Intercultural Language Education for Non-English Major College Students

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Abstract
Co-operation between China and foreign countries in various fields has become a common part of social practice. Culture and cultural comparison between Chinese and other cultures are unavoidable in the increasingly frequent international exchanges. So English teaching should transform from pure language skills education to intercultural education. To cultivate non-English major college students’ awareness and enhance their competence of intercultural communication has become the urgent requirement of the era. However, the traditional classroom teaching mode is limited for non-English major college students to realize and overcome cultural differences. This paper analyzes the importance and current situation of culture education for College non-English majors. Some suggestions are given to optimize intercultural foreign language teaching in China.

Key words: Culture; College English teaching; Non-English majors; Strategies

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, socialization among people of different regions with different languages has increased within the country for reasons of economic co-operation, academic exchanges, travel, trade, etc. English, as a tool of communication, has been playing an important role in the increasingly frequent international cultural exchanges. As the global economy and the science and technology developing so quickly, intercultural communication between China and the outside world is becoming more frequent and wider, which poses a real challenge to the present college English education. There will be more opportunities for non English major students to participate in international and intercultural communication in their future work. They need to have great communicative competence in English. To cultivate the college students with intercultural language abilities is urgent. Unfortunately, some college students, though having learned English for several years, and even those who have passed CET4 (College English Test Band 4) and CET6 (College English Test Band 4), find it difficult to communicate fluently and successfully with native speakers. One of the most important reasons for the English non-major students’ comparatively low level of pragmatic competence is their insufficient or vague understanding of the target culture. To ensure the accuracy and validity of international exchange, China, as a developing country, is eager to accelerate the pace of modernization and increase international social interaction. Therefore, intercultural education has its realistic significance in today’s college English Teaching. English majors have specified curriculum of inter-cultural communication, while the non-English majors have understanding problems to overcome the cultural differences. With the development of computer and web technology, web-based and multimedia teaching mode, internet resource provides a new way to develop college non-English majors’ inter-cultural communicative awareness and competence.
1. INTERCULTURAL LANGUAGE EDUCATION FOR COLLEGE NON-ENGLISH MAJORS

Culture teaching has been considered important in foreign language teaching for several decades. However, it is not until more recently that culture teaching in foreign language teaching has been widely recognized. It has become evident that cultural competence is an integral part of communicative competence. As a consequence, it is necessary for all foreign language teachers and learners to have a deeper understanding about culture learning. In other words, foreign language teachers should know that “language teaching is not only to teach the language itself, and what is more important is to help their students take control of their own learning as well as to achieve autonomy by evaluating and questioning the wider context within which the learning of the target language is embedded” (Thanasoulas, 2003).

In English teaching as a foreign language, the importance of teaching culture has been widely recognized. However, how to teach culture in foreign language education is a problem faced by language educators all over the world. The teaching of foreign language is not merely referring to the teaching of vocabulary and language pattern but also introducing cultural background knowledge of the target language that affects students’ understanding. Therefore, the students can use the target language in a proper way and learn to understand the cultural connotations hidden behind the literal language. A major aim in the teaching of culture is to bring the students to the realization that the target culture may have a system of values that differs from their own.

Language and culture are closely related. Learning a language means learning a culture. Culture teaching is absolutely essential in the English language education. The teaching of language and the teaching of culture are of the same significance in the English language education. Culture differences are reflected in languages and communicative activities. The definition of culture teaching should include all the human achievements of civilization and the ways of life and the different habits of people. Furthermore, it makes great difference in communication whether learners can understand or know the cultural differences, cultural rules, and even the cultural taboos.

2. FEATURES OF CULTURAL TRAINING IN COLLEGE ENGLISH EDUCATION IN CHINA

English teaching is highly valued in China, and the importance of culture teaching has been widely realized by most of the scholars and teachers. In the recent two decades, culture education has been given more attention. But the mainstream approaches and methods of foreign language teaching neglected the important role of cultural education in foreign language teaching and communication. There is no denying that there does exist a cultural barrier between the Chinese and the foreigners, which holds back the successful communication. The communicative competence of most Chinese non-English major students is not very encouraging. As we all know, communication cannot be separated from cultural background, so as foreign language educators and learners, no matter we are interested in culture or not, we should be conscious about the problems occurred in the process of intercultural communication.

Currently, non-English majors in many colleges have four English classes every week for the first two years. Due to the tight teaching plan and big class teaching, usually over 40-70 students in each class, it is a bit hard to integrate cultural background information into English teaching.

