

A Proposed Framework for Cultivating Students' Cross-Cultural Awareness in High School English Teaching

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Abstract

One of the goals of English teaching during compulsory education is to cultivate students' cross-cultural communicative competence. To achieve this goal, cultural knowledge and cross-cultural awareness are required. The status quo of students' knowledge of English culture indicates that the cultural knowledge of today's students is not sufficient and systematic enough for them to communicate successfully. The students had various pragmatic failures in communication. The study focuses on the cultivation of students' cross-cultural awareness in high school and aims at explaining how to effectively promote the target culture learning in a non-native context like China through establishing a conceptual framework of cultivating students' cross-cultural awareness, which is more effective and practical than through isolated classroom instruction.

Key words: Cross-cultural awareness; English Teaching; Culture teaching

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INTRODUCTION

English is a compulsory subject in the basic education stage in China. And teaching English during compulsory stage is also called Foreign Language Teaching (FLT). It describes in *English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education* (2001, 2011) that "cultural awareness is the guarantee of appropriately utilizing language, which is consisted of cultural knowledge, cultural knowledge and cross-cultural communication awareness and capabilities. Cross-cultural communication should be arranged in every high school so as to improve the students' self-learning abilities and communication abilities." However, in China, because of the influence of grammar-oriented perspective, traditional foreign language teaching has a longstanding emphasis on the development of learner's grammar competence rather than that of cross-cultural communicative competence. Furthermore, in the classroom teaching, the teacher controls the class and pours out what he knows about the English Language, giving detailed explanations of new words, explaining grammar rules, analyzing complicated sentences structures, even separating the language from the culture unconsciously. Accordingly it leads to the fact that students may produce grammatically correct but culturally inappropriate sentences, which often cause misunderstanding, and even worse culture shock when communicating with foreigners. In a word, the students can not truly master the language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs. That is a new challenge for all English teachers. We need to consider this problem and try to integrate culture teaching into high school English teaching, cultivate students' cross-cultural awareness, and develop their cross-cultural communicative competence.

1. CROSS-CULTURAL AWARENESS AND CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

According to Hanvey (1981), cross-cultural awareness is an intuition, a power of the immediate consciousness to the cultural elements of the communication as well as texts, and a direct sense to the cultural differences between the two languages. It is a sense as it cannot be touched but can be felt or acquired through reasoning. Of course, cross-cultural awareness is not only a sense, but it is also an ability to appropriately communicate with English-speaking people. Therefore it is an ability to be sensitive to the cultural differences. Many researchers and scholars have acknowledged the unique place of cross-cultural awareness in the foreign language learning process. Dirven and Putz (1993) equates the aim of foreign language learning as to an awareness of cultural communicative differences, followed by increased tolerance and finally accommodation. Rose (2004) argued CA (Cross-cultural awareness) is not at all a “fifth skill” following reading, writing, listening and speaking and important to all levels of language learners. She argued against an “all-too frequent error” of assuming that CA is something only associated with advanced learners and students with a low level of English also have a low intellect generally, so that it is impossible to explain intellectual concepts. Actually, for any language learner, lack in cross-cultural awareness in fact places a serious obstacle in his path to the acquisition of a new language. Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982) explained that “many of the meanings and understandings, at the level of ongoing processes of interpretation of speaker’s intent, depend upon culturally specific conventions, so that much of the meaning in any encounter is indirect and implicit.” And for a language learner on the way, Yang (2001) emphasized IA is “of great significance in clearing up the pragmatic failures and improving the quality of cross-cultural communication”. Meanwhile, many empirical studies showed that IA is closely correlated to other factors in language learning and communication. Monthienvichienchai et al. (2002) studied the relationship of IA to communication competence (CC) and communication apprehension (CA) with such conclusion that higher IA leads to more CC and less CA.

