

The Cultivation of Cross-cultural Awareness in College English Teaching

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Abstract: Rapid development of China and progress of opening-up policy have seen more opportunities for people from different cultural backgrounds to communicate. In this context, how to cultivate cross-cultural awareness of contemporary college students in English teaching has become a widespread concern of the society. This paper first clarifies the relationship between language and culture, and then analyzes cultural differences between Chinese and English in terms of vocabulary, discourse and modes of thinking, and finally puts forward suggestions for cultivating cross-cultural awareness in college English teaching.

1. Introduction

At present, college English teaching mainly focuses on pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary to consolidate language points, but it is necessary to understand that college English teaching is not only about isolated language points, but cross-cultural awareness also matter for both English and non-English majors. Thus, intercultural factors should be integrated into college English teaching.

2. Language and culture

“We can't learn a foreign language well if we don't learn its culture, and we can't understand a culture exactly without learning its language”.[1] Language and culture can be complementary. Language learning can be means to serve culture study while studying cultural factors helps to consolidate students' language points, arouse their intercultural interests and improve communication skills.

The Onion Model of Culture reveals that the outer layers of an onion represent cultural artefacts, the next layer is composed of common social norms and rituals, and in the center are underlying values, beliefs, norms and attitudes which are difficult to recognize without deep analysis and profound understanding.[2] This proclaims that the traditional teaching mode should make adjustments to achieve cross-cultural communication by studying different layers of English, especially its cultural factors such as values, norms and attitudes and so on.

Just like the core of an onion, the inner layer of culture cannot be easily seen or touched like large portions of an iceberg hidden beneath the water. If we are not aware of them, we might hit rocks.[3]

3. Contrastive study between English and Chinese culture

“Any culture can be closely related to a nation's producing activities and lifestyle. Unique development process, mode of production and way of life, living environment and attitudes make a nation different from others.” [4] Chinese is a branch of Sino-Tibetan family while English derives from the Indo-European family and is the most widely spoken language in the world. Differences between the two languages mostly lie in their cultural disparities. The following contrasts cultural differences between Chinese and English in vocabularies, discourse and modes of thinking.

3.1 Cultural differences in vocabularies

Cultural differences have directly resulted in differences between English and Chinese language, and manifested in their different vocabulary systems and meanings.

3.1.1 Overlapping words

Since both Chinese and Western cultures share something in common, meanings of some words of the two languages may overlap each other. These overlapping words cover two types: allographic synonyms and homograph.

3.1.1.1 Allographic synonyms

Allographic synonyms are words with the same or similar meanings but different expressions in various languages. The followings are examples:

Table 1 Examples of allographic synonyms

English	汉语
To have the ball at one's feet	胸有成竹
To shed crocodile tears	猫哭老鼠
To spend money like water	挥金如土
Wait for gains without pains	守株待兔
Drink like a fish	牛饮
Like a drowned rat	像只落汤鸡
Walls have ears.	隔墙有耳
To fish in troubled waters	浑水摸鱼
To blow one's trumpet	自吹自擂

3.1.1.2 Homograph

Homograph refers to a word that is spelled the same as another, but is different in meaning, origin, grammar or pronunciation.[5] “Politics” and “family” are two examples of homograph different in meanings. “Politics” in English are matters concerned with getting or using power within a particular group or organization, with fraud and improper means engaged in political activities. Its negative meanings can be found in phrases like “play politics” and “office politics”. But in Chinese, “politics” mostly refers to positive political activities. For example, “讲政治”(stress political awareness) “深入推进政治建军”(ensure the political loyalty of the armed forces), “思想上政治上”(thought and stance). “Family” in most westerners’ eyes consists only of husband, wife and children. It is a small unit based on marriage only. In China, “family” also refers to other relatives living together. It is a social unit based on the relationship between marriage and pedigree.

3.1.2 Lexical vacancy

Lexical vacancy refers to the fact that a certain cultural expression in one language is vacant in another. lexical vacancy is reflected in variations of social customs, historical backgrounds, religions and ideologies of English and Chinese.

Many expressions in English can find their source in Greek and Roman mythology, such as “the wheel of fortune” from Roman legend, “the Apple of discord” from Greek mythology.

In the West, many idioms are related to Christianity or God because of people’s belief. For example, “bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh”, “as poor as a church mouse”, “the last Judgment” or “The Day of the Lord”. In Chinese, many idioms related to religion come from Buddhist culture. For example, “救人一命,胜造七级浮屠”(Better save one life than build a seven-storeyed pagoda), “善男信女”(devotees of Buddhism), “因果报应”(karma, retribution for sin).

Due to many battles between Britain and France and Spain in history, some related words have been retained, for example, “French fare” “虚假的客套”, “to have seen the French king” “喝醉”, “French leave” “不辞而别(常指参加宴会的人不辞而别,或在外用餐不付款偷偷离开)”, “Spanish coin” “虚假的奉承话或恭维话”.

Apart from the above, many cultural and social vacancies can also be found. For example, due to different food cultures, many Chinese cooking methods are vacant in English, such as “炆”, “焗”,

煨”，”扒”，”腌”，”煽”，”烩”。

3.1.3 Cultural conflict

Lexical conflict refers to words in one language that have completely opposite or contradictory meanings in another. Since many English vocabularies can find their roots in the Bible, fables, myths and legends or cultural factors such as customs, history, geography, social culture and other backgrounds, thus some English idioms, proverbs and fixed expressions seem incomprehensible superficially.

