



The Cultivation of Cultural Awareness in Chinese CET

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ABSTRACT Cultural awareness is the foundation of communication. It becomes central when we interact with people from other cultures. Therefore, the cultivation of cultural awareness has significant worth in language teaching. College English teachers in China have recognized the importance of students' awareness of the target language's culture and of strategies for integrating the target language's cultural background and activities into English language teaching. The iceberg theory, which analyzes and interprets the visible and invisible parts of culture, provides a useful rationale for including the target language's culture into the learning experience. Moreover, the theory offers a new perspective on the value of integrating Chinese home culture into English classes to engage Chinese students more fully in the cultivation of cultural awareness.

INTRODUCTION

We cannot learn a language without learning the culture. Language is a part of culture and at the same time a carrier of culture. The culture reflects not only the environment in which we live but also the values, human relationships, and the daily operations of society. Since cultural awareness is a foundation of communication, Chinese College English teachers have always attached some importance to the cultivation of cultural awareness. However, mistakes or errors still frequently take place in the process of cross-cultural communication. There are many reasons, but one of the most important reasons is that Chinese English Language Teaching (ELT) has failed to combine the visible and invisible culture and failed to combine the home culture and the culture of the target language. This paper addresses the following question: What should be taught in Chinese College English classes to cultivate the students' cultural awareness which, in turn, will more deeply contextualize their English language skills? From the iceberg theory of culture, we find that both visible and invisible parts should be emphasized. Indeed, the intangible part of a culture is sometimes more important than the tangible. From the reality of language usage and the rising of China on the global stage, it is also evident that a deeper understanding of the Chinese home culture is as important as learning the culture of the target language for the success of cross-cultural communication.

Objectives

In July of 2007, the Chinese Ministry of Education published the revised new *College English Curriculum Requirements*, which states:

College English is not only a language course that provides basic knowledge about English, but also a capacity enhancement course that helps students to broaden their horizons and learn about different cultures in the world. It not only serves as a tool, but also has humanistic values. When designing College English courses, therefore, it is necessary to take into consideration the development of students' cultural capacity and the teaching of knowledge about different cultures in the world."^[1]

This *Requirements* acts as the main guide and principle of College English Teaching (CET) in China. Thus, cultural teaching and learning become a very important task of CET, and cultural input should be emphasized as an essential strategy for CET. Specifically, the researcher's objectives are to identify and put into practice the following elements:

- 1) What to teach in ELT classes;
- 2) How to combine cultural and language teaching;
- 3) How to creatively design cultural activities when teaching English; and
- 4) How to enhance students' competence in cross-cultural communication.

METHODOLOGY

The first theory applied to this study investigates the relationship between language and

culture. What is culture? *The New World Encyclopedia* defines the word, culture, as the totality of the spiritual, intellectual, and artistic attitudes shared by a group, including its traditions, habits, social customs, morals, laws, and social relations. Sociologically, every society on every level has its culture; the term has no implications of high development.^[2] If one hopes to really master a language, it is imperative to understand the local culture of the target language.

What is language? Linguistic experts have defined it in various ways. Hall (1964) said that language is "the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral—auditory arbitrary symbols."^[3] According to Poole (2000), "language is generally considered to be a form of communication between human beings by means of a system of symbols which are principally transmitted by vocal sounds."^[4] In a word, where there is culture, there is a language. Language is the carrier of culture, and culture is a mirror of language. Language is rooted in culture and controlled by culture. Each kind of language developed in its specific, social, historical environment. Meanwhile, language is the intellectual treasure created in the progress of mankind's evolving. Culture is a nation's peculiar way of living, of which language is a part and is also the carrier. Language, being a part of culture and a vital element in the formation and vitalization of other constituents of culture, is ever present and all inclusive. Language is also a tool, which propels the development of a nation's culture and the communication between nations in ways of speaking and writing. Thus, culture and language are inextricably tied together. The process of learning foreign language is most effective when it is bound to the process of grasping its cultural background.