Teachers and students of English language are deficient in awareness of intercultural communication. Although intercultural awareness training plays a crucial role, but the current status of college English teaching in China is not optimistic. In college English teaching, there exists a serious lack of cultural awareness training. First of all, in college English teaching, the teacher is only concerned about the teaching of language and the training of language skills. In traditional approaches to teaching a foreign language, the aims of the teaching are very often defined with reference to the cultivation of five “language skills”: listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating. Culture teaching is not so much emphasized as an important teaching target as the above mentioned language skills. They take it for granted that a good command of linguistic competence is enough for successful intercultural communication, whether or not having intercultural communication knowledge and competence is not helpful, which is probably one of the major reasons for communication misunderstandings and failures. Students often make cultural mistakes when they communicate with native speakers because of their lack of cultural knowledge.

College English teachers are in great need of culture teaching training and of chances to get exposed to English and American cultures. The lack of the systematic training of teachers results in the unsatisfactory situation of intercultural education in college. In recent years, foreign language teaching has been paid more attention in the society and English teachers spare no efforts to enhance their basic language skills. But the training of intercultural communicative competence of college English teachers is not enough. Although they received training in teaching practice, but in the practical teaching, English teachers’ intercultural sensitivity is not strong and their capability of intercultural communication is weak. Furthermore, by the influence of the exam-oriented education, students
themselves are rarely conscious of cultural background knowledge when they are learning a foreign language.

As to the College English textbooks, textbooks of intercultural communication in English are rare and no cultural textbooks are available for non-English majors in China. Systematic evaluation methods and standards for cultural competence are also lacking in colleges. As is known to all, one main objective of English learning for non-English majors is to pass the examination, especially CET4 or CET6. Many college students admit frankly that they seldom have motivation to learn intercultural knowledge because the knowledge will not benefit their performance in exams. Therefore, the orientation of English testing determines the general orientation of English learning. Therefore, there is much difficulty in putting culture teaching into practice in college English teaching owing to the educational system at present. There is a long way to go towards a cultural dimension of English teaching in the colleges and universities of China.

3. STRATEGIES TO DEVELOP NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS’ INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

3.1 Enlightening Intercultural Awareness of Students

Obviously, many non-English majors do not know the exact meaning of intercultural competence and its importance to English study and communication. With the deepening of education reform, scholars and teachers come to realize that the development of intercultural communication competence firstly lies in the cultivation of their cultural sensitivity and awareness. Therefore, the first step in intercultural communication teaching is to enlighten the awareness of students’ intercultural communication. Teachers of English should continually improve their own level of intercultural awareness, and they should be aware of the importance to develop students’ intercultural communication competence and combine the teaching of intercultural communication with language teaching so as to improve the intercultural communication competence of the students.

To enlighten the students’ awareness of cultural differences in intercultural communication, the teachers may firstly help students realize that cultural differences in communication do exist. Teachers should help students avoid ethnocentrism and learn to be open and flexible in intercultural communication. Every nation is equal in the world so we should not have the attitude that one culture is superior to another. Otherwise, we will feel it difficult to be tolerant of the different nonverbal behaviors of other cultures. In a word, an awareness of these intercultural differences will help us to achieve more successful intercultural communication.

3.2 Changing the Traditional Teaching Approaches

In the new era, the developing trend of today’s foreign language teaching requires a new concept of teaching. English teaching should be aimed at developing students’ communicative competence so that they could be able to interact properly and freely with native speakers of English in various social circumstances. Language should be taught in cultural background. The importance of culture teaching to Chinese college students calls for adequate attention.

Intercultural awareness training of college students aims to enhance their intercultural communication skills, so that they can perform properly in their intercultural exchanges. Teachers should follow certain principles and take certain measures and means to actively and effectively enhance the intercultural awareness of non major students in China. They should make full use of the existing English textbooks and provide authentic language materials of culture background knowledge. It should be emphasized that the development of intercultural awareness of the students is not only a simple teaching process, but should be practiced in the real communication of the target language.

When teachers prepare lessons or lectures, they should take cultural background knowledge into consideration and do their homework to find more interesting related information. In order to provide the students with authentic materials, teachers may collect English posters, comic strips, maps, newspaper cuttings, restaurant menus, railway and airline timetables to create a visual and tangible presence of the target language. It is especially significant to ask students to collect the materials themselves. This method is of particular importance in a foreign language learning setting. In addition, some video and audio teaching materials on culture in English can effectively supplement textbooks may lead to better effects in culture teaching. In this way, students can slowly realize the importance of cultural knowledge and get more interested in foreign culture and have more motivation to the understanding and usage of cultural knowledge. As to the students, they should preview the textbooks, and try to get some relevant cultural background knowledge of the text with the help of the network for self-exploration and research. Therefore, the textbook materials can not only enhance the language ability of students but also achieve the purpose of training intercultural awareness of students.

