we realize that the Chinese collectivism and Western individualism constantly come into perplexing conflict with each other. Awkward discourse often occurs when students translate from their native language, use a form of inter-language or try out what they assume is a legitimate structure but are hindered by insufficient knowledge of correct usage, register, colloquial expressions and communication style. (Duszark, 1997; Kutz, 1998; Raimers, 1987; Swales, 1990). It's believed that language and lack of cultural knowledge may play significant roles in determining why college graduates could not have fluent communications.

2.1 *Negative features of collectivism at school*

Like individuals and groups, schools have cultures, too. These usually reveal the culture of the dominant society. China's strong collectivism-oriented culture has a profound influence on the school system. It serves as one of the most detrimental factors which discourage speaking English in the school context. The following shows some salient features of collectivism and individualism.

2.1.1 Main features of individualism

Individualism is the representative of prevailing U.S. culture, it fosters independence and individual achievement. It also promotes self-expression, individual thinking and personal choice. Individual students will speak up in class in response to a general invitation by the teacher. Face-consciousness is weak in terms of individualism.

2.1.2 Main features of collectivism

Collectivism is the representative of Asian cultures, it fosters interdependence and group success. Besides, it promotes adherence to norms, respect for authority/elders, group consensus. Collectivism is associated with stable hierarchical roles (dependent on gender, family background, age). Individual students will only speak up in class when called upon personally by the teacher, neither the teacher nor any student should ever be made to lose face.

These fundamental values help form notions of people's right and responsibilities, what roles they may take within societies, norms of communication, and ideas of how to rear and educate children.

2.2 Collectivistic culture that stifles individual initiatives and uniqueness

Many foreign English teachers remember many cases where students seemed to hesitate to answer the questions posed to them, even when they knew the answer. Sometimes it might have caused misunderstandings. As a result, some teachers must have been upset, presuming that the student was ignoring him, leading to cross cultural communication failure. What is blocking communication here are differences in cultures-tacit yet deep-seated beliefs about what matters in life and how people should behave. In the collectivism-oriented Chinese society, a student's uniqueness and initiatives are not a virtue but a vice to be suppressed. In this vein, skillful self-expression, critical thinking, and the ability to engage in discussion and argument which individualistic societies uphold are not always good behavioral norms they have grown up with. In their view, a quiet student learns more and is more respectful than one who speaks up, singling himself out from the group and taking time away from the teacher's lesson.

In fact, speaking ability becomes perfect through the endless trial and error process. Even though teachers encourage students not to be afraid of making mistakes while speaking English, Chinese students hesitate to express their opinions freely because they are concerned about how others will see them.

2.3 "Eloquence May be Silver, Silence is Gold" mentality

In order to sharpen their communicative skills, students should aggressively participate in class and group activities. In this vein, "Eloquence may be silver, silence is gold" is another major cultural barrier to the improvement of spoken English. For this reason, discussions, debates, group activities, and the interactions between students and teachers are difficult to be fully utilized. From their childhood, Chinese students have been taught never to "show off" and stand out from the group. A talkative person is characterized by a "weightless" person, especially if you are a male.

2.4 Confucianism and hierarchical society: respect for authority

In the collectivistic societies, people are hierarchically related and social interaction is strongly defined by age and gender. Children raised in collectivistic communities form a sense of self from recognizing their place in the community hierarchy and from affiliation with the group. Children in such societies are less likely to be asked to formulate and share their opinions or to talk about what they are learning in school. The role of sharing opinions and knowledge is reserved for people with higher status (Delgado-Gaitan 1994). This mentality permeates the whole Chinese society combined with Confucianism. The school system is not an exception. Just listening to teachers respectfully in class without expressing their opinions is a norm in the Chinese education system.

2.5 English-unfriendly school culture: from historical and socio-political perspectives

It is recommended that students should transfer what they have learned in class to outside the classroom, so that the knowledge and skills the students acquire in their classrooms can be reinforced and retained. Schools have been working on how to create the environment in which students talk with each other in English in class and outside the classrooms. But it must be noted that those methodologies were mostly developed in the English as a Second Language (ESL) context and that situation is quite different from that of China, which is an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context.

Therefore it is not feasible and, in a sense, too idealistic to ask students to speak English outside the classrooms. From what I have closely observed, students never speak English among themselves outside the classrooms. What is worse, Chinese English teachers do not tend to be willing to speak English to their students and co-workers outside the classrooms.

3. How to bridge cultural barriers

Cultural change takes a considerable time because change in the value system must be accompanied. China is a hybrid society where collectivism and individualism are intermingled, but still relatively skewed more toward collectivism. English teachers can't just sit back and wait until the ideal English-friendly environment is created for us. English teachers should seek to find ways to utilize various teaching strategies within the limited environment.

3.1 Use group work

In a collectivistic and Confucian society, it is too much to expect students to take initiatives. Thus teacher-centered teaching methods or rote learning styles should give their way to the group-oriented activities. Since group work generates interactive language, it should be manipulated strategically in class. Instead of conforming to the traditional teaching styles based on Confucianism, English teachers should be well-informed about various teaching interaction-based methodologies, manipulate them and develop their own teaching methods compatible with the Chinese education context to promote interaction among students.

3.2 Hire more foreign teachers

As mentioned above, within the EFL environment like the Chinese college context it's too idealistic to recommend and expect English teachers and students to speak English outside the classrooms. Given this constraint, it will be of great service in many ways if foreign teachers stay with English teachers at their workplaces. It will appear quite natural for English teachers to speak English with native English speakers. Hence, depending on how we use foreign teachers, it

can be catching more than two birds with one stone. Before we argue that hiring foreign teachers is cost-ineffective and not right for our education environment, we should ask ourselves first how well we have used them in and outside the classrooms.

3.3 Facilitation of only English areas

Now that it is difficult to speak English because of various English speaking unfriendly factors mentioned, Only English Areas such as English corner, English salon, English Learning Club etc. should be provided and facilitated in each school. These places should be staffed with native English teachers or Chinese English teachers, English music is played all the time and students must speak English there. They will serve as a "limited ESL" environment and students can get feedback on what's been covered in class.

3.4 English teachers as cultural mediators

Chinese English teachers are accustomed to Confucian teaching methods and may have negative attitudes toward students who take individual initiatives, participate in class aggressively and "challenge" their ideas. Therefore, changes in the minds of our English teachers are of great importance. They should possess role flexibility. They should keep in mind that one of English teachers' role is to help students as cultural mediators. In order to be cultural mediators, our English teachers should learn more about the cultures of English speaking countries and be given more overseas training opportunities to get exposed to the cultures of English speaking countries.

4. Conclusion

This paper comes up with some tentative solutions to coping with cultural obstacles, hopefully they will help to improve the cross-cultural awareness of college engineering students. Of course, intercultural communication studies should not be occupied only with investigating and analysing communicative problems, difficulties or breakdowns resulted from cultural differences. It is as important to study how people tackle problems, overcome difficulties and repair breakdowns.

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