Cultural Awareness in the English Language Teaching

SENSIBILISATION À LA CULTURE DANS L'ENSEIGNEMENT DE LA LANGUE ANGLAISE

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Abstract: In this thesis, the emphasis is laid on the culture teaching in the English learning, and on the discussion of the relationship between culture and culture, which makes us realize that learning English is inseparable from learning it culture. Judging from this, the author proposes a classification of cultural items, some teaching approaches as well as some main principles of cultural teaching.
Key words: Culture; Teaching; Approaches; Principles

Resumé: Dans cette thèse, l'accent est mis sur l'enseignement de la culture dans l'apprentissage de l'anglais, et sur la discussion de la relation entre les cultures, qui nous fait comprendre que l'apprentissage de l'anglaise est inséparable de l'apprentissage de la culture. A partir de cette découverte, l'auteur propose une classification des objets clturels, des méthodes de l'enseignement ainsi que quelques principes élémentaires de l'enseignement culturel.
Mots-clés: Culture; Enseignement; Approches; Principes

1. INTRODUCTION

As we know, people of different languages have their unique cultures. Because of cultural differences, misunderstandings may often arise when people with different cultural backgrounds communicate, although the language used in communication may be faultless. The same words or expressions may not mean the same things to different peoples. Because of cultural differences, a serious question may cause amusement or laughter; a harmless statement may cause displeasure or anger. Because of cultural differences, jokes by a native English speaker may be received with blank faces and stony silence in non-English speaking countries. Yet the same stories in the speaker's own country would leave the audiences holding their sides with laughter.

Besides, with the development of modern linguistics, language researchers and teachers are fully aware that learning English well means more than merely mastering its pronunciation, grammar, words and idioms. It also means learning to see the world as native English speakers see it, learning the ways in which

their language reflects the ideas, customs and behavior of their society, learning to understand their "language of the mind". Learning the English language, in fact, is inseparable from learning its culture.

2. THE DEFINITION OF THE TERM "CULTURE"

The concept of culture was first defined in print in 1871 by E. B. Tylor, who was the first to provide a scientific definition of the term. According to Tylor (1924), culture is "That complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". For anthropologists, culture has long stood for the way of life of a people, for the sum of their learned behavior patterns, attitudes, and material things. Although most anthropologists tend to disagree on what the precise substance of culture is, generally, the term culture may be understood in two different senses. It may refer to the "intellectual refinement" and "artistic endeavor, or the appreciation of music, literature, the art and so on". This is the sense of "high culture", often refer to whatever a person must know in order to function in a particular society. This is somewhat similar to Goodenough's definition (1957:167) of the term, which reads:

> "… a society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or to believe in order to operate in a matter acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves".

Goodenough thus takes culture as socially acquired knowledge, which includes both "know-how" and also "know-that", often referred to as culture with a small "c". condon (1973:4) makes it more vivid by defining culture as "a system of integrated patterns, most of which remain below the threshold of consciousness, yet all of which govern human behavior just as the manipulated strings of a puppet control its motions". W. A. Haviland (1975:29-33) summarizes four universal characteristics of culture:

Culture is shared: Culture is a set of shared ideals, values and standards of behavior. It is the common denominator that makes the actions of individuals intelligible to the group. Because they share a common culture, people of the same community can predict each other's actions in a given circumstance and react accordingly.

Culture is learned: All culture is learned rather than biologically inherited. One learns one's culture by growing up in it. The process whereby culture is transmitted from one generation to the next is called enculturation.

Culture is based on symbols: All human behavior originates in the use of symbols. Arts, religion and money involve the use of symbols. Symbolic language is the foundation upon which human cultures are built.

Culture is integrated: For the purpose of comparison and analysis, anthropologists customarily break a culture down into many discrete elements. But all aspects of a culture function as an integrated whole. This tendency is called integration.

According to Hall (1959: 38-39), the essence of culture lies in the fact that it is a mold in which we are all cast, and it controls our daily lives in many unsuspected ways, and that it is that part of man's behavior which he takes for granted- the part he does not think about. Though the concept of culture is abstract, they turn out to be highly relevant to the deepest personal concerns. They touch upon such intimate matters that they are often brushes aside at the very point where people begin to comprehend their implications. Hall concludes that full acceptance of the reality of culture would have revolutionary consequence. Therefore, he thinks that it is necessary not only to study and understand foreign culture which underlines cross-cultural communication, but also to be aware of one's culture so as to learn more about how one's system works, about something useful and enlightening about oneself.

3. THE RELATION BETWEEN CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

If we accept the definition of culture as "socially acquired knowledge", then it is easy to see that culture is one part of memory which in turn is a component of thought. Hudson (1980) distinguishes three kinds of knowledge: cultural knowledge, which is learned from other people; shared knowledge, which is shared by people within the same community or the world over, but is not learned from each other; and non-shared non-cultural knowledge, which is unique to the individual. Of these three kinds of knowledge, the shared kind is relevant to language. That is, some parts of language are cultural knowledge, since they are learned from others, while other parts are shared non- cultural knowledge, since they are not learned from others. Hudson argues that most of language is contained within its culture, and that a society's language is an aspect of its culture. He contends that the relation of language to culture is that of part to whole.

Since language is a part of culture and plays a very important role in it, some social scientists consider it the keystone of culture. Without language, they maintain, culture would not be possible. On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture; it reflects culture. In the broadest sense, language is the symbolic representation of a people, and it comprises their historical and cultural backgrounds as well as their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking.

4. CULTURAL ASPECTS IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

From the above discussion of the relationship between language and culture, we realize that it is uncontroversial to introduce culture into the English language teaching. But the problem is what kind of culture is to be taught and how.