Cross-cultural communication refers to the communication between people from different cultures. Cross-cultural communication occurs when a member of one culture produces a message for consumption by a member of another culture. Samovar et al. (2000) give a more precise definition, and it refers to “the communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event”. Chen and Starosta (1998) simply refers to it as “the communication between people from two different cultures”. Although Samovar

et al. (2000) and other scholars point out that there is a difference between the two terms cross-cultural communication and cross-cultural communication, in which the former one implies a comparison of cultures. But considering that “cultures” in this paper mainly refer to dominant or mainstream cultures in China or in other countries, the author prefers to use the more universal and inclusive term “cross-cultural communication”, implying the interaction between cultures. The studies of cross-cultural communication have drawn theories and concepts from many other social sciences. The findings of such studies have supported the view that the teaching of language should be combined with the teaching of culture, for language is an inseparable part and carrier of culture; culture is the pedestal of language. The common understanding that the incorporation of cultural instruction into English teaching and learning is strongly recommended, with the hope of cultivating not only linguistic competence, but also cross-cultural communicative competence. According to sociolinguistics, language is regarded as a means of communication. Learning to communicate is a socialization process, so language teaching involves not only a set of grammar rules and lexical items, but also a set of social conventions governing language form and behavior within a communicative group. Thus, to communicate successfully, learners need to be both linguistically skillful as well as having knowledge of the use of “socially and culturally acceptable norms of interaction of the target language” (Crozet, 1996, p.38).

As the inhabitants of the global village in the 21st century, we have to live and communicate in a world of many cultures. The forces that bring other cultures into our life are dynamic, potent, and ever present. What competence should high school English students have to meet the needs of communicating appropriately and effectively in such a global village? The answer is that FLT should cultivate students’ cross-cultural communicative competence. Briefly stated, the study of cross-cultural communication in the thesis is in the hope of arousing interest in it and helping students and teachers improve their cross-cultural awareness.

2. A PROPOSED FRAMEWORK OF CULTIVATING STUDENTS’ CROSS-CULTURAL AWARENESS

Cross-cultural communication is a necessity for many reasons. But it is far from enough just to be aware of the importance of cross-cultural communication. Integrating culture teaching into FLT and understanding cultural differences are also the key to sufficient cross-cultural communication. Establishing a conceptual framework of cultivating students’ cross-cultural awareness is more effective and practical than through isolated classroom

instruction. The present author proposes that principles and content of culture teaching would be the most important parts of the framework of cultivating cross-cultural awareness.

2.1 Principles of Culture Teaching

In the process of foreign language teaching, due to the limitation of time and a lack of input from the cultural environment itself, it is impossible to cover everything about the target culture. Then how to conduct culture teaching in high school English classes? Or what principles should we follow in culture teaching? In order that students acquire cultural competence, culture teaching in high school English classes must have definite objectives and teaching principles through which the objectives are realized. There are principles put forward by scholars from different perspectives in China FLT environments, such as Lu Jianyi (1990), Zhao Xianzhou (1992), Shu Dingfang (1996), Bao Zhikun (1997), Wang Yingpeng (1999), etc. Zhao Houxian (2002) puts forth four principles of cultural instruction in his treatise, which may throw some lights on the principles of culture teaching. They are as follows: cognitive principle, assimilative principle, comparative principle, and tolerant principle.

2.1.1 Cognitive Principle

Cognitive principle in culture teaching is that the students are required to know, to understand and to learn the target culture. In terms of the cognitive principle emphasis is placed on knowing and understanding, rather than behaving. We lay emphasis on the cognitive principles as the chief principle in culture teaching. The cognitive principle is feasible in FLT. For nowadays, even many language teachers themselves have never visited any foreign countries. Their knowledge of the target culture is mainly indirect. The majority of students have few opportunities to study, work or live in the target culture community, so they can only get information about the target culture indirectly. What they are doing work or live in now is just to make good preparation for the future possibility of encountering the target culture. They have to access the culture through the language being taught, which is feasible for one important characteristic of culture is that culture can be learned. Besides, for most of the high school students, cultural instruction is not an independent course, but an integral component of language teaching. Thus when they are taught a foreign language, they are taught some basic knowledge about the target culture. So the study of cultural behaviors should be made an integral part of each lesson. Furthermore, for students to know the differences between two cultures lays the very foundation for developing their cultural sensitivity, tolerance and flexibility.

