

Culture Influences on English Language Teaching*

ZHANG Xue-wei, YAN Ying-jun

(Harbin Institute of Technology at Weihai, Weihai, Shandong 264209, P. R. China)

Abstract: It's obvious that the teaching situation and teaching methods used in English Language Teaching (ELT) in China need to be changed to involve culture instead of language knowledge only. To further explain the importance of culture teaching, teachers need to know to what extent cultural background knowledge influences language learning and teaching, and how teachers can take advantage of that influence. To account for the roles culture plays in language learning and teaching, it is necessary to demonstrate the functions it may perform in the components of language learning and teaching, such as listening, speaking, reading, and translating.

Key words: culture influence; English teaching; second language acquisition

1. Language Teaching is Cultural Teaching

Teaching culture has been considered important in foreign language instruction for almost a century. However, it was not until more recent years that teaching culture in language courses has been widely emphasized in China universities and colleges. Now most scholars in second language acquisition (SLA) have operated with the assumption that learning a language means acquiring the set of pragmatic norms and cultural values embodied in the target language. Brooks (1964: 45) states:

“Turning to culture, we deliberately shift focus away from language as such towards the people who use the language: where and how they live, what they think, feel, and do. It is nowadays a commonplace in a language pedagogy that language and culture are intertwined, that it is not possible to teach a language without culture, and that culture is the necessary context for language use”.

Teaching culture in language class is already a concept accepted by language teachers the world over and this concept has been put into practice for a long time.

As the second language (L2) and foreign language (FL) educators, teachers teach and the students learn about the culture of the L2/FL whether or not teachers include it overtly in the curriculum. This point was made by McLeod (1976:212) some years ago: “by teaching a language...one is inevitably already teaching culture implicitly”. Socio-linguist reveals why. In an article on discourse, for example, Brown (1990:13) questions whether or not language may be value-free or independent of cultural background. She concludes: “There are values, presuppositions, about the nature of life and what is good and bad in it, to be found in any normal use of language.” Such normal language use is exactly what most L2 and FL instructors aim to teach.

Having outlined these findings, Buttjes (ibid) cautions readers that “as in the case of first vs. second language

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ZHANG Xue-wei, male, associate professor of College of Foreign Language, Harbin Institute of Technology at Weihai; research fields: language teaching & intercultural communication.

YAN Ying-jun, female, associate professor of College of Foreign Language, Harbin Institute of Technology at Weihai; research

acquisition research, first and second culture acquisition differ in many respects”. Two of his further observations also explain just how language teaching is culture teaching: language codes cannot be taught in isolation because processes of socio-cultural transmission are bound to be at work on many levels, e.g. the contents of language exercises, the cultural discourse of textbooks (Kramersch, 1988), and the teacher’s attitudes towards the target culture; in their role of “secondary caregivers” language teachers need to go beyond monitoring linguistic production in the classroom and become aware of the complex and numerous processes of intercultural mediation that any foreign language learner undergoes... (Buttjes, 1990: 55-56).

In short, culture in L2 and FL education today is clearly much more than great literature. As the understanding of language and communication has evolved, the importance of culture in L2 and FL education has increased.

2. Culture Influences on Foreign Language Teaching

It’s obvious that the teaching situation and teaching methods used in ELT in China need to be changed to involve culture instead of language knowledge only. To further explain the importance of culture teaching we need to know to what extent cultural background knowledge influences language learning and teaching, and how can we take advantage of that influence. To account for the roles culture plays in language learning and teaching, it is necessary to demonstrate the functions it may perform in the components of language learning and teaching, such as listening, speaking, reading, and translating.

2.1 Culture influence on vocabulary

Language is the carrier of culture and vocabulary is the basic ingredient of language. The cultural difference will inevitably exhibited on the vocabulary, and the explanation of vocabulary will also reflect the national or cultural difference. Take color as an example. in Chinese, “Blue” relates to “肃穆、美好”, but in English “blue” implies “depression” (沮丧), such as “in a blue mode” (情绪低落), “be down with the blues”(沮丧不振); “Green” in Chinese refers to “春天、希望”, but in English “Greenhorn” means “无经验的新手”. In Chinese, “红茶、红糖、红眼病” all uses “red” (红), but the English correspondents are “black tea, brown sugar, green-eyed.” Take another example, Chinese “龙” is colored with dignity, as shown in “真龙天子、望子成龙、龙凤呈祥”, whereas in western countries, dragon is never dear to them, for it represents devil.

