

The Importance of Cultural Teaching and the Choice of Cultural Content in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

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Abstract: Teaching Chinese, as a foreign language (TCFL), with the aim of developing students' communicative ability, includes both language teaching and cultural teaching. The lack of cultural teaching will cause misunderstandings or deviations in communication, as well as create obstacles in communication. Knowledge culture not only helps students to increase the understanding of knowledge, but also directly affects the efficiency of Chinese language learning. Foreign students may not communicate smoothly due to the lack of cultural knowledge in language practice. Therefore, cultural teaching is very important in TCFL. However, TCFL is mainly based on language teaching. Therefore, the choice of cultural teaching content should fully consider a lot of factors. Such as the native language cultural background of different students, the learning goals of different students, the learning environment and different stages of different students and the combination of nationality and times. Only in this way can the content of cultural teaching serve language teaching better, improve the learning efficiency of students, and promote the improvement of their communicative ability in Chinese.

1. Introduction

In the 1960s, Chomsky proposed the concept of "language ability". The so-called "language ability" refers to the language knowledge that people have. It is an internalized language rule system including speech, vocabulary and grammar. Language ability is a highly abstract grammar ability, mainly related to the language form structure^[1]. However, the social linguist Heems of the same period believed that a person's language ability not only refers to the ability to speak grammatical sentences, but also the ability to use the language properly in a certain language environment. That is the ability to successfully communicate with different people on different occasions and locations^[1]. Therefore, in order to do well in Chinese listening, speaking, reading and writing, it is not enough for foreign students to learn the language structure itself. It is also necessary to learn the cultural information carried by the language itself. Students must understand the basic national conditions and cultural background of China. This will help to enhance the acceptability and fluency of their communication.

2. The Importance of Cultural Teaching in TCFL

In the early 1980s, Zhang Zhanyi, a scholar of the TCFL proposed a distinction between "knowledge culture" and "communicative culture" from the perspective of developing communicative competence in second language teaching. "Knowledge culture" refers to the linguistic and non-linguistic cultural factors that will not directly affect the accurate transmission of information in intercultural communication. "Communicative culture" refers to the linguistic and non-linguistic cultural factors that directly influence the accurate transmission of information in intercultural communication^[1].

Communicative culture may cause misunderstanding or deviation in communication. Therefore, it has attracted more and more attention from teachers and students in both writing teaching materials and the teaching practice of TCFL. For example, the teacher will tell the students the

differences in usage between the two words “nin” and “ni” when addressing someone. They will also tell the students the differences of greetings in Chinese and English, such as Chinese people often put forward some questions that are known or have a definite answer according to the situation. While English speaking people often ask some abstract questions. Therefore, Chinese people often ask “You’re here ?” “Are you going to the library?” “Why do you look tired?”, while English speaking people often say “Good morning”, “Hello”, and “How are you?” when greeting someone. There are also special honorific and modest words of Chinese in textbooks, such as “qing jiao”, “bai tuo”, “da zuo”, “qian jian”, “zhuo zuo”, and so on. Most international students will also specifically consult some Chinese people about taboos when they participate at their Chinese friends' banquets, or intend to give gifts to Chinese friends. We can imagine how funny it is if a 50 to 60 year old international student asked three to four year old Chinese child “Nin gao shou? (an expression for asking the age of an elder)” and how embarrassing it is if the international student gave “san (an umbrella)” to a Chinese friend who gets married, or “zhong (a clock)” to a Chinese elderly who is celebrating his or her birthday. (Another Chinese word whose pronunciation is similar to “san” means “to separate”, the word whose pronunciation is similar to “zhong” means “to die”). Therefore, teachers should pay enough attention to the teaching of “communicative culture”.