2.1.2 Assimilative Principle

As for assimilative principle, we mean that in culture teaching classes it is not enough only to help the students

understand and explain the target culture. The most important point lies in making the useful parts of the target culture serve us. The following explanations are the reasons to support the principle. First, every culture, belonging to its own nation and bearing its own national characteristics, needs to assimilate a good deal of foreign progressive culture to nourish itself, for every culture has its strong and weak points and should overcome its weak points by learning from another's strong points. Second, with the world being reduced to a global village, cross-cultural exchanges become more and more frequent. By assimilating alien cultures, our own culture flourishes.

2.1.3 Comparative Principle

Comparative principle is an attempt to make a comparison between the learners' own culture and the target culture so as to find out their similarities and differences. For instance, there are both similarities and differences between Chinese culture and Western cultures. With the comparative principle, Chinese learners can well comprehend the similarities and differences between their native culture and the target culture. With those differences and similarities of cultures in mind, it is more likely for learners to distinguish what is acceptable and what is unacceptable in the target culture, and it is less likely for them to wrongly interpret utterances according to their train of thought, replacing the target cultural pattern with their own cultural pattern. Comparison can help learners better understand the target culture and explain different cultural behavior so as to avoid just explaining another's behavior according to their own standards or bringing their own culture into other cultural situations. Only by comparing can learners distinguish the differences and improve the abilities of distinguishing acceptable culture and unacceptable culture, thus preventing them from accepting the target culture uncritically. In this way can people deepen each other's understanding and clear up the misunderstanding. Consequently, learners can improve their communicative competence.

2.1.4 Tolerant Principle

Tolerant principle is the principle of no cultural discrimination and it is also very important in culture teaching. In the process of second culture learning, learners usually approach and study a foreign culture from the perspective of their native culture. Therefore, it is impossible to escape the influence of cultural discrimination, which is the hodgepodge of ethnocentrism, cultural stereotypes and cultural prejudice. Teachers should inform learners of English culture as objectively and neutrally as they can. At the same time, they should provide clear unbiased description about the target culture and emphasize that the differences are just differences and learners should not judge which norms are better or superior. Both learners and the teacher should be encouraged to find their own position between the two cultures so that they can appreciate different cultures

and expand their views without risking their identity and over-simplifying or over-generalizing their ideas towards different cultures. By doing so, teachers can prevent learners from conceiving prejudiced ideas towards both cultures. Thus an awareness and tolerance of the cultural differences can well be developed.

It is true that how to raise the cross-cultural awareness in language classes is an expanding problem for language teachers and the four principles mentioned above may be incomplete or may not be our sole guideline. To a certain extent, however, they serve as the basic rules on which the culture teaching is based on the teaching.

2.2 Content of Culture Teaching

The content of culture teaching refers to the aspects of culture that teachers and students should pay attention to in foreign language teaching and learning. Generally speaking, the teaching content is based on the teaching syllabus. Hu and Gao (1997, p.161) summed up the content for culture teaching that coincide with what may become barriers to cross-cultural communication. They are as follows:

(a) Participating cultural behaviors

Participating behaviors refer to the facts that under cultural surroundings learners can have a lot of chances to participate in cross-cultural communicative activities, which requires learners' active participation and knowledge about cross-cultural principles, such as visiting, telephoning, receiving friends, social communication and contact etc..

