



Teaching Culture Within and Beyond Language

Weiqliang Mao

School of Foreign Languages, Jiangsu University

212013 Zhenjiang, China

Tel: 86-511-8878-7609 E-mail: matalpa@ujs.edu.cn

This research is financed by following funds: Teaching and Reform Programs of Jingjiang College, Jiangsu University (JJ08C034); Social Science Program of Institutions of Higher Learning, Jiangsu Province (06SJD750023), Teaching and Reform Program of Jiangsu University (JGYB2009076).

Abstract

This paper attempts to make a thorough examination of the factors that necessitate and influence the teaching of culture in the EFL classrooms with an aim to present a mode of culture teaching in China.

Keywords: Culture, EFL, China

1. Introduction

The teaching of culture has aroused great interest in the EFL (English as a foreign language) curriculum but it has remained “insubstantial and sporadic in most language classrooms” (Omaggio, 1993, p357). The problems confronting most language teachers are invariably the lack of time, uncertainty about which aspects of culture to teach, and lack of practical techniques. The dilemma is further complicated by the great importance attached to scores in most language proficiency tests, such as TOFEL, IELTS, CET, TEM and etc., held by authorities of different kinds worldwide. Such tests are designed either for students who want to study abroad or for those who want a certificate that will enhance their opportunities in landing a good job, all of which test for the most part examinees’ skills in sitting in for tests, leaving, therefore, the aspect of culture intact.

The case is true with the EFL teaching in China, where there is an overwhelming fever for grasping certificates of CET 4, CET 6, TEM 4 and TEM 8. Cultural factors concerning the language of English, as well as the English-speaking countries, are more often than not neglected in the EFL classes at primary stages. Culture is taught purposefully only at places of higher education like colleges and universities, where only a small portion of students of English majors are privileged to receive such an education on culture. Even among this very small number of students majoring in English, culture receives undue attention partly because of the insufficient of culture-oriented realia and materials, and partly because of the unreasonable and impractical teaching syllabus that leaves out cultural knowledge in most tests.

It is a relief that from 2005 on, humanistic knowledge about culture and language is to be included in TEM 8 and there will be more tests and trials on the teaching of culture in the EFL classrooms at different levels of education throughout China. Therefore, it is due time for people to reconsider the importance and substantialization of the teaching of culture. This paper attempts to make a thorough examination of the factors that necessitate and influence the teaching of culture in the EFL classrooms with an aim to present a mode of teaching culture in the EFL classroom in China.

2. The Rise of Teaching Culture in the EFL Classroom

Current interest in teaching culture worldwide owes much to the inter-disciplinary efforts made in cultural studies. It made its first appearance in the 1940s in English literature studies and has entered the forefront of academia since the latter part of the 1980s. Meanwhile, the study of English literature as an academic discipline is gradually on the decline and its heyday has been over. Just as Simon During has observed, “English is losing ground to a wide spread of contemporary culture forms from advertising and the internet to cartoons and art movies—what we call cultural studies”. (During, 2004)

What During is trying to argue here is not that people worldwide are no longer interested in English as a language, but that cultural studies concerning English have been of most significance in the age of economic globalization as symbolized by the blurring of the boundary between high culture (of English literature) and popular culture (of advertisements, cartoons and art movies). In accompany with economic globalization, there is a tendency of cultural globalization, which in finality will annihilate the cultural idiosyncrasy intrinsic to each nation that comprises the world as a whole by changing the rest of the world into markets for cultural products produced by the few hegemonic powers. Whereas, English been used, first by Britain in the colonial period, and then by America in the postcolonial period, as a vehicle in the construction of “western capitalist hegemony and globalization” (Jones, 2002). For this reason, the English language has been regarded by some as a form of hegemonic power, and the learning of it, due largely to the

cultural superiority it represents, will possibly lead to the loss of cultural identity of the learners through the process of acculturation imposed upon them by the hegemonic powers. Cultural studies, on the other hand, are able to break the hegemony, if there is any, imposed by the English language, by adopting a multicultural policy of applauding "the wide spread of contemporary culture forms from advertising and the internet to cartoons and art movies." The study and maintenance of one's own culture in process of learning English as a foreign language will help the learners maintain their own distinct cultural identity. Hence the great significance of cultural awareness in today's world of globalization.