The Iceberg Theory of culture is the second method applied to the research. The Iceberg Theory was developed by Hall in 1990. Hall stated that culture can be understood as a huge iceberg, which is partly visible and partly invisible. The visible part is the tip of the iceberg, which is much smaller and includes language, architecture, food, population, music, clothing, art and literature, pace of life, emotional display, gesture, leisure activities, eye contact, sports, and related things. The invisible part is under the water. It is much bigger, including opinions, viewpoints, attitudes, philosophies, values, and

convictions. What we can see is sometimes the reflection of the invisible part. In College English teaching, our aim should be to raise the iceberg as much as possible to see more of the invisible part. Otherwise, a successful and smooth cross-cultural communication is not possible.

RESULTS

Despite the early learning of English and great effort and financial investment, criticism has existed in China for a long time about the teaching and learning of language. One aspect of the criticism is the teaching content. Because of the testing system, English teaching in China is basically skill-oriented. Skills such as memorization of vocabulary and grammar rules become the main task; or such language skills as listening, speaking, reading and writing, especially the skills for tests, are the main teaching content. Many people believe that students will naturally communicate well with foreigners if they master pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and related skills. The result is that many Chinese students can do very well in tests, including College English Test 4, College English Test 6, or even in TOEFL, or IELTS, but show very weak performance in cross-cultural communication. Thus, Chinese ELT is also called *mute* English teaching. Chinese students are supposed to be silent in classes or shy in social communication.

However, learners may continue to make errors related to idiomatic usage of words and phrases even when they have mastered the necessary language skills since idiomatic usage does not depend on specific rules. For example, Chinese students are more likely to begin the conversation with, "Have you eaten?" or "Where are you going?" rather than "Hi" or "How are you?" since food is regarded as heaven in Chinese culture and the destination of a person is not something private. When they ask, "How are you?" they usually will wait for the response while Westerners think of it only as a greeting. The typical telephone expressions in English are, "Hello, this is Mary speaking. Is that John?" while Chinese students tend to use expressions like, "I am Mary. Are you John?" Chinese students often say "My English is very poor," even when their English is really good. If a foreigner says, "You look great today!" the Chinese student very possibly answers with, "Oh, it's noth-

ing,” or “Well, just so-so.” They don’t mean to deny the compliment. They just respond according to their cultural values. Chinese culture values modesty more than pride.

Such differences in context between high-context cultures like China and low-context English speaking cultures cannot be grasped by only studying grammar, rules, syntax, and vocabulary. Additional examples illustrate the importance of integrating cultural context into learning while, at the same time, acquiring language skills. In Chinese elementary or high schools, “teacher” is more of an honorific title so students tend to say, “Good morning, teacher,” rather than “Good morning, Mr./Mrs./Miss/Ms,” as students do in English speaking countries. In Chinese colleges or universities, students usually use “professor” or “doctor” before the family name of their teachers, such as “Prof. Zhang” or “Dr. Wang.” The key rule in Chinese culture is to show respect and high social status to the teachers because “teacher” is a highly respected position in Chinese culture.

Kinship terms frequently cause problems when Chinese students and people of different cultural backgrounds try to communicate. For example, the English sentence, “David’s brother married Jenny’s sister.” often frustrates Chinese students a lot. They often need to know whether the brother is David’s elder or younger brother, or whether the sister is Jenny’s older or younger sister because these meanings are clearly distinguished in Chinese culture. Another example of the complicated nature of Chinese kinship terms can be seen in the word *uncle*. An *uncle* can be *father’s younger brother* or *father’s older brother* or *mother’s brother* or *the husband of father’s sister* or *the husband of mother’s sister*; an *aunt* can be *mother’s sister* or *father’s sister* or *the wife of father’s younger brother* or *the wife of father’s older brother* or *the wife of mother’s brother*. A more complicated example is that of *cousin*. A *cousin* can be *the older son of mother’s siblings* or *the younger son of mother’s siblings* or *the older daughter of mother’s siblings* or *the younger daughter of mother’s siblings* or *the older son of father’s siblings* or *the younger son of father’s siblings* or *the older daughter of father’s siblings* or *the younger daughter of father’s siblings*. In Chinese culture, whether he/she is mother’s brother or father’s brother will have a difference in meaning, written characters, and sounds. Whether he/she is the elder or younger is also

expressed with different meaning, characters, and sounds.

