

# **The Importance of Introducing English Cultural Background in College English Listening and Speaking Class**

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**Abstract:** English is an important subject in the education and training of students. The most basic requirement for talents in all walks of life is a high level of English. In order to improve students' ability to compete in society, teachers must improve their teaching standards. At the same time, it is needed to strengthen the training of English listening and speaking and introduce English cultural background into the classroom with the existing resources of the school. In order to comply with the requirements of the times, teachers are expected to continually refine, improve and innovate in their teaching plans and strategies. There is a need to abandon the traditional teaching method of "blind indoctrination" and the teacher's "single-man show" and enhance the fun of classroom teaching to cultivate students' enthusiasm for learning by teaching them according to their aptitude, so as to improve the overall level of their English scientifically and efficiently. Starting with some of serious teaching problems in college English listening and speaking class, this paper summarized the importance of integrating the English cultural background into the classroom and then provided some corresponding measures for reference.

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, colleges and universities propose higher requirements on the association of cultural backgrounds in the teaching of English subjects and open-ended questions about cultural backgrounds often appear in the exams. But on the other hand, the traditional teaching does not pay enough attention to dealing with diversity issues, life situations, experience history and other problems about cultural connotations. Therefore, teachers should appropriately introduce English cultural background and properly train students in listening, speaking, reading and writing in the classroom, constantly striving for the stable and sustainable development of socialist construction with Chinese characteristics.

## **2. Teaching Problems in College English Listening and Speaking Class**

### **2.1 Problems in English Listening Class**

The traditional English classroom teaching generally focuses reading and writing, with lag in listening. The teaching aids used are only the audio tapes provided in the courseware. There are some shortcomings in this teaching mode. For one thing, the listening materials are recorded years ago and they have been very old. For another thing, early listening materials do not focus on the explanation of the English cultural background; what they focused on is the dialogue in daily life and thus student cannot get profound understanding from them.

The traditional way of investigating English listening is that the teacher broadcasts the relevant listening materials, and the students find out the answers from the recordings. It hard for teachers to fully understand the students' learning situation in this way and thereby they cannot grasp the direction of teaching.

### **2.2 Problems in Oral English Class**

Most oral English exercises that the teacher arranges for the students are reading the paragraphs

or articles in the textbooks. They usually do not train the students' conversation skills and therefore it is difficult for the students to flexibly use their knowledge in exact oral English communication. The traditional teaching method does not focus on the ability to adapt to the actual conversation and communication and also lacks innovation in spoken expressions. As a result, students cannot communicate with others independently, generally because they do not have sufficient vocabulary and do not know how to express what they want to say. Simply reading textbooks not only fails to train students' ability to communicate independently, but also make them have a low ability to understand and apply what they have learned. In this way, it is hard for them to apply English knowledge into actual life. Fluent English and standard accent are necessary in language communication, but this problem is often ignored in the current teaching process.

### 3. The Status of Introducing English Cultural Background into College English Listening and Speaking Class and Its Importance

After a series of simple classroom surveys and analysis, the author drew the basic situation of college students' cultural background knowledge and its impacts on English listening and speaking based on the survey results. The following simple questions are designed for the English classroom (46 students in this class):

1) What do you think of your English cultural background?

- A. Well know                      B. Generally know  
C. Know a little                  D. Know nothing

	The number of students	Proportion
Well know	8	17.4%
Generally know	14	30.4%
Know a little	20	43.5%
Know nothing	4	8.7%
Total	46	100%

As can be seen from the table above, 43.5% of students thought that their knowledge about English cultural background was relatively lacking; 30.4% thought that they had some related knowledge; but only 17.4% thought they were knowledgeable in English cultural background while 8.7% thought they did not know anything about it. In this regard, teachers need to take various ways to improve the students' knowledge of English cultural background in and after class.

2) How do you learn about English cultural background?