Rather than one's own culture, the EFL learners shall also develop an awareness of the cultures belonging to all the English-speaking countries, or even other cultures. Such a cultural consciousness is often referred to as intercultural awareness, which has always been talked about as though it were a 'fifth skill' - the ability to be aware of cultural relativity following reading, writing, listening and speaking. There is something to be said for this as an initial attempt to understand or define something that may seem a difficult concept but, as Claire Kramersch points out:

"If...language is seen as social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching. Cultural awareness must then be viewed as enabling language proficiency.... Culture in language teaching is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing" (Kramersch, 1993).

Or just as Hudson argues, language itself is defined by and contained within its culture and a society's language is an aspect of its culture (Hudson, 1980: 84). We cannot be competent in the language if we do not also understand the culture that has shaped and informed it. We cannot learn a second language if we do not cultivate through teaching an awareness of that culture, and how that culture relates to our own first language/native culture. It is not only therefore essential to have cultural awareness, but also intercultural awareness.

Consequently, great significance has been attached to the teaching of culture in the teaching of English as a foreign language. The exposure to cultures both of the EFL learners' and of the ones related to the English language is considered by many linguists much in consistence with the language-acquisition process manifested in our first language learning and acquisition. Though not testified, the seemingly effortless child language acquisition underlies undeniably the importance of the culture in the acquisition of human language. This assumption is best echoed in the findings by psycholinguist Thomas Scovel: Among the four stages (i.e. the stage of crying, the stage of cooing, the stage of babbling, and the production of the first word) of children's first language acquisition, the stage of babbling is the first stage where we have strong evidence that infants are influenced by all those months of exposure to the cultural environment they are living in (Scovel, 1998:11). It is therefore justified to conclude that the teaching of culture in the EFL classrooms will be of same positive influence upon the second language acquisition.

The ultimate goal of teaching culture is to nurture the intercultural communicative competence that will complement with language competence to accomplish to a fuller extent the communicative function of language. To R. Wardhaugh, language is a system of arbitrary symbols used for human communication (Wardhaugh, 1972: 3). In actuality, every action concerning English as a foreign language, either in the aspect of listening (to audio or audiovisual materials in English) or speaking (either with persons with English as their first language, or with persons who speak English as a second or foreign language), or in the aspect of writing or reading (materials in English), can be regarded as intercultural communication, for in each of the actions, there is an encountering of the native culture embodied in the EFL learners and the exotic culture(s) carried either in the English materials or by the persons who communicate with the learners of EFL. Intercultural communicative competence is an attempt to raise the learners' awareness of their own culture, and in so doing, help them to interpret and understand appropriately other cultures. In other words, the EFL learners will be able to predict the behavior patterns of the peoples from the target cultures. As a result, the intercultural communication will be greatly facilitated.

3. Teaching Culture in China's EFL Classrooms

In China, the issue of teaching culture in the EFL classrooms was first put on the agenda in the 1980s when China entered a new era of reform and opening to the outside world (Hu, 1997). The rapid increasing of the volume of foreign trade and the burgeoning of intercultural communication and cooperation with other countries raise the need to study foreign languages and cultures, amongst which, English and the English-speaking countries' cultures have captured the greatest attention.

However, the result of decades of foreign language teaching in China turns out to be both unsatisfying and uncomfortable, due largely to the afore-mentioned reasons of score-oriented teaching and impractical teaching syllabus. The score-oriented or certificate-oriented teaching of English wears the energy of both the teachers and the students in drilling the skills for various examinations and tests that focus on the four basic skill of listening, speaking, reading and writing, leaving them no spare time to cultivate a cultural consciousness that would have made the teaching and learning of English both entertaining and highly effective.

The teaching methods and techniques used in China's EFL classrooms have also contributed to the failure of teaching culture. The conventional way of teaching English in China is what Martin Wedell defines as Grammar Translation

Method (Wedell, 1996). In classes where such method is adopted, grammatical rules are explained and are then practiced by exercises consisting first of sentences and later texts, to be translated into and out of the foreign language. It is believed that if learners could manipulate the rules they would be able to read and produce grammatically right written language. Therefore, great emphasis is laid on the reading and writing skills, with the other two language skills of listening and speaking being recognized only recently. The fifth skill of intercultural awareness is not at all mentioned at any EFL classes at different levels.

