An Empirical Study on Non-English Majors' Ability to Express Chinese Culture in English

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Abstract

Cross-cultural communicative ability is an important ability that college students should have in modern society. A successful cross-cultural communication is based on several factors. The basic one is the understanding of the target language culture. In order to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings it is necessary for college students to know western culture and also form the ability to express Chinese culture appropriately in English. This paper did an empirical study among non-English majors to test the present ability and the differences between college students who passed CET-4 and those who did not. The results showed that the former performed better than the latter, but both were far from satisfying. Based on these findings, this paper provides some measures to enhance their ability in this field.

Keyword: non-English majors, ability to express Chinese culture in English, an empirical study, measures

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of globalization international communication is becoming more and more popular. During this course cultural conflicts are unavoidable due to their different cultures and histories. In order to avoid the unnecessary misunderstanding, it is important to grasp other country's cultures. Therefore more and more Chinese educators focus on western cultures in English teaching. However, some of them ignore the necessity of cultivating learners' ability to express Chinese culture in English, which will easily lead to the coming up of Chinese cultural aphasia (Cong, 2000), which is a big barrier to any successful cross-cultural communication and will do harm to spreading Chinese culture on a global scale. University students are the future constructors of China, whose qualities have direct effects on Chinese constructions. In order to get a better communication with other countries and keep Chinese culture from being destroyed by some determined ones, English teachers should have a strong sense of cultural security and then give the top priority to cultivating students' ability to express Chinese culture. In the past decade many educators have done some researches in this field, but the results were dissatisfying (Zhang, 2002; Liu, 2003; Liu, 2005). Ten years later whether their ability is improved or not is everybody's guess. So an empirical study among non-English majors in some local universities was carried out to investigate their present condition. Besides, the differences between learners who passed CET-4 and those who did not would be tested as well. Based on these findings, this paper will explore the proper measures to improve non-English majors' abilities to express Chinese culture.

2. Research Design

2.1 Research Questions

Nowadays international communication has developed much in every aspect. During this course some determined countries want to affect and control others' cultures. At this point cultural security catches our eyes. Cultural security is one of the most important securities that every independent country must protect. In the new atmosphere, it is the cultural security, along with military security, political security and economic security that forms the current national security system. Cultural security includes the security of customs, the security of values, the security of languages and the security of lifestyles. (Liu, 2004)

College students, as the future constructors, will work on various fields. It is possible for them to introduce Chinese culture to foreigners. In this case they should form the ability to express Chinese culture properly in English. Unfortunately, according to some researches in the past decade, they were not good at it. Due to this result, a study was carried out in some local universities in order to answer these questions:

1) At present whether the non-English majors' abilities to express Chinese culture are enhanced?

2) Are there any differences between students who passed CET-4 and those who did not? If so, what are they?

3) How to improve non-English majors' abilities to express Chinese culture?

2.2 Participants

This research was carried out among sophomores from Grade 2012 in 3 local universities or colleges in Sichuan Province. They majored in different subjects, for instance, history, politics, laws, computer science, physics, mathematics and so on. Totally there were 1161 students involved in this investigation. 600 of them had passed CET-4, while other 561 had not. Among the participants who had passed CET-4, 204 students were male, and 396 students were female. While among the other participants who had not passed it, 243 students were male, and 318 participants were female.

2.3 Research Instruments

In this study 2 instruments were put into use. One was questionnaire, another one was test paper. The questionnaire was to investigate non-English majors' attitude toward learning Chinese culture in English classes, English teachers' activities of teaching Chinese culture, and learners' self-esteem about their ability in this field, etc. This questionnaire was created by the author herself on the basis of some other relative questionnaires (Xu, 2008; Liu, 2013), which turned out to be effective. After some necessary changes, at last, there were 14 items in it, and to each question there were 5 choices, from "I completely agree with it" to "I do not know" to "I do not agree with it at all". These choices respectively represented scores from one to five. To some items the scores were reversed.

In the testing part there were 40 Chinese words, which were representatives of Chinese culture, for example, reform and opening, steamed bread, Peking opera, the Palace Museum and so on. These words fell into 4 categories: Chinese traditional culture, Chinese foods, Chinese historic sites, and modern Chinese social culture. There were 10 words in each category. What the students should do was to translate these Chinese words and phrases into English appropriately. Write one correctly, get 2 points. The total score was 80. The higher the score was, the stronger the ability was.