In a word, culture is a comprehensive composite with abundant implication, and each factor in it may be exhibited on words. Learning vocabulary, while paying attention to cultural factors, is vital and crucial.

2.2 Culture influence on listening

In FL learning particularly in training their listening ability to understand better, learners often complain that although they spend lots of time in learning and practicing their ability of listening comprehension, their progress is not very obvious. To achieve this end, they seem to have done everything they can. Some, for example, bought tape recorders to facilitate their learning process in an attempt to improve their listening ability, and spent several

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hours in it every day. But when they met new listening materials, they still could not understand them. The reason for this may be various, but some of them have been identified. Among them are their small vocabulary, weak grammar, and vague pronunciation. But a relatively more important reason is that they lack the necessary cultural background knowledge of the language they have learned. Listening is closely related to the culture, politics and economy of the target language. In judging one's listening ability, we are in fact considering his comprehensive ability, including the English level, intellectual range, analytical and imaginative ability, etc.

We may have this kind of experience: when we are listening to something where the events involved are familiar to us, no matter what they are, e.g., news, reports, stories, lectures; or art, science, sports or economy, it is relatively easier for us to understand. Even if there are some new words in it, we can guess the meaning in the light of the context. On the contrary, it will be difficult for us to understand, if the materials we are listening to are closely related to the cultural background knowledge we are not familiar with. Sometimes the materials may be easy and we can get the pronunciation of each word from the tape, but the lack of necessary cultural background knowledge may hinder our thorough understanding. If, for example, a student comes across a sentence like: Edward Kennedy went downhill since Chappaquiddick.

He won't find it difficult to understand the structure of the sentence. But if he doesn't know that "Chappaquiddick" is the name of a place in America, and is used in this sentence to refer to the traffic accident E. Kennedy suffered, they cannot understand the real meaning.

From the above explanation we can see how important the role that culture plays in our listening ability: Culture is one of its unalienable attachments. It can hinder our progress of listening, and it can also help it. So we should notice the existence of culture and try to take advantage of it.

2.3 Culture influence on speaking

Just like listening, the ability of speaking is not a matter only concerned with pronunciation or intonation. People need to read a lot to understand the cultural background knowledge of the target language; only in this way can they communicate successfully with the others. So in the training of oral English, teachers should emphasize the practical use of the language, and try to use the materials which come from the daily life. And this can help people use proper sentences in proper context. Otherwise, even if one may have been well trained in the linguistic aspect of the language, he may make mistakes or have misunderstanding for the sake of lacking related cultural background knowledge. For this, the experience of a young interpreter is a case in point:

There is a young interpreter whose pronunciation is standardized and natural. The first time he was appointed to accompany a foreign guest, he tried to do everything he could to show he was enthusiastic, kind, considerate, and competent. He tried to be attentive as possible by saying "You come this way." "You sit here." "Don't go too fast." "Follow me." "Don't be late." But the next day, it came to him as a shocked surprise that the foreigner didn't want to go with him, because the foreigner thought the young interpreter was not polite. In the foreigner's eyes, the interpreter is not helping him, but scolding him as scolding a child. There is no problem in the interpreter's English, but the lack of the cultural background knowledge makes him incompetent for this job.

The story is simple, yet it says something important. In the course of oral communication, speakers should pay much attention to the context, i.e. what you are saying, to whom you are saying it, when and where you are saying it, etc.

2.4 Culture influence on reading

Having some knowledge about English is the basic requirement to read English. But this knowledge is not the only standard in judging one's reading ability. The cultural background knowledge plays an important role in it.

Reading is a process in which the knowledge of language, the cultural background knowledge, and other specialized knowledge are altogether in effect. And it is also a course of prediction and revision on the basis of language materials, cultural background knowledge, and logical conclusion. Generally speaking, when we are learning Chinese, we seldom meet cultural obstructions, but in terms of reading English, the cultural differences are always bringing us trouble of one sort or the other.

