



On Cultivating Students' Cross-Cultural Awareness in Primary English Teaching

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Abstract

Due to the inseparable relationship between language and culture, culture learning is inevitably involved in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching. Cultural knowledge directly affects the appropriateness of communication in English. Accordingly it is essential to cultivate students' cross-cultural awareness, thereby improving their communicative abilities to speak and write in English. Through analyzing the present situation of cross-cultural awareness in primary English class in Nanchong, China, as well as the necessity of fostering students' cross-cultural awareness in primary school English teaching, this paper explores ways of how to permeate the culture teaching and cultivate students' cross-cultural awareness, aiming at enhancing their communicative abilities to speak and write.

Key words: Cross-cultural awareness; Primary English teaching; Communicative abilities; Ways of cultivating cross-cultural awareness

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INTRODUCTION

As the carrier of culture, language bears the crucial task of cross-cultural communication. Simultaneously, culture knowledge plays an important part in EFL

learning and teaching, for students are able to improve their communicative competence by learning cultural knowledge, and the ultimate goal of language teaching is to cultivate English learners' communicative abilities to speak and write in English.

However, as is observed in primary English class in Nanchong, the concepts of culture teaching and cross-cultural awareness are lack of attention and students' communicative abilities are far from satisfaction. Hence it is of great necessity to cultivate students' cross-cultural awareness and communicative competence in primary English teaching. This paper analyzes the present situation of cross-cultural awareness in primary English teaching, puts forwards the necessity of cultivating primary students' cultural awareness and explores ways of how to primary school students' cross-cultural awareness in English class in order to improve students' communicative abilities to speak and write in English.

1. CROSS-CULTURAL AWARENESS AND ITS PRESENT SITUATION IN PRIMARY ENGLISH TEACHING

With strong cross-cultural awareness, English learners are capable of having a good command of cultural knowledge, and then acquire communicative abilities to speak and write in English from the viewpoint of EFL teaching. To explain it, students are trained to think as native English speakers and take part in communication activities in which they need to speak or write English. What's more, English learners with strong cross-cultural awareness find it easier to get fully accurate understanding about cultural differences or cultural conflicts, between the native language, namely Chinese and the target language, namely English. To simplify it, cross-culture awareness is a manifestation of communicative abilities to speak and write in the target language. It is very difficult to learn

language well if the learners pay less attention to learning its culture. Without strong cross-cultural awareness, students are unable to talk with native English speakers smoothly and make correspondence with them via Emails or letters. On the contrary, learning a language on the basis of deep understanding its culture enables learners to yield twice the result with half the effort. In other words, being conscious of cultural differences or conflictions means that English learners can eliminate obstacles which stop them from better understanding the different culture in their English learning process, then can make good preparations for communicating with English speakers both in spoken English and in written English.

Although cross-culture awareness is of great importance for learners to gain communicative competence, it is observed from primary English class in Nanchong that there are two major problems associated with cross-cultural awareness cultivating in primary English teaching. First, in traditional primary English class, English teachers focus on teaching words, sentences and grammars other than training students' cross-cultural awareness. In order to finish their teaching tasks and make students get high scores in exams, primary English teachers try their best to teach words and grammars and to analyze sentence structures, while the main task of students is to follow teachers to do practice. Second, teachers themselves have difficulty in exploring scientific and systematic sways of cultivating students' cross-cultural awareness in the large-numbered class, even though they have realized its importance. Primary teachers do not attach importance to teaching cultural knowledge. As a result, students know very little about the differences between western culture and Chinese culture, let alone how to make appropriate communication in spoken English and written English. In conclusion, the present situation of cross-cultural awareness cultivating in primary English class is not optimistic in Nanchong. Therefore, it is of great necessity to change this present situation.

2. THE NECESSITY OF CULTIVATING CROSS-CULTURAL AWARENESS IN PRIMARY ENGLISH TEACHING

Successful and decent communication with native English speakers face to face or by Emails requires both the language knowledge and the cultural knowledge. As *New English Curriculum Standards for Elementary School (New Edition)* points out, the overall objective of elementary English courses is to cultivate students' language skills, language knowledge, emotions, learning strategies and cultural awareness. It is worthy of being mentioned that cultural awareness is the guarantee of proper language use.

Besides, words' meanings consist of denotations and rich cultural connotations. Denotation refers to the strict dictionary meaning of a word, while connotation is the emotional and imaginative association surrounding a word. Teachers need not only help students with denotations, but also introduce the cultural connotations to students. Only through combining denotations with connotations can students achieve effective English learning and successful communication with native English speakers. Take teaching the number 13 in primary English class for example, what teachers are supposed to do is not only to ask students to practise the pronunciation, but also to provide its cultural connotation for students. In this way, students are able to understand why there is not the number 13 for numbering seats. Thus it is essential to permeate western cultural knowledge in primary English teaching.