The gender pronouns, like *he* or *she*, often frustrate Chinese students, too. In Chinese, we use the same *ta* for both *he* or *she*. Therefore, students always need to think hard before choosing a pronoun in English. Even a fluent English learner will make mistakes in using *he* or *she*.

Some other cultural mistakes committed by students may relate to issues of privacy since personal boundaries and personal space are a more Western concept and not a concern in Chinese culture. Chinese students may ask, “How old are you?” “Are you married?” or “What is your salary?” The language form is correct, but the communication is highly improper. Again, the speakers do not mean to disturb the foreigners. They only have a totally different concept of privacy. For example, Chinese people don’t think the grades at school are private for the students so it is very common for a Chinese teacher to publicize the grades and ranks of the students. In contrast, in Western countries teachers only return the paper to the student himself/herself. A goal of language learning should be to provide students with multiple ways to see the world and broaden their understanding of their own and other cultures.

DISCUSSION

One reason for the above-mentioned mistakes or errors could be ethnocentrism; that is, the evaluation of other peoples and cultures according to the standards of one’s own culture with the assumption that one’s own culture is superior. There are three assumptions we might have about those in our environment who are from a different culture:

- 1) Their culture is inferior to ours.
- 2) They need to see and do things as we do.
- 3) There probably is not that much difference between us anyway.

We are probably all ethnocentric to some degree. We are more likely to stick to our own home culture and refuse to change when we communicate with people from different cultures. Such bias may lead us to confirm what we already believe and disregard other ways of thinking.

However, a more important reason for making cultural mistakes and errors is the influence of the Iceberg Theory of culture. The internal, unconscious part of culture is beneath the surface of water and is therefore invisible. These invisible parts of the culture, such as beliefs, values, motivations, world views, gender roles, etiquette, social or familial rules, importance of time, and concepts of self, often cause those visible aspects, such as greeting, behavior, clothing, food, and other behaviors. Therefore, mastering English structure like grammar, vocabulary and syntax is necessary but not sufficient alone for mastering the English language. Mastering the English language means using English in a way that communicates the message in a way that is understood successfully by the listener. The following example tells us that even if we know the English structure and some of the visible culture (how to greet, for example), it is far from enough to achieve a meaningful greeting in which both communicants understand each other in the same way.

A Chinese man fell into a pit, and was helplessly waiting for help.

An American man came to ask, "How are you?"

The Chinese man instinctively answered, "Fine, Thank you. And you?"

The American man said, "I'm fine, too." and left.

As the above narrative illustrates, cross-cultural awareness is essential to any meaningful dialogue. Language learning cannot be separated from cultural learning. Language can be better mastered when both language and culture are better understood by the language learner. Cultural awareness of the target culture and reflection on the students' home culture will contribute to a deeper understanding and effective usage of language. Learning language should take culture into account and vice-versa.

Then, what cultural knowledge should we discuss in our English language teaching? First, more emphasis should be placed on the invisible aspect. Students should spend time studying and reflecting on the values, attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge of our own Chinese culture, those qualities that comprise our cultural identity and make us unique. When we appreciate the qualities in another culture, we should approach it with knowledge and a celebration of our own.