One of Churchill's speeches during the Second World War is a very typical example of this case. In his speech, he used his private secretary's words to express himself: "After dinner, when I was thinking on the croquet lawn with Mr. Churchill, he reverted to this theme, and I asked whether for him, the arch anti-Communist, this was not bowing down in the house of Rimmon. Mr. Churchill replied, 'Not at all. I have only one purpose, the destruction of Hitler, and any life is much simplified thereby. If Hitler invaded Hell, I would make at least a favorable reference to the devil in the House of Commons.'"

In the above paragraph, Churchill quoted three religious allusions: the first one is "bow down in the house of Rimmon." which comes from the "Bible". That means, "doing things against one's willingness"; the second one is "Hell"; and the third one is "the devil". If we don't know the three allusions, we can't fully understand that Churchill likened Communist USSR to the "Hell" and the Soviet Communist to the "devil". In the use of the religious allusions in this paragraph, Mr. Churchill not only showed his anti-Communist stand, but also avoided annoying the Soviet Union Communist directly. So the real meaning of this paragraph is that his support to the USSR is for the salvation of the human beings, and it does not mean that he has changed his anti-Communist stand.

So we can see that the knowledge of language itself cannot solve all the problems in reading. People's works is always related with the culture of their nations, especially related allusions or usage, which we are not familiar with. That reminds us that we should pay attention to the cultural influence in reading.

2.5 Culture influence on translating

It is widely believed that translating is greatly influenced by culture. In translating, we should have enough knowledge about both the target and the source language. The difficulty in translation mainly lies in the understanding of cultural background knowledge.

The cultural background knowledge includes many aspects, such as art, history, geography, philosophy, science, etc. For example: I was not Pygmalion, I was Frankenstein.

There are two points that may puzzle us: one is "Pygmalion", and the other is "Frankenstein". We can see that they are the names of two persons, but who are they? In fact, Pygmalion is the King of Cyprus in Greek fairy tales. Once he carved a statue of a very beautiful young lady, and he fell in love with "her". Because of his pious love, Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love gave the statue life, and at last, Pygmalion got married with her. Frankenstein was a character in M. W. Shelley's "Frankenstein", who was a young medical college student. Once he invented a monster, but that monster ate him. From the above background knowledge, we can see that "Pygmalion" means, "to enjoy one's own creation", while "Frankenstein" means "to suffer from one's own actions". So the success in translating this sentence does not solely depend on understanding its structure but is determined by the knowledge of the cultural load the two terms carry respectively.

3. Conclusion

Thus, from the above, it's clear that language teaching is indeed culture teaching. Such a perspective is evident outside of the fields of applied linguistics and second language education as well, in writings on intercultural

communication (Luce and Smith, 1987). Consider this view from outside of the L2 and FL education literature: Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted. Culture is the foundation of communication. (Samovar, Porter, & Jain, 1981: 24)

In view of this, teachers should and do teach the students the L2 or FL culture in the classes when teaching goal is communicative competence in particular. As Byram (1988: 22) argues: "Not only is culture part and parcel of the process, but the educational value of it within L2/FL education is great."

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◆ **Conference Information**

Education Society of Asia (CESA) and the Annual Comparative Education

Society of Hong Kong (CESHK) Conference

Learning from Each Other in an Asian Century

The Biennial Conference of the Comparative Education Society of Asia (CESA), to be held in Hong Kong from 8th to 10th January, 2007. The Conference is being held in conjunction with the annual Conference of the Comparative Education Society of Hong Kong (CESHK), and is hosted by the Comparative Education Research Centre (CERC) at the University of Hong Kong.

The Conference theme, "Learning from Each Other in an Asian Century", is intended to be inclusive. The following is sub-themes:

- } Theories, concepts, issues and methodology in comparative education research
- } Educational development in conflict and reconstruction settings
- } Literacy and education for all

- } Education and poverty
- } Educational policy convergence, or divergence, in an increasingly connected world
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