3. WAYS TO CULTIVATE STUDENTS' CROSS-CULTURAL AWARENESS IN PRIMARY ENGLISH TEACHING

3.1 In Vocabulary Teaching Process

As to teaching primary students vocabulary, it is concluded from class observation that primary English teachers put pronunciations and denotations of words above everything and students spend a large amount of time practising the pronunciations and trying to remember the denotations of words. If students only know the denotations of words, they will be likely to make mistakes in making communication. In the cross-cultural contexts, communicators have different understandings of a same word which is a commendatory term in the native language, while it is a negative one in the target language. For instance, the word *red* and the word *white* are two controversial words in Chinese culture and western culture. The word *red* is regarded as a symbol of auspiciousness in China, but it symbolizes cruelty in westerners' eyes. The word *white* is another evidence. In Chinese culture, the word *white* is thought as a symbol of death and a bad omen, but in western culture, westerners hold the view that the word *white* stands for innocence, integrity, honesty and luck. Without understanding the different cultural connotations of the words like westerners, English learners will find it hard to make themselves understood by westerners. How to avoid being misunderstood has become an urgent issue. First, primary English teachers are supposed to be familiar with the cultural connotations themselves, through which they are able to give full explanations to students in class. Second, teachers play an important role in guiding students to think as native English speakers, providing authentic materials such as idioms, proverbs, short essays and cartoon videos for students to enrich

the students' cross-cultural knowledge and creating an authentic environment for students to make dialogues like native English speakers in daily life. It is noteworthy that teachers ought to utilize the authentic materials in a proper way. Idioms, proverbs and short essays had better be dubbed by those who speak standard English. Under the teachers' instruction, students listen to the materials or watch the videos for two times. Then they are asked to find out target words with teachers' help, and to make simple sentences in these words, so as to strengthen memorizing them and to learn how to use these words in real life.

3.2 In Reading and Listening Teaching Process

In a broad sense, reading and listening are two effective ways to help students get lots of information about politics, economics, history, religion and customs. From the standpoint of EFL learning, English reading and English listening are two indispensable means of input. Meanwhile it is a crucial step for students to cultivate cross-cultural awareness when they read and listen to English materials, particularly authentic English materials. To put in other words, imputing a great deal of knowledge about all aspects of lives in English-speaking countries can help students accumulate cultural knowledge, foster the thinking modes of native English speakers and avoid the cultural shock in their extra-curricular reading and listening.

As is observed in primary English class in Nanchong, textbooks are their main reading materials, so it needs teachers to search for more suitable authentic materials before class. In the pre-learning stage of primary English class, a children's English song, a short story from children's picture books and a short cartoon can boost the students' interest and make students get into western culture. In the while-learning stage, the cultural knowledge behind the texts needs to be explored by teachers first and then this cultural information can be shown in the forms of cartoons, short videos and pictures in class. At the same time, the before-designed activities can be conducted in this stage, such as children's English singing competitions, movie-dubbing competitions, English speech contests, guessing games and words-pictures matching games and so on. Finally, in the post-learning stage, students are required to read a short picture story or essay about westerners' lives. After class, students are assigned to read another picture story or essay. Students can even spare some time to design a dialogue or make a short play by themselves or with their classmates.

It is worthwhile to note that less primary students in Nanchong have the habit of reading English articles or English books except their textbooks after school. Because of their English proficiency, the children's English picture books are more suitable for them. Primary school students in Nanchong still have great trouble in reading children's

literary books in English which are mirrors of western cultures. Therefore, the combination of reading children's picture books in English with reading children's English literary works after school is a wonderful choice to gain more cultural knowledge, know about cultural differences and cultural conflictions, familiarize themselves with different thinking modes, form cross-cultural awareness and consequently promote their communicative abilities to speak and write in English.

To sum up, primary students follow teachers' instruction in class and are suggested to read children's English picture books as well as children's English literary works after school. Only in this way can students be acquainted with the English thinking mode.

3.3 In Speaking and Writing Teaching Process

Speaking and writing, two means of output in EFL learning, are two essential communicative abilities. The basic purpose of English teaching is to cultivate students' communicative abilities to speak English and to write in English, which lays the foundation for facilitating further cultural exchanges. It is analyzed from class observation that primary students are better at speaking than writing. However, speaking of their speaking proficiency, they are unable to express their own ideas in English as they want when communicating with one another. Two major reasons account for their low speaking proficiency as follows. First, primary students lack chances of speaking English in large-numbered class, so do they after class. Second, due to the primary students' insufficient English reading and listening amount, they have difficulty in seeking appropriate words to express their ideas in English. As to primary students' writing proficiency, it is lower than their speaking proficiency, for teachers do not attach importance to English writing. Apart from it, the inadequate amount of English reading leads to students' low writing proficiency.