- A. Textbooks                      B. Extracurricular reading  
C. Films and TV dramas        D. Online materials              E. Teachers' explanation

	The number of students	Proportion
Textbooks	13	28.3%
Extracurricular reading	4	8.7%
Films and TV dramas	6	13.0%
Online materials	8	17.4%
Teachers' explanation	15	32.6%
Total	46	100%

It can be seen from the survey result that college students' understanding of English cultural background knowledge mainly comes from classroom explanations and textbook learning. But there are limitations in the content of the textbooks and teachers do not have enough time to explain related knowledge in the classroom. The other three methods (extracurricular reading, films and TV dramas, and online materials) all depend on students' autonomous learning ability and enthusiasm for English learning. In this context, teachers should pay more attention to the English cultural background in the process of arranging learning content and homework.

3) Do you think learning English cultural background can play a role in listening and speaking?

- A. Yes                      B. No

	The number of students	Proportion
Yes	42	91.3%
No	4	8.7%
Total	46	100%

More than 90% of the students believed that knowledge about English cultural background can directly affect listening and speaking, and thus learning this kind of knowledge is a problem that college English teachers need to pay attention to.

4) How often do you encounter English cultural background in listening and speaking training?

- A. Often                      B. Occasionally  
C. Hardly                    D. Never

	The number of students	Proportion
Often	17	37.0%
Occasionally	15	32.6%
Hardly	8	17.4%
Never	6	13.0%
Total	46	100%

37% of the students thought that they often encountered English cultural background knowledge in oral and listening training, which shows that the related knowledge has impacts on strengthening the ability to apply English; only about 30% of the students thought that English cultural background knowledge was occasionally involved in speaking and listening, which reflects the lack of related knowledge in current college English teaching.

5) Does unfamiliar cultural background in listening and speaking training affect answering questions?

- A. Yes                                      B. No

	The number of students	Proportion
Yes	38	82.6%
No	8	17.4%
Total	46	100%

Up to 80% of the students believed that it is difficult to complete the listening and speaking exercise if they do not understand the English cultural background correctly. Therefore, Teachers should be keenly aware of the impact of cultural background knowledge on students' English learning, and then focus on guiding them to accumulate relevant knowledge in daily study.

6) When hearing "She's telling a white lie", what prevents you from understanding the meaning of the sentence?

- A. I cannot identify any part of the sentence.  
B. I cannot understand the word "white" correctly  
C. I cannot identify the keyword "white"

	The number of students	Proportion
I cannot identify any part of the sentence.	10	21.7%
I cannot understand the word "white" correctly	21	45.7%
I cannot identify the word "white"	15	32.6%
Total	46	100%

45.7% of the students translated the "white lie" in this sentence into "a white-colored lie". This is obviously not the content of the sentence. "White lie" is really a good-faith lie. Students obviously cannot understand the correct meaning of the listening text if they do not have related background knowledge.

7) Did you ever misunderstand others in training or communication because of cultural background knowledge?

- A. Yes                                      B. No

	The number of students	Proportion
Yes	28	60.9%
No	18	39.1%
Total	46	100%

More than half of the students stated the misunderstanding of the other party's meaning caused by insufficient English cultural background knowledge would result in inefficient oral English training. Some slang and proverbs are usually used in daily communication, which is different from written language. This is an obstacle caused by insufficient knowledge of English cultural background in oral training. This is why insufficient cultural background knowledge can hinder the effectiveness of oral training.

8) In speaking training, when the other party says “I have hot potato”, can you understand the meaning of this sentence correctly?

- A. Fully understand                      B. Understand the surface meaning  
C. Cannot understand the meaning of words at all

	The number of students	Proportion
Fully understand	12	26.1%
Understand the surface meaning	30	65.2%
Cannot understand the meaning of words at all	4	8.7%
Total	46	100%

“Hot potato” is an expression with strong English cultural background. More than 60% of the students can only know its surface meaning, namely, “potato with a high temperature”, which is obviously not the true meaning of the other party. It is because of the lack of English culture background knowledge that many students cannot understand the actual meaning of this phrase is “tricky problem”.