2.4 Data Collected

In this study 1161 questionnaires were distributed, and the collected effective questionnaires were 1086; the effectiveness rate was 93.5%. Among them, 564 pieces were collected from learners who had passed CET-4, and their effectiveness rate was about 94%; while other 522 pieces were collected from learners who had not passed it, and the effectiveness rate was about 93%. As to the test, totally 1161 testing paper were distributed, and 1068 pieces were effective. The effectiveness rate was 92%. Among them, 555 pieces were collected from higher-English-level students, and the effectiveness rate was 92.5%, while the number of lower-English-level students' effective papers was 513, and the effectiveness rate was about 91.4%. It was obvious that both the questionnaire and the testing paper had a fairly high effectiveness rate (in China students who pass CET-4 are usually regarded as learners with higher English level, those who do not pass it are regarded as learners with lower English level).

3. Results and Analysis

3.1 Results about Questionnaire

The results showed that most participants were in favor of teaching Chinese culture in English classes. They had realized their responsibility to spread Chinese culture to the whole world and they were interested in learning it. The percentages of agreeing with these two items in those who had passed CET-4 are 87% and 74% respectively; and the percentages among the lower-English-level were 75% and 58% respectively. But few of them had a high esteem of their ability. Among those participants who had passed CET-4, only 15% thought they could translate Chinese culture into English appropriately, and the percentage among those who failed in CET-4 was only 7%. When it comes to "I can easily find materials about Chinese culture in English", many people found it very difficult. Among the higher-English-level students, 73% disagreed with this point, 15% chose "I do not know", and only 12% supported it; while among the lower-English-level students, 61% disagreed with this statement, and 28% chose "I do not know", and only 11% showed their agreement with it. From this result it was clear that

no matter whether the participants had passed CET-4 or not, they all found it difficult in searching English materials about Chinese culture. This is worth our serious thinking, especially to the publishers. They should realize students' strong demand for it. Besides, as for the item "college English teachers often introduce Chinese culture in English", many participants revealed that college English teachers seldom did that. The percentage of approving among those who had passed CET-4 was 25%, and the percentage of those who failed in CET-4 was only 21%. It was concluded that until now few college English teachers could combine culture teaching with language teaching well.

3.2 Results of Testing Paper

Table 1. Distribution of scores

Scores		0	1-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	Above 60
Higher-english-level participants	Number	4	260	199	63	9	9	7	4
	Percentage	0.7	46.8	35.9	11.4	1.6	1.6	1.3	0.7
Lower-english-level participants	Number	5	351	117	21	10	5	4	0
	Percentage	1	68.4	22.8	4.1	1.9	1	0.8	0

From table 1 it is clear that in both groups most students had a positive attitude to this study, so only 1% or less than that got a zero. Of course, this was also related to their ability. Besides, most participants stayed in the line of 1-10, that is to say, most of them could only do at most 5 items correctly. Among higher-English-level participants the percentage was 46.8%, and in the other group the percentage was 68.4%. However, few participants could get high scores. Among those who passed CET-4 only 20 students got a score over 41, and among them only 4 students got the score above 60, and in the other group only 9 students got the score above 41, and nobody's score was beyond 60. It is obvious that the participants' ability to express Chinese culture needs improving. Analyzing the testing papers, researchers found that many students could express such phrases as "the Great Wall", "Peking opera", "hot pot", but failed in other phrases, such as "the construction of spiritual civilization", "cotta warriors", "spring festival couplets", etc.

Table 2. Results of means

	CET-4	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	F
Social culture	1.00	555	2.6054	2.64184	.19423	14.429***
	2.00	513	1.5439	1.87933	.14372	
Historic sites	1.00	555	3.2865	1.96963	.14481	7.525**
	2.00	513	2.7251	1.69095	.12931	
Traditional culture	1.00	555	4.4216	2.86955	.21097	6.703***
	2.00	513	3.1579	1.96250	.15008	
Foods	1.00	555	2.6378	3.10043	.22795	14.845**
	2.00	513	1.8363	2.31035	.17668	
Total score	1.00	555	12.9514	8.02461	.58998	15.895***
	2.00	513	9.2632	5.40542	.41336	

It is obvious that in every aspect of testing paper the students who had passed CET-4 performed better than those who had not passed it. And what is amazing is that both groups performed best in traditional culture, and then it was followed by historic sites, foods and social culture. But even in their best performance, the mean was only 4.42 and 3.16 respectively. The total score for the test was 80, while the mean for it was 13 and 9.3 respectively. It was very low and dissatisfying. In other words, their ability to express Chinese culture needs improving.

