

Challenges and Practices in Developing Intercultural Competence in College English Teaching

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ABSTRACT

The cultivation of intercultural communication capability is a great challenge in college English teaching, with language being the greatest barrier. Language, which carries the culture and history of a nation, bears great significance to English teaching and learning. Based on the present situation of the college English teaching in the regard of intercultural competence cultivation, this paper analyzes the existing problems in the current education work and the connotation of the students' cross-cultural communication ability. Meanwhile, some solutions will also be put forward in this paper.

Keywords: *Intercultural competence, College English teaching, Cultivation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Effective communication with people from different cultural backgrounds has been attached increasing importance when it is realized that a good command of target language doesn't necessarily equal expected effective communication. Intercultural competence which reflects the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations is mainly based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Due to the globalization, cultivating the intercultural competence tends to be increasingly important in the current age since interactions with people from diverse cultures have become increasingly common, and people usually benefit from these intercultural experiences. China is sparing no effort to participate in international cooperation. For example, many multinational companies have established branches in China, offering a large number of jobs to people from different countries; meanwhile, many Chinese choose to study and work abroad. However, it is universally turned out that people have difficulties in understanding and communicating with each other because of different social backgrounds, social systems, and customs, (Petraakis, 2013) [1]. Learning a foreign language, especially English, is the best way to solve this problem, but obviously language learning and culture learning shouldn't be

separated, as Mak (2010) asserted that language learning is a deep, conceptual activity which involves explicit analysis of language and culture [2]. According to Mascadri (2017), understanding the ways in which culture shapes our attitudes about ourselves and others, developing critical awareness of ethnic, racial, gender and other inequalities and discrimination, and strengthening of individual responsibility, sensitivity and solidarity are essential in order to respect each culture for the development of humankind [3].

The key to make them understand each other is to get to know each others' different cultures, therefore, culture learning is not a necessity but a must for a foreign language learner to obtain intercultural communication competence.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTIVATION OF CHINESE EFL LEARNERS' INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AT TERTIARY LEVEL

In 2007, Office of the Education Ministry issued College English curriculum requirements, pointing out that College English teaching in China should be an integrated teaching system, with English language knowledge and practical skills, and intercultural communication as the main

contents, together with a variety of teaching methods and teaching strategies (General Office of the Ministry of education, 2007) [4]. From curriculum requirements, it is not difficult to see that the cultivation of intercultural communication competence of college students should be one important teaching objective of contemporary college English teaching. And it is necessary for English teachers to learn how will the current intercultural communication competence of college students be? And how shall we cultivate their intercultural communication competence effectively?

In today's world, individuals pay a great deal of attention and time to successful communication across cultures with other individuals and institutes around the world (Schwarzenthal, Juang, Schachner, van de Vijver, 2017) [5]. Intercultural communication served as the bridge for people to welcome the change, and deliver messages across borders and cultures. As Byram (1997) mentions, intercultural competence is "the ability to see relationships between different cultures - both internal and external to a society - and to mediate, that is interpret each in terms of the other, either for themselves or for other people"(p.29) [6]. Thus students with global perspective and awareness are expected and the development of "world-mindedness" has become critical. Consequently, educational institutes are under pressure to prepare "global-ready graduates" or "global citizens" (Paige & Goode, 2009) [7].

This paper is to analyze the problems in the process of cultivating college students' intercultural communication competence and probes into the reasons for those problems, based on the survey conducted in the teaching practice in BIGC. The survey objectives are to find the proper and effective teaching method, and meanwhile finding out the problems existing in the process and suggest solutions as well.

3. PROBLEMS REFLECTED FROM THE SURVEY BEFORE TEACHING PRACTICE

It is suggested to carry out a survey to find out Students' competency in the intercultural area. And to our disappointment, most of our students have no idea on what to say in intercultural communication: over 80% of them are not sure what to say in intercultural communication. This is to show that most participants lack the ability to have effective

intercultural communication. Due to the fact that English teaching in Colleges is still examination-oriented, teachers generally focus on delivering language knowledge, while ignoring the culture behind language, especially the culture and custom in intercultural communication. Similarly, students have got used to memorizing vocabularies and the rules of grammar, and do not pay attention to any cultural knowledge related to intercultural communication.

Secondly, more than half of the participators are in great short of the knowledge about western customs. About 70% of them haven't heard of non-verbal communication, meanwhile, 53% of them have no idea of the appropriate body distance in western culture. Obviously, the above data shows that most of students have not yet mastered related knowledge of intercultural communication, and the reasons for those problems mainly resulted from teachers' ignorance of culture part in language teaching. Their interpretation of language learning as grammar and vocabulary focus learning makes them ignore the essence of language teaching, a tool for communication. Consequently, they overlook the importance of cultivating college students' intercultural communication competence.

Language is the carrier of culture, so it is inseparable from culture. English education experts Deng Yanchang, Liu Runqing(1998) ever pointed out that learning a foreign language not only needs to master the pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and idioms, but needs to know the way they use to look at things around, to observe the world; and the way to reflect their thoughts, habits and behavior of the society [8]. Nowadays, it is not hard for us to find that most college students who can speak fluent English are not capable to have effective intercultural communication. This is suffice to show that Language competence is just a part of intercultural communication competence. With a growing number of teachers come to realize the importance of imparting cultural knowledge, then how to cultivate students' intercultural communication competence effectively unavoidably became the focus of language teaching. Some suggestions are provided in the following part.