Classroom teaching is supposed to be the main channel for the students to acquire the cultural background knowledge of target language. Hence making full use of the class time is vital in culture teaching. How do we exploit efficiently the time of classroom teaching? The most efficient method is to use textbooks to arouse the students’ intercultural communication awareness, introduce the nonverbal behaviors, compare the cultural similarities and differences between native culture and target culture and develop the students’ intercultural
communication competence. The textbook, one of the major dimensions of classroom teaching, is a powerful influence on the organization and management of the teaching and learning. Since the textbook is a determining and dominate factor in the range and depth of cultural information to which learners are exposed, it is imperative that more cultural information and cultural activities should be provided, which embody an intercultural view and guide the teaching and learning of the foreign culture. Values and beliefs held by the foreign people should be covered in the textbook.

While trying to understand the culture meaning hidden in the values and beliefs, students learn to respect other cultures and develop the perspective of globalization. If enough culture background information and culture-oriented activities can be contained in the textbook, the students’ pragmatic competence and cultural awareness would be quickly enhanced. So, it is suggested that culture knowledge related to each unit should be sorted out and emphasized so as to arouse students’ attention and strong interest, promoting their autonomous learning of the cultural notes. Therefore, the teachers should choose the textbooks with more cultural information, and they should grasp the opportunities to teach the knowledge of communication of English culture as possible as they can when they meet the language points associated with nonverbal communication of English culture.

In presenting the cultural background information, visual aids are a good way to be used to enlighten the students’ intercultural awareness. Seeing films, watching slides, watching TV or video in the target culture are the very direct ways for students to observe cultural differences. Usually, visual aids such as films, slides, video and TV programs can give students very interesting and attractive descriptions about people’s actions, reactions, expressions, emotions and many other differences. People will learn more about different customs, values, religions and beliefs in other cultures due to its vivid manifestation with pictures, sounds, and music, consciously or unconsciously. From these media-aided instructions, students will learn much about verbal expressions in the target culture as well as nonverbal communication.

3.3 Designing Extensive Extra-curricular Intercultural Activities

Learning culture can take place outside the classroom. Students’ intercultural communication competence would be better developed with a wide variety of well-designed extra-curricular activities. Teachers should help students collect and accumulate English cultural knowledge in a variety of ways. Cultural knowledge not only exists in textbooks, and students can pick up intercultural information in a large amount of resources as well, such as magazine, newspapers, television programs, literature books, etc. All these materials contain much nutrition of a nation’s culture. To get access to these materials is a very effective way of understanding the lifestyle and way of thinking of the people speaking the target language.

It is very important to create a genuine second language environment in order to learn the target language culture effectively and directly. With the development of information technologies and the prevalence of network study, college students can get access to a variety of original language materials as well as many other related resources through the Internet. For example, they can read English magazines, newspapers, literature works, and can watch English movies as well as English TV programs.

Extensive reading is regarded to be an especially helpful way for students to acquire more cultural information. Some cultural materials which may serve as an introduction to the history, arts, literary works, geographical information, science, technology, economy, society, beliefs, value systems, lifestyle, view of time and space of the target culture which are valuable to students in authentic intercultural communication. Such valuable information will enable students to communicate more smoothly and idiomatically. Therefore, the teachers should encourage students to read extensively after class. Teachers can offer some recommendation of books, magazines, websites or other materials to students, and students themselves can get these materials that they are interested in from the libraries or on the Internet. Students should be encouraged to take some notes and try to compare the target culture with their native culture in the process of reading. Extensive reading not only helps the English non-majors have an insight into the target culture, but also enable them to make a comparison between their native culture and the target culture, finding out the similarities and differences. Only when they are equipped with a command of knowledge of intercultural communication, can they put what they learnt into practice most effectively. Reading extensively may not bring immediate benefits, but it does help students understand the target culture at a deeper level and the students’ intercultural communicative competence will be improved day by day.

It may be a good idea to offer some optional courses on both Chinese and western culture in English in the third or fourth year in college. For one thing, students’ English learning will not be interrupted and they may have accumulated adequate language skills to understand the cultural information. For another, a better understanding of culture may lay a solid foundation for their further study and greatly benefit their career after graduation. At present, some universities and colleges have extended courses related to intercultural communication to non-English major.

To the English learners, the authentic intercultural communication with native speakers in the target language may provide them with the “most persuasive materials”. Cultural difference exist in every aspect in the intercultural communication, such as gestures, facial
expressions, body language, use of silence, etc can be compared. They are the effective and convenient methods to help cultivate the students’ intercultural communication competence. Therefore, having interaction with people of target cultures and trying to understand them is proved to be one desirable and effective way to improve intercultural communicative competence. The Chinese English teachers should encourage the students to develop personal contacts with English native speakers, and create the opportunities for the students as possible as they can. What the students should do is to communicate as much as possible with native-English speakers in order to obtain more and more empirical knowledge that will enable them to communicate appropriately and effectively with people from the target culture. They can even have communication and make friends with native speakers over internet. Therefore, there has been much convenience for learners to learn the target language culture through genuine communicative activities. In this way, students’ pragmatic competence and intercultural communicative competence can be developed a lot.