The role of “knowledge culture” also cannot be underestimated in TCFL. For example, at the beginning of Chinese learning, it will be easier for students to understand why we can say both “Ren shi ni (to know you), hen gao xing (I am very glad)” and “Hen gao xing (I am glad) ren shi ni (to know you)”, why either of the three sentences “Pinguo (apple) duo shao qian (how much) yi jin (500g)?” “Yi jin (500g) pinguo (apple) duo shao qian (how much)?” “Duo shao qian (how much) yi jin(500g) pinguo(apple)?” is right, if they know that Chinese language structure is more flexible and simple because of its emphasis on meaning rather than structure form. Affected by this feature, we can even omit “bei (sign word for passive voice)” in some Chinese sentences, such as “Cha (tea) he(drink) wan(finish) le(modal auxiliary words indicating completion of the action)” “Shu (trees) zhong (plant) hao (ready) le(modal auxiliary words indicating completion of the action)” “Wo de yifu (my clothes) lin (drench) shi (wet) le (modal auxiliary words indicating completion of the action). In addition, it will be helpful to improve students' Chinese vocabulary learning efficiency, if they know that the meaning of modern Chinese compound words is related to the meaning of the various morphemes. For example, if students understand the meaning of the prefix “di” means to indicate the order, they can quickly learn the meaning of the words “di yi (first)”, “di er (second)” and “di san (third)”. If they understand the meaning of the suffix “shou” to mean “someone who has some expertise or has mastered a certain skill”, it will be much easier for them to learn the words “ge shou(singer)” “xie shou(writer)” “da shou(beater)” and “che shou(diver)”. Therefore, learning knowledge culture not only helps students increase their understanding of Chinese cultural knowledge, or to understand the cultural content of language itself, it also directly affects the efficiency of Chinese learning for foreign students. Foreign students may meet obstacles in communication with a target language as a result of the lack of knowledge culture.

3. Choice of Cultural Teaching Contents in TCFL

The development of language and the process of human culture complement each other and depend on each other. Culture is the soul of the country. It is the cornerstone of the founding of the country and the content of language expression^[2]. Professor Zhang Ying mentioned in the “Philosophical and Cultural Thinking of Language——The Theoretical Basis of Culture Teaching in Second Language” that the goal of cultural teaching lies in “intercultural competence”, and the content of teaching is “communicative-related knowledge in the culture system”^[3]. Therefore, learning a second language requires not only mastering the rules of grammar and vocabulary, but also understanding the cultural information reflected by the language. This has become the consensus of the second language teaching community^[4]. Teaching practice also shows that it may cause communication failure if we only teach language itself, but do not lay enough emphasis on the “function” of the language form, and on the relevant cultural content. Therefore, in teaching, we

must pay enough attention to the cultural content associated with specific communicative tasks, and emphasize the “function” and “culture” that language carries ^[5]. However, the main task of TCFL is language teaching. How to make the content of cultural teaching better serve language teaching is a problem we must seriously consider.

3.1 Consider the Native Cultural Background of Different Students.

Different students have different understandings and acceptances of Chinese culture, as the communication between their native culture and Chinese culture are different. For example, due to the influence of their family, the traditional customs and habits of the Chinese are still retained in many families, so many Chinese born overseas experience Chinese culture every day. Then some cultural content such as the order of Chinese surnames and names, habits about addressing somebody, respecting for the elderly and authority are all natural lessons learned in the everyday that may not be necessary to teach. In addition, because these students have a strong sense of identity with Chinese culture, they may have a certain need to explore the culture of China and inherit the traditional cultural virtues of China. Examples include life culture involving eating, living, family; custom culture including weddings and funerals, festivals, taboos; and pristine culture including places of interest, Beijing opera, Tang poetry and Song poetry will be suitable for this group of students. For non-Chinese students, it is necessary to focus on the "practical culture" that directly affects language learning. For example, we can use the tongue twisters to help students practice their tones and the pronunciation of the initials and finals in pinyin; we can use the "liu shu" theory to help students improve the efficiency of Chinese character recognition; we can also use the particularity of Chinese morphemes to help students expand their vocabulary. What's more, we can introduce the special honorific and modest words of Chinese and the praise and apology in Chinese to help them overcome communication barriers and make successful intercultural communication.

3.2 Consider the Learning Objectives of Different Students.

The purpose and needs of learners to learn Chinese are different. Therefore, the content of cultural teaching should be arranged according to the needs of learners when developing the syllabus. For example, if students learn Chinese as a common communication tool, in addition to focusing on the language and culture factors that directly affect the efficiency of Chinese learning, we should also teach them some special communicative culture in Chinese society. Chinese dress etiquette, speech etiquette, introduction etiquette, ceremonial etiquette, ritual etiquette, invitation and visit culture, are a few examples. If students are engaged in specialized Chinese studies or as Chinese teachers in the future, in addition to the above mentioned content, we should also teach them the content of Chinese traditional culture, so that they can have deepened understanding of the profound cultural information carried by Chinese language. If students use Chinese as a medium to learn a specific course, we must also add specialized cultural content related to their major. For example, if students want to study Chinese medicine, we need to set up a special Chinese medicine culture course while teaching Chinese lessons. If students want to study a major in tourism or hotel management, we also need to offer courses in tourism culture or service culture.