As far as the content of culture to be taught is concerned, I think it appropriate to classify the cultural items into two classes: lexical ones and discourse ones. As we know, the impact of culture on language of lexis, and the other is in the organizational structure of discourse.

4.1 Lexical cultural items: Lexis includes two classes: single words and phrases (idioms, proverbs and sayings, etc.). As lexis is a carrier of cultural information, a variety of cultural features are manifested in a given language vocabulary. Some lexical meanings, under the influence of different political systems, customs and habits, as well as religions, are reflected differently in their connotations. For instance, the word "xuan chuan" in Chinese is different in meaning from the one "propaganda" in English. Besides, the roles of cultural factors involved in metaphors, euphemisms and proper names are outstanding. Here I'd like to summarize the most important contents reflected in lexical culture as follows: 1) the unique things and concepts in the culture of a people entailed in lexis; 2) the words that have the same references or denotations in different languages may have different connotations (e.g. the words such "worker", "farmer" in English are different in cultural connotations for "gong ren" "nong min" in Chinese）；3）the meanings of words are not equivalent in cultural connotations (e.g. the word "intellectual" in English is not equivalent to "zhi shi fen zi" in Chinese); 4) the same phenomena in different cultures are manifested by different words and meanings, according to the classification of mentality (e.g. kinship addressing); 5) culturally-loaded idiomatic expressions, such as set phrases, proverbs and sayings.

4.2 Discourse cultural items: Culturally-influenced and culturally-restricted discourses are as follows: 1) the selection of topics has different social implications in different cultures. For instance, talking about weather, age, income, marriage and privacy has different implications in English and Chinese. 2) code-selecting. It is also conditioned by culture to use what variation and what style in speech. 3) the discourse arrangement, such as turn-taking, coherence, order and manner of description, has a different pattern in different cultures.

4.3 Approaches to culture teaching: From the angle of the English language teaching, it is both simple and feasible to classify cultural items into lexis and discourse. It is easy for teachers to prepare teaching materials, and it is also easy for students to accept and understand them.

How do we teach culture? I think that we can adopt these following approaches: 1) note approach: This approach is mainly adopted in most English teaching materials. The compilers note those culturally-loaded words and expressions that are difficult for students to understand after the text. This approach is flexible

and convenient. It is suitable for various kinds of teaching materials at different stages. However, it is not systematic. 2) combination approach: This approach refers to the one that combines cultural items into teaching materials, from which the students show much interest in such kinds of materials, which in turn exerts an imperceptible influence on them and enables them to learn both linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge. But the disadvantage is that the selection and compilation of teaching materials are not so easy. In particular, the complicated language structure has to be simplified or adapted to meet the students' demands. As a result, the authenticity of materials is weakened. 3) practice approach: This approach refers to the one that students learn cultural knowledge of the English language community through practice, such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, etc. The media include seeing films, watching video tapes and giving lectures on the English language culture. Besides, reading literary works of the English language is also an important method to acquire cultural knowledge, because literary works of a nation carry the cream of its culture on the basis of an accumulation of its traditional culture. 4) comparative approach: Comparative study is a very important means in language teaching of cross-cultural communication. Just as a Chinese saying goes, "only by comparing can one distinguish two different things", so we can show the students the differences and the similarities in language structures and cultures between Chinese and English by comparison, to cultivate their cultural awareness in cross-cultural communication. Besides, we can offer a specially-designed course in "language and culture" to explain the cultural phenomena characteristic of English, especially those that will lead to "cultural shock" in cross-cultural communication.

5. MAIN PRINCIPLES OF CULTURAL TEACHING

In cultural teaching, I think we may as well abide by the following principles: practical principle; phased principle; appropriate principle.

5.1 Practical principle: It demands that the cultural content to be taught should have to do with the language content that the students are learning, and also with the main aspects involved in daily communication. We should also take in account the professions to be occupied by the students later. This principle has two advantages: on the one hand, the students will no longer think the relationship between language and culture is too abstract and too empty for them to learn; on the other hand, the combination of cultural teaching with language communication will simulate the students to greater efforts to learn language and culture of the English community. Such a study method will produce good results.

5.2 Phased principle: This principle demands that the introduction to cultural content should proceed in an orderly way step by step. The cultural content to be taught should be selected in accordance with the students' linguistic level, their receptive and comprehensive aptitudes. Meanwhile, we should attach importance to the inner hierarchy and congruity of cultural content proper, to avoid its fragments. It seems to me that attention should be paid to both lexical culture and discourse culture.

5.3 Appropriate principle: Appropriateness refers to both appropriate teaching methodology and teaching content. Apart from being practical and phased, the teaching materials should be typical. If the cultural items are dominant and representative, they should be detailed on and practiced again and again. Besides, we should deal properly with the relationship between diachronic culture and synchronic culture. In my opinion, emphasis should be laid on synchronic culture (that is, contemporary culture), supplemented with diachronic culture. As far as an appropriate teaching method is concerned, we should properly coordinate the teachers' explanation with the students' self-learning. The cultural content is extensive and complex while the teachers' explanation is selective and limited. Therefore, we should encourage the students to do as much outside reading as possible in order to enrich their cultural knowledge. Only in this way can the students improve their communicative competence and avoid pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication.

6. CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I stress the importance of introduction to culture in the English language teaching, and discuss the relationship between culture and language, which makes us realize that learning English is inseparable from learning its culture. Judging from this, I propose a classification of cultural items, some teaching approaches as well as main principles of cultural teaching. As the teachers of English, we should attach importance not only to the students' linguistic competence (i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing), but also to their socially communicative competence. Only in this way can our students learn English well.

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