Although most of our extant English textbooks at primary levels start with everyday spoken English intended for intercultural communication, most of the patterns designed for initiating dialogues with foreigners are, nevertheless, out of joint with the actual situations in which they are to be used. The sentence “where are you going?” in “wh-patterns” (which also include “what’s your name”, “what’s your parents”, et.) introduced to beginners is not explained in detail about in which circumstances to use, for instance. You will not get a satisfactory answer if you ask a foreign friend you run into about where he is going, for it is impolite for people to ask this kind of questions in English-speaking countries, though it is quite common for people to raise such questions when they come across one of their friends. Such problems arise directly as a result of the lack of cultural awareness either of our native culture or of the cultures pertaining to the English language.

Language learners studying in such an environment of the EFL teaching and learning, when confronted with the actual situation of intercultural communication with native speakers or English speakers from other cultures, though they might have a competent knowledge in speaking and listening, will in most cases fail to converse successfully if the topic of discussion touches on the culture(s) of the English language. It is most evident in a conversation listed below between a Chinese girl Miss Chen and her American boy friend Mr. Steven.

Mr. Steven: Hey, Puppy, you look lovely today!

Miss Chen: What? I am your pet dog?

Mr. Steven: Oh, I mean baby, please. (Peccei, 1999:19)

The lack of knowledge about “Puppy” as a pet name in American culture obviously offends the girl, whose culture has attributed unfavorable meanings to dogs.

Similar misunderstandings also occur in the aspects of reading and writing for English language learners who lack an intercultural awareness. In a reading material of acknowledgements to a book, there runs a line that “I owe many thanks to my students at Roehampton Institute who were the guinea pigs for many of the exercises used in the units” (Peccei, 1999: F7). The ignorance of the usages of the culture-loaded word “pig” in American culture will unmistakably lead to the confusion and puzzlement of Chinese learners of English: in American culture, pig can mean wise and loyal and innocence; whereas in Chinese culture, the image of pig usually symbolizes stupid and greed.

4. How to Teach Culture in China’s EFL Classrooms

Insomuch as the two examples given above are concerned, there are words in the vocabulary of language that inform people’s ways of behavior. Just as G. Lazar has argued, “our students’ comprehension is frequently impeded not by linguistic features, but by cultural ones.... Language can never be divorced from culture” (Lazar, 1993:66). To make a better understanding of the English language both in written and spoken form, and to ensure the success of intercultural communication that takes place with increasingly high frequency in today’s globalization, it is imperative to reconsider the importance of cultural factors in the EFL classrooms and to incorporate the teaching of culture into the teaching of English, namely to teach culture within and beyond language. Such a model of teaching culture is determined by the inseparable relationships between language and culture: language is transmitted by and transmits culture.

The teaching of culture within and beyond language can be realized by two steps. They are teaching culture embedded within language and the teaching of culture that is beyond language. To implement successfully the two steps of cultural teaching, it is necessary to arrive at a detailed knowledge about what is culture within language and what is culture beyond language. According to Raymond Williams, culture consists of three parts that are in correspondence with the three different definitions given to culture, namely cultural values and beliefs, cultural artifacts taking various forms that document cultural values and human life, and fixed patterns of behavior ordained by cultural values (Williams, 1975: 41). Plausibly, the first part and the third part are the parts of culture that lies hand in glove with language, as there are culture-loaded words and expressions that betray people’s values and behavior patterns. In contrast, the second part of culture, except the artifacts that document cultural values and behavior patterns with language as their medium, is the part of culture that lies beyond language. At a closer analysis, however, the distinction between culture within language and culture beyond language is not clear-cut. The artifacts with painting and sculpture as their expressive forms, for instance, can be regarded as of the same communicative function of the system of symbols that constitute language. What’s more, there are in language words to recapitulate the cultural values and behavior patterns embodied within such artifacts. Therefore, the division of the teaching of culture into two steps is made not to emphasize the distinction between culture within language and culture beyond language, but rather the great necessity to develop a

comprehension cultural awareness in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language in China.

Following is an excerpt of a reading passage, "The British Isles", drawn from senior middle school English textbook Book 2A, Unit5. It is to be used to exemplify exactly how culture can be taught both within and beyond language.

The idea that England stands for Fish & Chips, Speakers' Corner, Big Ben and Tower of London is past. Though many people around the world study its language, their view of British culture is sometimes narrow. The fact that Great Britain is made up of three countries is still unknown to many.... The climate of the British Isles is mild with a lot of rain. In general, Scotland... .. (Fors, 2004: 35).