In order to analyze the meaning of the visible and invisible parts of culture, two movies are used here as examples: a Hollywood movie *Gladiator* and a Chinese movie *Hero*. These two movies are chosen with four considerations. First, the two movies are contemporaneous. They were released in the years 2000 and 2002 respectively. Secondly, both stories took place in ancient time, one in ancient China, the other in ancient Rome. Thirdly, and more importantly, both stories are about heroes. Fourthly, both heroes die in the end. In *Gladiator*, General Maximus, who was reduced to slavery, rises through the ranks of the gladiatorial arena and fights to death for his own liberty and the revenge of his family. In *Hero*, a killer Wuming (Nameless), who gets the precious chance to kill the King of Qin, finally gives up his plan and is killed by the King of Qin instead.

The posters of these two great movies illustrate some of the significant differences between Eastern and Western cultural contexts as well as some differences in visible and invisible aspects of culture. Of course, visible details tell the audience that one is a Chinese story while the other is Western including the language, faces of the characters, hairstyles, weapons, architecture, and costumes. The music of the two movies is also typically Western and Chinese. All of these visible elements represent the upper part of the iceberg. When studying a foreign culture, it is not difficult to learn about the food, architecture, clothing, literature, history, customs, and even taboos. However, for everything that shows, there is much more that is worth our examination. Take these two movies for example. We know they are movies from Western and Chinese culture, but what values are implied? What philosophies are reflected? What is meaningful to its people, and why? These questions can be only answered after we explore the invisible culture.

Another interesting visible element in these two film posters is the number of the characters. There is only one character in *Gladiator*'s poster while there are five in *Hero*'s, but this visible part can be illuminated even more by the invisible one. *Gladiator* tells a story about one hero, Maximus, who suffers from some injustice, and so he fights all alone until his death for his family and glory and himself. *Hero* tells a story about a group of heroes who sacrifice one after another in order to kill the king of Qin. One story is

about individualism while the other is about collectivism. This difference in cultural contexts has an important impact on all parts of life: beliefs, values, motivations, world views, gender roles, etiquette, social or familial rules, importance of time, concepts of self and many other life experiences. The internal, unconscious part of culture is beneath the surface that we see; but, in an increasingly global world, it is in our students' best interest if our English language teachers help them to achieve a new critical consciousness, a deeper awareness of the invisible part of their target culture and their own home culture.

For example, *Gladiator* and *Hero* represent totally different notions of self. One fights for his personal life, individualism, and freedom, which is a typically Western value. As Patrick Henry stated, "Give me liberty, or give me death." The other fights for the *Tianxia* (World), so that he finally sacrifices himself for a more peaceful *Tianxia*. This is a typically Chinese philosophy. As Confucius stated, "Harmony/peace is most precious." In Chinese culture, a value that is held dear is to sacrifice personal life for a bigger, especially national, interest.

The visible and invisible parts of a culture are both important in language learning, but how well we know the invisible part of the culture will determine how deeply we understand the whole culture. Sometimes, the Chinese students, who speak fairly good English, have difficulty in communicating with native speakers. They complain that they can't go deep with foreigners. One reason here must be a lack of understanding of the invisible culture. Therefore, when we learn a new culture, the serious learner will go beyond surface knowledge and be willing to dive deeply to explore the invisible part of the culture.

In addition, College English Teaching in China should include a study of Chinese culture. Thirty years ago, English was a foreign language to Chinese people, but now we take for granted that it is a global and international language. Thirty years ago, Chinese students learned English in order to communicate with the people from English-speaking countries. However, things are different today. With the peaceful rise of China, more people in the world come to China and are trying to understand China. Chinese language has become a second important foreign language in the world, and Chinese culture has been studied in many universities in the

world. More people speak Chinese (one billion of whom speak Mandarin) than any language in the world. Therefore, Chinese students should take the opportunity and responsibility to share Chinese culture, one of the world's great civilizations, with the rest of the world. For this reason alone, Chinese English teachers should recognize the importance of including the teaching of Chinese culture in their curriculum.

Canton Fair is the largest trade fair in China held twice a year since the spring of 1957 in Guangzhou, attracting hundreds of thousands of international businessmen to Guangzhou every year. The following is a conversation that might take place at the Canton Fair.