Therefore, it has become an urgent thing to introduce cultural background knowledge into college English listening and speaking class and it can greatly prevent students from learning blindly without understanding the English cultural background and then help them realize improvement. To solve the main problems in college English listening and speaking class, it is needed to change the lagging teaching methods and models. Students cannot be scientifically and effectively cultivated in the old teaching mode, and their innovative ability cannot be discovered. The unilateral export of theoretical knowledge to students will only make them less active in English.

#### **4. Specific Measures for Introducing Cultural Background Knowledge into College English Listening and Speaking Class**

##### **4.1 Improvements in Vocabulary Teaching**

In traditional teaching concepts, teachers only need to train students to use the words given in textbooks to complete exams for exam-oriented education. However, after the new curriculum reform, teachers are required to focus on the vocabulary learning process and the vocabulary accumulation of students. Introducing cultural background knowledge into vocabulary teaching can make students feel the differences of expressions between western countries and China more intuitively. In Western culture, a word can have several meanings, and there may be huge differences between similar words. When does it can be used? What body language, phonetic intonation and specific phrases should be used to help express yourself? Teachers can help students solve these problems by introducing cultural background knowledge in vocabulary teaching.

##### **4.2 Improvements in Audiovisual Class**

After the new curriculum reform, modern teaching methods such as multimedia, VCD and voice lab have entered the classroom teaching. Teachers can make use of these methods to fully motivate students to learn while exercising their visual and auditory abilities. It is practical to guide students to experience Western people's communication methods by listening to English songs and watching English soundtrack videos, ranging from the body language and phonetic intonation to specific pronunciations in spoken expressions. It will be more intuitive and convenient for students to understand the charm of English culture and cultivate their interest in learning English.

##### **4.3 Innovative Combination of Teaching Materials and Cultural Knowledge**

The Ministry of Education the People's Republic of China should fully incorporate Western cultural knowledge into teaching materials when drafting them. The supplement of knowledge about English cultural background should not only depend on teachers. For example, the special contribution, deeds and cultural background of President Lincoln can be used as materials, emphasizing the relevant outstanding characters and his life profiles of celebrities, so as to deepen students' recognition and impression of this person. In the actual teaching process, the role of

textbooks should be more than teaching students how to make better use of sentences, grammar or vocabulary or some rhetorical methods of expression. They should cover broad knowledge, so that students can learn about the cultural background of western countries, such as regional cultural characteristics, humanities and customs. While carrying out the corresponding teaching guidance, teachers are supposed to increase the reading volume of students and guide them to learn about English culture autonomously and actively.

#### **4.4 Training Students' Independent Thinking Ability of Culture**

In the process of studying Western culture, students should think about the materials on textbooks while learning the basic knowledge. If students just accept the ideas brought by the textbooks without thinking or their own opinions, they still couldn't escape from the traditional teaching model – “blind indoctrination”. The description of the celebrities' deeds in the materials should guide students to think deeply about their deeds and behaviors, and they are supposed to have their own viewpoints about the world and culture expressed in the materials. Only by flexibly experiencing Western culture and actively exerting the ability of autonomous learning, students can effectively apply English culture into their actual life and learning. The elements of heterogeneous culture are to facilitate teachers to improve students' perceptions of the culture of hope, because unilateral drawing cannot be understood in depth. It is not difficult to recite English, but students need a lot of work to enter the English culture and use English flexibly.

#### **5. Conclusion**

It can be seen from the analysis above that there are still many “small problems” in the current teaching methods in China. In order to solve these problems, teachers need to commit to the continuous teaching methods reform. Teachers should not only focus on students' grades, instead, more attention should be given to cultivate their enthusiasm and consciousness for English, so as to comprehensively improve their ability to use English. In addition to strengthening the teaching of listening and speaking, it is also necessary to introduce English cultural background and train students' self-understanding of culture. This will not only improve their love of English, but also scientifically and efficiently improve the English teaching level and promote the stable and sustainable development of socialist construction with Chinese characteristics.

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