3.3 Consider the Learning Environment in Which Students Live and the Different Learning Stages.

Students living overseas are curious about Chinese culture, and there are few representations of Chinese culture reflected in their social environment. They are eager to know about modern China and the life of modern Chinese. Therefore, in order to make students understand Chinese culture comprehensively and objectively, Chinese teachers can select some cultural content that reflects the Chinese people's way of thinking; reflects Chinese philosophy, Chinese values, and Chinese modern national culture. Nowadays when Chinese culture is mentioned overseas, many Chinese teachers usually teach folk culture which can enable foreign students to master a large amount of social common sense in a short period of time. And this also helps foreign students to understand Chinese tea culture, wine culture, ceremonial culture, festival customs and other cultural knowledge, and to

experience the fun of learning Chinese in the process of making Chinese knots and listening to Peking Opera. No matter how concrete the content of folk culture is, students still don't know much about the perspectives of the Chinese nation and lack a real communicative ability even if they have mastered all these kinds of culture^[6]. What is worse, is that after learning this, many students who previously wanted to choose Chinese as a university major because of their love of Chinese culture may give up their plans, as a result of thinking that they had fully understood Chinese culture.

Foreign students who come to China to study Chinese will inevitably experience cultural incompatibility and even cultural conflicts because of the unfamiliar communication environment. Therefore, at the beginning of their studies in China, teachers should focus on selecting the cultural content that directly affects the efficiency of Chinese learning, directly affects the smooth progress of students' communication, and directly affects the adaptation of students' lives in China^[4]. With the improvement of students' Chinese proficiency and the reduction of cultural conflict, teachers can teach some Chinese traditional historical culture, modern national culture, etc., or offer different cultural seminars and cultural optional courses according to the needs of different students.

3.4 Consider the Combination of Nationality and Time.

"The nationality of culture embodies the characteristics of one culture that is different from another. It is a unique cultural achievement that the nation has accumulated in the unique history, and it is also the cultural basis for the existence of a nation."^[7] We must make appropriate choices when selecting cultural teaching content, and appropriately incorporate cultural content that reflects the characteristics of the times. This will allow foreign students do not only marvel at our long-standing and splendid traditional culture, but also comprehensively and objectively understand the brilliant achievements of modern China and the friendly, motivated and vigorous spirit of modern Chinese people. In this way, if some countries have hostile sentiments and deliberately distort our development status, foreign students who has learned these culture can maintain a clear-headed mind and adhere to an objective position. Therefore we can subtly expand the international influence of Chinese culture in the teaching process and achieve the goal of continuously improving the soft power of Chinese culture. However, in teaching practice, we often have a tendency to over-emphasize traditional culture and neglect modern culture, that is, taking nationality into account, but do not pay enough attention to the times. For example, in the book "Culture China' Chinese Culture Reading Course" written by Wang Hailong in 2002 and "Chinese Traditional Culture and Modern Life" written by Zhang Ying and Jin Shu Nian in 2004, traditional culture occupies more than 80% of the content^[8]. These books are not enough to show the whole picture of modern China to the rest of the world.

4. Conclusion

The production and development of any language depends on the language group who use it and the social culture. In a sense, if you don't understand the culture contained in the language, you can't really understand the language. Language acquisition and cultural acquisition complement each other, so cultural teaching can not only improve the language learning efficiency and communication ability by providing a true and vivid context for language teaching, but also can help learners reflect on their own culture, broaden their horizons, enhance cross-cultural awareness, and improve intercultural communication ability on the basis of understanding foreign cultures^[9]. Therefore, for those who learn Chinese as a second language, if they don't learn Chinese customs, etiquette, thinking habits and values, then they can't learn Chinese well because of the cultural differences. Of course, Chinese language can't be successfully communicated in modern China^[10]. However, the content of culture is so vast, so teachers of TCFL must choose appropriate cultural content based on different kinds of learners, different learning stages and different learning environment, in order to effectively teach Chinese language.

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