To solve the above-mentioned problems, cultivating primary students' cross-cultural awareness is the key factor. If students have strong cross-cultural awareness, they will find it easy to enhance their speaking and writing abilities. In the pre-learning stage of primary English class, students in grade 3-4 can be required to follow teachers or multimedia to read proverbs and idioms, while students are grouped to write a very short conversation or a short story which happens in English speaking countries within 15 minutes. In the while-learning stage, teachers are suggested to conduct activities such as movie-dubbing competition and role play. In the post-learning stage, teachers give out reading materials to get more about cultural differences and taboos. Such topics as weight, age, religion and marriage are prohibited in conversations with native English speakers. In order to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding in conversations, teachers are supposed to inform students of the taboos, cultural differences and shocks.

3.4 Achieving Switching Teacher's Roles and Improving Primary Teachers' Professional Qualities

In the traditional primary English classrooms, teachers play a dominant role, which means that teachers talk, meanwhile students just listen to them and take notes. If the primary English class is teacher-centered and students are the passive receivers, students will learn the dumb English, which refers that students learn English to get high scores in English exams instead of communicating with English speakers. As a result, students and teachers are not satisfied with their dumb English. In order to deal with this problem, what teachers urge to do is to switch their roles to be guiders and instructors.

Besides, to be qualified teachers, they also need to be good students to strengthen their own professional qualities. Teachers' professional qualities involve their language proficiency, their educational theories, their teaching concepts, their teaching approaches and their computer skills and abilities to retrieve information. Teachers' high professional qualities is the key to improve students' language competence. To explain it, teachers have to keep learning so as to meet the demands of contemporary English teaching. There are five suggestions involved in enhancing teachers' professional qualities as follows.

First, teachers' language proficiency has great influence on students. As it knows, teachers must be skilled at listening, speaking, reading and writing, so that they can meet the requirements of being teachers. Under the teachers' guidance, students make rapid progress in these four language abilities. Especially in regards to English speaking, students directly imitate the pronunciation and intonation from teachers.

Second, in terms of teachers' educational theories, as the society advances, the educational theories keep pace with the times and the contemporary students' psychological features, thus teachers ought to renew their educational theories regularly through reading updated theoretical journals or books and attending online or offline class. Besides, it is of significance for primary English teachers to seek the chance to attend the teachers' training exchanges projects abroad.

Third, in relation to the teaching concepts, particularly the culture teaching concepts, the prerequisite is the strong cross-cultural awareness that teachers themselves are supposed to have. In the working practice, the teachers are able to obtain the cultural knowledge by means of reading enormous English literary works, watching foreign movies, appreciating TED (technology, entertainment, design) and learning from smart phone apps. Furthermore, it is conducive for teachers to take part in cross-cultural teaching projects. As is noted, primary English teachers need adhere to the principle of associating language teaching with culture teaching. Namely, the language practice is suggested to be combined with culture teaching activities as much as possible in class.

Fourth, regarding the teaching approaches, various kinds of teaching approaches are supposed to be scientifically employed in the pre-learning stage, the while-learning stage and the post-learning stage in class. Updating their teaching approaches has become an urgent task for teachers, because the old-dated teaching approaches are unable to satisfy the contemporary children's needs. To accomplish better English teaching, it is urgent for teachers to learn from online class or offline class, actively participate in the discussion with their coworkers, and join the cultural exchanges conferences.

Fifth, by means of computer skills and their abilities to retrieve information, the teaching design, resources and tools can be optimized to achieve cultural infiltration. In traditional primary English class, textbooks are the commonly-used teaching tools, but they are not the only ones. English newspapers and magazines that fit for primary students are also good choices, which offer a wide range of interesting topics and latest news. As the information technology advances, teachers are requested to master computer skills and to foster the ability to make full use of Internet, multimedia and smart phone apps. Owing to their psychological features, primary students fancy visual stimuli, which can be given by teachers' super computer skills to make high-quality PPT. In addition, due to the popularization of smart phone apps, it is easier for students to have access to more updated cultural knowledge. At the same time, through QQ, Wechat and Skype, they have more chances of chatting with foreigners and establishing long-term friendship. As for teachers, network teaching is not out of reach any more, through which teachers and students can make communication and discussion anytime. In a word, improving teachers' computer skills and abilities to retrieve information is of great use to arise students' cultural-awareness and improve their communicative competence.

CONCLUSION

If English learners do not understand the culture of English-speaking countries, they could not really master English. That's why it is vital to cultivate English learners' cross-cultural awareness and promote their communicative abilities. This paper analyzes the present situation of primary students' cross-cultural awareness in Nanchong, points out that teachers focus on language teaching other than culture teaching and there are not scientific and systematic culture teaching ways, and explores ways of cultivating students' cross-cultural awareness in vocabulary teaching process, in listening and reading teaching process, in speaking and writing teaching process, and by switching teachers' roles as well as by improving their professional qualities. In conclusion, how to permeate culture teaching into language teaching is responsible for increasing students' cultural awareness and improving their communicative competence.

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