A: an American businessman

B: a manager of a Chinese company

A suggested a meeting to B.

B replied in quite good English, "That would be interesting."

"When can we meet?" asked A.

"Ah. This week is very busy," replied B.

"It sure is," said A, "How about 10 o'clock tomorrow? Meet you here."

"Tomorrow at 10 o'clock?" asked B thoughtfully.

"Right," said A, "I'll see you then?"

"Hmm, yes, why don't you come by tomorrow," B answered.

The fact is that the Chinese manager didn't plan to meet the American businessman at all, so the American businessman didn't see the Chinese manager the next day.

In this conversation, both the Chinese manager and the American businessman had no problems in speaking or understanding English, but a miscommunication of messages still took place. Obviously, the American businessman failed to understand Chinese culture, which is very high-context. In high-context culture, the meaning is often in the situation, and the situation determines the words. People may use many fixed phrases, like "Welcome you to come again." or "That's interesting." but they do not mean it literally. People often just say what they should say, as a kind of courtesy, in that situation. In this example, when the Chinese manager said, "This week is busy," it meant he was not interested in the appointment at all, even though he said, "That would be interesting." However, Western culture is a low-context culture. People communicate directly. They pay more attention to words rather than the context. Therefore, when

the Chinese manager said, "That's interesting," the Western businessman took the statement to mean they had agreed on the appointment.

In English language teaching, a study of the cultural differences between East and West should be included in lesson plans. Teachers should create a learning environment in which differences in cultural context are learned and applied in multiple ways. That means both the target and home cultures should be equally important in CET.

CONCLUSION

Cultural teaching deserves more of our attention in CET in China. Chinese teachers should keep in mind that culture is like an iceberg, partly visible and partly invisible. Our job is to raise the iceberg so that the students can see more of what is below the surface. Moreover, we should not forget that knowing our own culture is of great value in helping to raise our students' global cultural awareness. Language study alone is not sufficient. College English teaching should consistently include intercultural activities that emphasize both the visible and invisible, both home culture and the culture of the target language. This will give students the cultural awareness, sensitivity, and skills they will need to communicate competently in a diverse, networked, interdependent world.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to cultivate the students' cultural awareness, there are several steps to take in Chinese College English teaching. Even when we take College English as only a language course, we should emphasize the cultural meaning as much as possible in the textbooks. It would be better if we can provide some extra, foundational, cultural courses such as Greek-Roman Mythology, Bible stories, Shakespeare, the Harlem Renaissance, World Wars I and II, and related topics, which can help build a basic understanding of Western cultures.

Of course, the best way to extend learning will always be to help students apply what they have learned beyond the walls of the classroom.

Can they interview an international student or faculty on their campus and then share what they learned with the class? Can they dialogue with a Westerner, teaching each other about their hometowns, favorite holiday, favorite vacation spot in their own country, or their families? Can they give presentations regarding what they learned about similarities and differences between their cultures? Can they produce a short video about their cross-cultural experience? Can they use their own creative and critical thinking to develop other projects that will enhance their cross-cultural awareness? As the 19th century English philosopher and sociologist Herbert Spencer noted, "The great aim of education is not knowledge but action." A College English curriculum that integrates English language skill acquisition with cross-cultural learning and practical application will enrich English language proficiency among students and, at the same time, enhance the competency of the next generation of cross-cultural thinkers.

NOTES

- [1] Chinese Ministry of Education 2007. *College English Curriculum Requirements*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, P. 3.
- [2] Guo Z, Li Q 2003. *A Practical Course in Translation between English and Chinese*. 3rd Edition. Wuhan: Wuhan University Press, P. 169.
- [3] Hall RA 1964. *Introductory Linguistics*. New York: Chilton Books, P. 56.
- [4] Poole SC 2000. *An Introduction to Linguistics*. London: Macmillan Press, Foreign Language Teaching and Research, P. 23.

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