“East wind” and “west wind” have opposite meanings in English and Chinese. East wind represents cold, death and decay because the UK is at the east of the European continent, facing the Atlantic Ocean to the west. Every winter, “Northeast wind” from Northern Europe brings a bitter cold to Britain. This can be verified in English literature, for example, Dylan Thomas’s “Why east wind chills and south wind cools, shall not be known till windwell dries”. In comparison, east wind in China represents life, vigor, warmth and spring in poems such as “东风送暖入屠苏” “盼望着,盼望着,东风来了,春天的脚步近了”. This is because China has mountains at the west backside, facing Pacific Ocean to the east. The wind blows from the east sea is temperate and gentle. The west wind is just the opposite. It can be proved in poems “昨夜西风凋碧树,独上高楼,忘尽天涯路” “帘卷西风,人比黄花瘦” and so on. In western poems, west wind is called “It’s a warm wind, the west wind, full of birds’ cries” or Robert Herrick’s “sweet western wind”.

3.2 Discourse

Chinese articles tend to be inductive while English ones deductive. Traditional Chinese articles draw conclusions in the end after listing specific facts, reasons, and data.[6] Sometimes the author’s attitude is blunt and hidden in lines. In English articles, attitudes, opinions or conclusions are []introduced at the beginning, followed by facts and experiments.

3.3 Modes of thinking

Cultural differences are also reflected in modes of thinking. Chinese thinking patterns can be intuitive and figurative but westerners are more logical and rational. Besides, Chinese highlights the entire picture and collectivism but westerners hail individualism. Traditional Chinese philosophy believes that nature and people are interconnected, interacting as a whole and harmonious unity. On the contrary, the west advocates independence and individualism.

Additionally, Chinese focuses on image and extension that words create, not to care function and organization of sentence components. Chinese likes to use topic as the subject with positive voice or make non-subject sentences, which makes Chinese musical but fuzzy sometimes. However, English prefers to be precise, which is manifested in their complete sentences with well-organized structures.

4. Suggestions for College English Teaching

4.1 Explain words and phrased in context and cultural background, integrating culture into vocabulary teaching.

Generally, words in English may cover a wider range of meanings than their correspondents in Chinese. Therefore, in teaching, English words should be studied in context. Take a simple word “kill” as an example, most students know it means “killing”, ignoring its other meanings in different contexts. For example, in the sentence “They killed the proposal”, “kill” means “refuse”. In “She was dressed to kill”, “kill” means “she is gorgeous in her dress”. “Kill hunger” means “get feed”. In “He kills time every day by surfing on the net”, “kill” means “spend” or “waste time”. in “He killed 5 bottles of beer in an hour”, “kill” means “drink”. In “Take some pills to kill her pain”, “kill” means “stop”. In “You will kill your child with too much indulgence”, “kill” means “spoil”.

In addition, cultural factors should be further explained in words and phrases. For example, many students know the word “purple”, but cannot understand the meaning of phrases like “be born in the

purple”. At this point, cultural background should be added. “be born in the purple” means “to be born in the royal family or be in high positions”. “purple” represents “noble” because in the west, it is a color loved by people of noble birth. This is due to the fact that purple is a rare color and the robe dyed in purple are only supplied to ancient Roman nobles. Similarly, “marry into the purple” means “marry to rich and powerful families”. The culture-related background information will impress students and stimulate their interest in learning.

4.2 Cultivate students with cross-cultural awareness, combining language and culture teaching.

In the process of learning foreign languages, we can “exclude interference” through more “positive transfer” and less or none “negative transfer”, which requires comparison and contrast.[7] In addition to focusing on language points, teachers are expected to introduce cross-cultural background information encountered in the text to stimulate students' interest in learning, and naturally instill cultural concept into their mind and enhance their cultural sensitivity. For example, in learning the first unit “life and logic” of New Horizon College English 4 Reading and Writing Course, it is recommended that teachers contrast Chinese and western thinking, reinforcing students' understanding through discussions or presentations. And also, in learning the six unit “gender equality” of the New Horizon College English 4 Reading and Writing Course, gender roles between different countries and regions, such as Western Europe, the United States, and Southeast Asian countries can be added. Furthermore, the evolution of feminism in different nations can be discussed to give college students more insights into issues involved in gender equality and prepare them social and family responsibilities as adult men and women in their near future.

4.3 Cultivate right cultural attitude, respecting different cultures and preserving Chinese cultural identity

Cultivating the cross-cultural communication ability of the target audience means to recognize and respect other cultures. It can only be achieved by respecting, understanding and cherishing different cultures. [8] In college English teaching, students should adopt an objective and equal attitude in respect of various cultures, esteem different behaviors caused by cultures, and learn strengths of other cultures with an open mind. In unit five “why culture counts” of New Horizon College English 4 Reading and Writing Course, it is recommended that teachers introduce the concept of “stereotype” and how it is manifested in different countries. Or teachers may attach great importance to the stereotypes foreigners have on Chinese to highlight the value of intercultural communication. Meanwhile, the premise is to preserve students' Chinese cultural identity, enhance their cultural confidence, and strive to cultivate cross-cultural awareness and shape students into communicators of Chinese culture.

5. Conclusion

The cultivation of students' cross-cultural awareness enables students to see large portions of an “iceberg” beneath the sea, which makes English learning more funny as they not only know “what” but also know “why” and “how” to explore after class.

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