(b) Non-participating cultural behaviors

Non-participating behaviors refer to the knowledge of the customs, conventions, and social values, etc.. The concrete items are as follows:

(c) Cultural psychology

Cultural psychology refers to the psychological preparation for the cultural contact and exchange, and the psychological process of understanding for cultural factors in acquiring cultural information and knowledge etc. The concrete items are as follows:

The above list shows that cultural knowledge is wide and complex. It is impossible to give overall consideration in classroom to culture features related with the language. Based on the status quo of high school English teaching, the content of culture teaching in FLT may be explored from five aspects: thinking patterns, nonverbal communication, value system, etiquette and customs, history and geography.

2.2.1 Thinking Patterns

Thinking Patterns, also termed as "ways of thinking", greatly influence cross-cultural communication. Language is the carrier of thought as well as the way to express thought. Ways of thinking restrict sentence structures. Distinction of thinking ways exists between Chinese and English cultures. The attitude towards being praised is quite different between the Chinese

and westerners. Chinese thinking pattern is circular, synthetic and associative while American one is linear, logic and analytic. We must admit that thinking pattern influences the way of speaking and behaving. Chinese people tend to speak in a circular and indirect way while Americans are in the linear and straightforward way. To Chinese, American way of speaking is impolite, while to Americans, the Chinese way lacks of confidence and beats the bushes. Ignorance of these differences in thinking pattern is certain to influence the effectiveness of the cross-cultural communication. That's why when we talk to a foreigner, we need to direct and focus on the point rather than indirect and deviate from the point.

2.2.2 Nonverbal Communication

Non-verbal communication, just like verbal language, is also a part of culture, and the carrier of culture. Language is the principal medium of communication, and we have successfully used and understood quite a lot about this special kind of communication. Apart from verbal communication, we communicate in many other ways, such as postures, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, addressing, environmental background and the use of space and distance. All these are nonverbal communicative ways. Hall highlights the importance of the study of nonverbal communication by maintaining that

Formal training in the language, history, government, and customs of another nation is only the first step in a comprehensive program. Of equal importance is an introduction to the nonverbal language which exists in every country of the world and among the various groups within each country. (Hall, 1959, p.10)

Nonverbal messages are divided into two comprehensive categories: those that are primarily produced by the body, and those that the individual combines with the setting. The former category includes appearance, movement, facial expressions, eye contact, touch, smell, and paralinguistic; and the latter refers to space, time and silence etc. This kind of knowledge is crucial to students for their understanding of the target culture, as well as for their appropriate manner and behavior in cross-cultural communication. Therefore FLT teachers must take the systematic input of nonverbal messages into class as a necessary teaching content.

2.2.3 Value System

Value is the orienting consideration and evaluation to what is acceptable and what is not. It is a concept and it influences people's behavior and thinking patterns. A value system, as Albert (1968, p.32) says, "represents what is expected or hoped for, required or forbidden. It is not a report of actual conduct but is the system of criteria by which conduct is judged and sanctions applied". Any cultural difference revealed in communicative actions can find its explanation in the difference of value system. Therefore, traditional value system is considered as the

core of a culture. Value system is formed in its culture and reflects the cultural features. Due to the close relation between culture and value system, value system cannot be ignored in cross-cultural communication. As Hu Wenzhong stated,

At a large extent, value system is the guiding principle in both language and culture study. Learning the target value system in foreign language class is not only an effective way to increase language learners' cultural awareness so as to guarantee successful communication, but also a way to widen their thinking space. (Hu, 1997, p.157)

Differences in value system may obstacle cross-cultural communication and even become disturbance of objective thinking, because people are so accustomed to their own value orientation and will reject the thinking patterns used by people in another culture. Therefore, it is rather difficult or even impossible to understand the native speakers' behavior patterns without knowing their value systems such as independence, individualism etc..