In this short piece of excerpt, there are several points that will trigger much cultural association both within and beyond language. Fish & Chips, Speakers' Corner, Big Ben and the Tower of London, which belong specifically to the English language as culture-loaded expressions, are at the same time cultural artifacts. The exhibition of the pictures of these things, together with the telling of the stories behind each of them, will inform, just as the excerpt states, part of British people's way of life and their cultural values.

Due to the limit of class period, the teacher can choose just one picture, Big Ben, for instance, and tell students the interesting story behind it. As for the stories behind the rest of the pictures, the teacher can ask the students to find out about them after class and make a report of them during the next period of class. Meanwhile, the students can be encouraged to find similar culture-loaded phrases (like John Bull, the Sun that never sets, etc..) to replace Fish & Chips, Speakers' Corner, Big Ben and the Tower of London in the first sentence of this excerpt so that the statement will still be of validity. In this way, the sentence structure of Noun Clause will be practised and mastered by the students in the mean time when culture lies within language is learned.

As my teaching experience of this passage as a cadet teacher has shown, such a mode of teaching greatly aroused students' awareness of British culture, so that when I asked what would be predicted of the characters of British people according to the passage, one student immediately responded that because of the changeable weather, British people were prone to be prudent and conservative, and they would always take an umbrella with them. Such a prediction about English people's disposition and character well proved that the cultural awareness had been aroused among the students and it enabled them to make a better understanding of the English language as well as the culture (s) beyond language.

Rather than reading materials, stories (to be told orally), and pictures to be used as sources for cultural information both intrinsic and extrinsic to language, there are other things that will help the EFL learners get a panoramic view of the target culture(s). The list below shows some of the other sources of information, which can be used as materials to develop the EFL learners' awareness of the exotic culture by utilizing one or a combination of some of the learners' five natural powers of sight, hearing, feeling, tasting, and smelling (During, 1997):

Foods or Fruits Culturally Specific to the English Language

Art Works Shown in Museum

Video

CDs

TV

Songs

Internet

Souvenirs

...

The exposure of all these cultural factors to language learners is not sufficient in cultivating the intercultural awareness. It is suggested in the example given above that students should be encouraged to take an active part in the revealing of the cultural information. For this purpose, certain types of activities should be designed to make students sensitized to every touch of cultural aura. Apart from prediction I mentioned earlier, other activities like discussion, research, and celebration of foreign festivals can also be used in the cultural consciousness-raising process.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the teaching of culture both within and beyond language should be considered as an integral part of teaching English as a foreign language in China. Syllabus concerning the EFL instruction should be further renovated to include the cultivation of intercultural communicative awareness, rather than simply the testing of cultural information. Meanwhile, teachers should develop in the first place an acute awareness both of the traditional Chinese culture and of the cultures related to the English-speaking countries, so that they would be able to present the foreign cultures as they are to help students form a positive attitude in the bombardment of the exotic cultures.

References

- Barnouw, V. (1963). *Culture and Personality*. Howewood, Illinois: Dorsey Press.
- Cullen, Brian. (2000). "Practical Techniques for Teaching Culture in the EFL Classroom" *The Internet TESL Journal* 6-12 [Online] Available: <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Cullen-Culture.html> (March 11, 2009)
- During, Simon. (1997). "Teaching Culture" *Australian Humanities Review* [Online] Available: <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-August-1997/during.html> (August 22, 2005).
- Fors, Nils Olov and Edwin Beak (ed). (2004). *Senior English for China: Student's Book 2A*. Beijing: People's Education Press.
- Hu, Wenzhong and Yihong Gao. (1997). *Foreign Language Teaching and Culture*. Hunan: Hunan Education Press.
- Hudson, R. A. (1980). *Sociolinguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jones, Randall. (2002). "The Role of English Language Teaching: Linguistic Imperialism or Linguistic Empowerment?" in *TESL-EJ* 6-1 [Online] Available: <http://tesl-ej.org/ej21/fl.html> (March 11, 2009)
- Kramsch, Claire. (1993). *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Omaggio-Hadley, A. (1993). *Teaching Language in Context*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.
- Peccei, Jean Stilwell. (2000). *Pragmatics*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Scovel, Thomas. (1998). *Psycholinguistics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wang, Ning. (1999). "Cultural Identity in Cultural Studies" in *Foreign Literary Review*, Vol.4.
- Wardhaugh, R. (1972). *Introduction to Linguistics*. McGraw-Hill Book Company.
- Williams, Raymond. (1975). *Long Revolution*. London: Penguin.