3.4 Training of the Teachers

Teachers with much knowledge, experience of foreign culture and with appropriate perspectives, approaches and techniques in culture teaching can facilitate culture learning effectively. Since teachers play the critical role in the teaching of language and culture, efficient teachers’ training is of great significance. Some teachers tend to avoid explaining the cultural background knowledge of language materials in teaching partly because they themselves are lack of sufficient knowledge on target cultures. Therefore, teachers of English should continually improve their own level of intercultural awareness, be aware of the importance to develop students’ communication competence, and take the teaching of intercultural communication into language teaching so as to improve the intercultural communication competence of the students. The training of culture teaching strategies for the college English teachers is an urgent issue.

In order to promote the intercultural quality, college English teachers need training in the following aspects. Firstly, the quality of intercultural training itself should be guaranteed with updated and practical teaching ideas to improve college teachers’ teaching ability. Secondly, intercultural sensitivity, intercultural knowledge, intercultural communicative competence should be included in their intercultural training. Current training for the college English teachers is insufficient to meet the requirement and it calls for more attention, time, and effective theoretical and pedagogical guidance. They need to turn to books on culture, intercultural communication, sociology, anthropology, etc. to enrich their own culture knowledge and teaching techniques; besides, institutes and colleges administrators should provide chances for teachers to gain real-life experience by going to the target country and living and studying there for a period of time. Only through regular trainings can the teachers have access to the recent achievements made in the research frontline and benefits their teaching.

3.5 Improving the Testing and Assessment System for Non-English Majors

As teaching and testing are usually linked together, the forms and contents of language teaching are greatly influenced by the forms and contents of language tests and testing is a very powerful device to verify the effectiveness of teaching and learning. It can not only stimulate students to work harder, but also helps teachers find out whether students have a command of what they are supposed to mastered and what aspects they should pay more attention to and make more efforts on. In the process of developing students’ intercultural awareness, testing definitely plays an essential role since tests always orient students’ actual learning. Hence necessary changes should be made in current tests for non-English major college students so that these tests will force these students to concentrate their efforts on developing not only their linguistic competence but also their intercultural awareness.

At present, cultural knowledge especially intercultural communication competence is rarely tested in examinations, and so both teachers and students don’t find much motivation to make efforts on it. In order to develop students’ intercultural communicative competence and their cultural quality, the tests should also cover the testing of culture knowledge of the target language and its appropriate use in authentic communication along with linguistic knowledge. It is a tendency that CET4 and CET6 will undergo greater reforms very soon with the development of the society and the rapid progress of foreign language teaching. It is also suggested to adopt culture as topics for the oral test since those college students who are qualified for oral test prove to be comparatively more capable in English learning and communication. Therefore, such adjustment may not be so demanding but a bit challenging for them.

The author believes that this change, as a challenge for the college non-English major students, will be more scientific and more beneficial to the cultivation of both linguistic and communicative competence of them. Experts and scholars have been researching to develop communicative tests in order to assess the communicative ability of candidates. However, no substantial progress has been made. And one of the reasons may have to do with the evaluation standards.

In the current evaluation standards, the performance standards of skills are developed and especially valued. However, considering the goal of college English instruction, content standards and lifelong standards in terms of culture, affect, attitude, learner autonomy and literary should be studied to satisfy the requirements of
overall development on the part of the students and to satisfy the demands of society for whole-person development.

Therefore, the construction and expansion of evaluation framework within the domain of curriculum standards for college English education is necessary. With the development of society and the implementation of the existing college English education reform, there is increasing demand for amendment to the current evaluation standards. The construction of context-adaptive evaluation framework requires the consideration and inclusion of intercultural communication competence. It is also true that the application and practice of these suggestions are subjected to a number of constraints, which calls for great efforts of administrators.

The above points can only cover part of the teaching and learning process of course, and more methods are expected to be added into the list as more efforts will be made in this field.

CONCLUSION

As we know, only presenting language teaching in English class can’t cultivate students’ active culture attitude, and we should specifically have culture teaching in English class. The paper puts forward a set of suggestions on how to improve intercultural communication competence, and mixing two or several culture teaching strategies together according to the specific teaching situations and teaching subjects and applying them into English class of non-English majors in college is a feasible culture teaching method. The author hopes they can be of some help to college teachers of English and students who learn the language. What’s more, English teachers ought to look at their roles and tasks from a different angle, restudy the objective of English teaching, and rethink students’ needs and demands, so as to find feasible ways to arouse students’ intercultural awareness and English cultural-learning motivation. They should also spare no effort to suit students’ right culture needs, raising students’ culture qualities in order to make them successfully face the great challenge of globalization.

REFERENCES