Speaking of the significance of these differences, the results showed that all the differences were significant. And in the dimension of social culture, traditional culture and the total score, the difference was very significant ($p <$

0.001); and in the dimension of historic sites and foods, the difference was not so huge but also significant($p <$ 0.01). It can be concluded that due to the higher English level, students who had passed CET-4 had a stronger ability than those who had not.

4. Discussion

Through this study it is found that at present non-English majors' ability to express Chinese culture in English was far from satisfying. Most of them could not express Chinese culture appropriately though most were interested in it. Students with higher English level did better than those students with lower English level in the testing part, but both did not do a good job. It mainly results from four factors.

4.1 Teachers

English teachers are the organizers of English classes. Their belief in teaching has a direct effect on their teaching activities and teaching results. In this investigation it is found that English teachers, no matter they teach higher-English-level learners or lower-English-level learners, seldom touch Chinese culture in English classes. However, some students say that their teachers will introduce English culture on and off. It tells us that some teaches have realized the importance of introducing cultures in language learning, but their security awareness is so low that they do not think it is of great necessity to cultivate learners' ability to express Chinese culture in English. On the other hand, though some English teachers do have this awareness, due to their dissatisfying professional ability, it is a big challenge for them to do this. Thus some have to give up. At last teachers' ignorance gives bad effects on learners: they do not attach much emphasis to it, which leads to their disappointing performance.

4.2 Teaching Materials

Textbooks are the basis of teaching activities. Teachers make their teaching plans according to it. So it has a great effect on teaching and learning results. According to the investigation the currently-used college English textbooks do not contain enough Chinese culture. Of course western culture can promote learner's English learning, helping them have a better understanding of foreign language, but the lack of Chinese culture and the flood of western culture may result in the absence of learners' self-identification, which will do harm to students' construction of correct values. In addition many participants complain that it is very difficult for them to find English materials about Chinese culture. If they do not have enough materials to broaden their horizons, how can they get improvements? It's obvious that the shortage of English materials about Chinese culture is also a big barrier to their success.

4.3 Students

Students are the subjects of learning process. Their attitude is one of the important factors that will have great impacts on learning results. In this study it is found that some learners never search English materials about Chinese culture. It may be caused by two factors: on the one hand, maybe they do not regard it as an important ability that they should have; on the other hand, due to their laziness, they seldom do that. In order to enhance their ability, college students themselves should be more active. Only in this way can they develop better.

4.4 Educational Systems

In China tests are the leader of our teaching activities. Teachers, parents, students and the society make their teaching plans based on all kinds of examinations. Therefore tests play a very important role in China. However, at present, Chinese culture is seldom included in English exams, so college students and English teachers do not throw enough light on it, which leads to their low ability to express Chinese culture. On the other hand, college students are accustomed to such a learning style: they focus on learning and tests, and ignore the developments of the society. They seldom read newspapers, and they are indifferent to everything unrelated to tests. In this case the result that they all performed worse in social culture is acceptable; at the same time the fact that they performed better in Chinese traditional culture is related to their long-time bathing in Chinese history from childhood through all kinds of examinations.

5. Implications

In order to improve non-English majors' ability to express Chinese culture in English, some measures should be put into practice.

First, the administrators in the college should emphasize the construction of cultural security among teachers and students. Only if the English teachers themselves have a strong sense of cultural security, will they put it into their teaching, and influence their students deeply. And only if the students themselves form this awareness, will they have the sense of responsibility to spread Chinese culture.

Second, English teachers must keep learning all the life. Teachers are the organizers of teaching activities. Only if the English teachers have a positive attitude to spreading Chinese culture and make much progress in their profession, can they perform the task of cultivating students' ability better. In a word English teachers should keep up with the society and keep their students in mind.

Third, college students should realize that they are the future of China. Their qualities have a direct effect on Chinese development. As an independent country, China must keep its independence in every aspect, of course including culture. It's the college students who shoulder the responsibility to spread Chinese culture to the world. Therefore, college students must realize their duty and make full preparation for it.

Finally, the publishers had better recompose college English textbooks, adding more Chinese culture into it. Besides, English materials about Chinese culture are insufficient at present. So it is the high time that the publishers and educators began to think seriously about it. Only if learners have enough input of Chinese culture in English, can they have bigger improvement.

6. Conclusion

With the rapid development of globalization, cross-cultural communication plays an indispensable role in our lives. It's necessary for university students to form a strong ability to express Chinese culture in English. However, according to this study, their present ability is low, no matter they are higher-English-level learners or not. This phenomenon is caused by several factors, such as the teachers, the learners, the textbooks and Chinese educational systems, etc. however, it is believed that with the help of English teachers, students themselves, the publishers and the administrators, it will have a better future.

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