4. SUGGESTIONS TO THE PROBLEMS

4.1 Introducing Cultural Knowledge into Class Teaching

After being fully aware of the importance of cultural education in cultivating college students' intercultural communication, teacher should adjust teaching content intuitively; instead of just focusing on language knowledge explanation in the class, they should introduce language knowledge into class teaching as well. In the process of intercultural communication, quite a few of misunderstandings may arise from people's different understanding of the same word which may contain opposite connotation. Consequently, teachers need to guide students into the understanding the connotation of English vocabulary, the loaded cultural meaning of word. In different cultural background, same word may contain different connotation. For example, Chinese people are proud of being the descendants of dragon, since dragon is regarded auspicious and as the symbol of power in traditional China culture. However dragon symbolizes evil in western cultures, like the one depicted in the England Epic poem Beowulf. Beowulf lead his people to kill the evil warrior dragon in attempt to defend their home. If students are provided the different cultural connotations of the same word, they will be clear why Westerners fell puzzled when Chinese call themselves the successors of dragon. Another example is that about the connotation of colors. There are huge differences in the use of color in China and western countries. For example, as the symbol of happiness in China, red is often used in wedding occasion or any other celebrating ceremony. While in western countries, white color, the symbol of purity and innocence, will be generally adopted as the main color in Wedding occasions. Without those cultural differences, it is hard for students to adopt appropriate words in intercultural communication, which may cause conflicts during intercultural communication. What's more, many English words originate from the Bible, Greek mythology and literary masterpieces. Lacking the related cultural knowledge, students tend to feel puzzled on how to use these words properly in intercultural communication. On the choice of topic in daily communication, there are differences for people from various cultures as well. Westerners usually talk about weather, sports, and pets, while seldom mention family, income and other sensitive private

topics. Unlike them, Chinese is willing to talk about family, income, children, while seldom mention disease and death which are usually considered to be unlucky. Therefore in order to achieve effective intercultural communication, students need to have a good command of cultural knowledge as well as the language competence.

4.2 Combining the Methods of Input and Output in Culture Acquisition

Language acquisition is considered to be based on a large number of listening and speaking practice, which also goes to the acquisition of culture knowledge. Therefore, many English learners hold the idea that the best way to acquire culture knowledge is to listen to teacher attentively in class, read novels, magazines in English version or watch original English movies after class. Obviously, a large number of culture knowledge input, especially reading novels in English version, watching original English movies can arouse students' enthusiasm to culture acquisition, but there is a big gap between the acquisition of culture knowledge and development of intercultural communication competence. It means that culture knowledge acquisition does not necessarily mean that students can use those knowledge properly in intercultural communication, as social and cultural school believes that foreign language learning should not separate learning and application, and learning should be integrated into the acquisition and utilization of culture knowledge (Firth, A & J. Wagner, 2007) [9]. It is far from enough for teachers solely explain the cultural knowledge in class teaching, but also need to provide opportunities for students to practice their acquired culture knowledge as well. Only in this way can students obtain the intercultural communication competence. Otherwise, the culture knowledge acquired by students will be the superficial knowledge in their mind, for lacking the chance to be used in the actual language environment. To provide the output opportunity, teacher can divide the whole class into various groups of 4-5 students in each group, and then assign different intercultural communication tasks to each group. The intercultural communication tasks could be like: you are going to airport to meet your potential customers from England, how to communicate with them; you are going to take part in an international business negotiation in representation of your company, how to invite the other party to have dinner at the end of the negotiations, and how to choose the appropriate topic at dinner; you want to

invite your foreign teachers to have dinner at home, how to invite him and how to prepare the dinner. After assigning different tasks, teacher can take 3-5 minutes to describe each task in detail and make a brief introduction of relevant background knowledge. Each group could be given a certain period of time to prepare and then perform their intercultural communication task in front of all students. Finally, teachers need to comment on their performance, point out the problems in students' intercultural communication performance, and provide suggestions for improvement. Besides, teachers should arrange appropriate simulated situation training to enable students to further consolidate their acquired culture knowledge outside the classroom.

4.3 Cultivating Students' Consciousness of Intercultural Communication

Teachers need to have the consciousness of intercultural communication first and then try to influence and consciously arise students' awareness of this aspect. We have to bear in mind that students are the recipient of intercultural communication and their ideal of English learning shouldn't simply equate English learning with examination. College students need to realize that the acquisition of intercultural communication competence is an essential part of language learning. Given the fact that people from different areas have different customs and value, when interacting with people from different places, without culture awareness to tolerant those cultural differences, students will fail in cross-cultural communication. To solve the problem, they need to learn to stand in others' position to solve problems. For example, when Chinese people having meals with friends, they usually rush to pay the bills to show their hospitality, while foreigners will be surprised to see this and feel puzzled why most Chinese are so eager to pay bill. Foreigners like to split the bill and go Dutch when having meals together, which would be regarded as mean and ungenerous in most people's eyes. Therefore, if they don't know the difference between others and themselves, misunderstandings will inevitably arise between Chinese people and foreigners. What they are supposed to do is to have the intercultural awareness and respect the difference in intercultural communication.

5. CONCLUSION

One of the main objective of College English Teaching is to enable students communicate effectively with people from different cultures , and to achieve the goal, cultivating college students' intercultural communication competence has become an indispensable part in the globalization era. Teachers, as the organizers of foreign language teaching, need to improve their teaching methods, adjust their traditional teaching contents, and give priority to cultivating students intercultural communication competence in their teaching practice. What's more, teachers can't stop their way of absorbing the knowledge of culture from other countries in order to deliver enough culture knowledge to students in class. Finally, college students, as the recipients of intercultural communication competence, should be open to cultural differences, aware of cultural differences, and participate in intercultural communication practice actively.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

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