2.2.4 Etiquette and Customs

Etiquette in a society is an objective reflection of its culture. Its different cultural contents might be the obstacles of comprehension. To know about the different etiquettes in English learning and teaching is very important. You can't understand or use English correctly if you know nothing about it. For instance, if a Chinese is invited to a house for the first time, perhaps what he says isn't really what he wants. When the host asks him, "Would you like some tea"? The Chinese guest will answer. "No. Thank you". But the Chinese hosts know it is just courteous and will still make tea for the guests. On the contrary the American is quite different from the Chinese. They will frankly tell whether they would like to drink or not. For a Chinese who doesn't know the culture of English-speaking countries, it will be amusing to communicate with them in the Chinese way. Customs are influenced and even shaped by the beliefs and values of people in a given community, at the same time customs reflect the beliefs and values. People are brought up in the community and they are so accustomed to their own ways of doing things that they can't accept the different actions by which other people accomplish the same purpose. Therefore, customs differences have great tendency to bring ill feeling or conflicts in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, in language class, customs traits should not be considered as trivial things that will not influence language learning. Customs, especially those concerning the basic aspects of daily life, such as greeting and compliments etc., should be introduced to students.

2.2.5 History and Geography

As for High school English students, they need to get to know the significant historical developments of the country or region, including the history of minorities and significant symbols, notable events and trends, and the main historical personalities as well as critical issues, past

and present. For the historical understanding and empathy that are needed in language learning context, all above mentioned needs to be looked at from the point of view of native speakers whose historical perceptions, values, political knowledge, and preferences provide the main basis. For example, Washington and Lincoln: the former was regarded as "father of his country". To the American people, Washington symbolized dignity, statesmanship and above all, honesty. The latter is a classic example of the self-made man, which embodied the American Dream, that is to say, an individual with ability, perseverance and strength of character can achieve success no matter how humble his beginnings. Besides the history of target culture, the learner needs some sense of physical location to which relates the target language. For example, a case in point is "carry coals to Newcastle" and "meet one's Waterloo". A better understanding of these expressions lies in one's historical or geographical knowledge—where is Newcastle? What is it famous for? Where is Waterloo? What historic event is it related to? The learners need an orientation to the geography of the country as a whole. If we are designing a syllabus, a choice has to be made of a particular country or region to be considered as the main target area, ranking other possible areas in an order of priority. In choosing a target area, our principal concern will be to describe how native speakers perceive the geography.

CONCLUSION

Cross-cultural awareness contributes to the understanding of other cultures and effective cross-cultural communication. A lack of it can be a severe hindrance in the understanding of a message which is linguistically accurate or comprehensible. Therefore, the thesis focuses on cultivating high school students' cross-cultural awareness through the integration of culture teaching at curricular and extracurricular time. And the concern is based on the fact that today high school students often have lots of misunderstanding and even culture shock in their communication with the native speakers. Although developing high school students' CCC(cross-cultural communicative competence) is one of the goals stipulated in *English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education* (2001, 2011), and cultural information is taught in English classes at all levels, the results from the relevant study indicate a deficiency. Many high school students are weak at CCC, and do not purposefully develop their potential cross-cultural communicative competence. The training of cross-cultural awareness does not usually constitute a syllabus strand at least as important as grammar or vocabulary. That is why this thesis has laid emphasis on the explanation and illustration of how to deal with culture teaching and what strategies may be employed in order to cultivate students' cross-

cultural awareness and develop their CCC. Cultivation of cross-cultural awareness is not only of great necessity but also is one of the most important strands of FLT in China. We must view raising cross-cultural awareness in English education as a means not just of improving the quality of FLT, but also of promoting cooperation and friendship among different peoples and nations. Cultivating high school students' cross-cultural awareness is a long term practical task. The ultimate teachers' goal should be to develop intrinsic motivation in their students. If students' intrinsic motivation is aroused, they will pursue their English learning by making better use of their spare time in learning materials containing alien cultures. With qualification-for life education being made the objective of Chinese education at all levels, professionals are striving for improving students' cultural qualifications. Much evidence shows that cross-cultural communication is not an easy assignment, but that does not mean it is not worthwhile or is to be avoided. We have no choice given. Within the waning hours of the decade, the century, and the millennium, if we are going to survive in the global village, we must strive to become effective and successful cross-cultural communicators.

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