

Cultivating Junior High School Students' Cross-Cultural Awareness in EFL Context: Evidence From an Empirical Studies

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to paint a picture of cultivating junior high school students' cross-cultural awareness in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. It starts with an investigation of the present situation of culture teaching, especially those problems in culture teaching. Culture teaching is long neglected or taken as a subordinate part of the language teaching in junior teaching practice. Worse still, the methods of culture teaching are sole and simple. The aim of culture teaching is misunderstood as a glimpse of cultural knowledge only, but not as an essential step to develop students' correct attitudes and beliefs about the target culture. Therefore, the cultivation of cultural awareness is nearly ignored in junior English teaching. This reality of English teaching results just from the influence of the old English teaching method, the pressure of the exam-oriented education, the teacher's lack of cultural knowledge and cross-cultural awareness, and obscure understanding of culture teaching.

Key words: Cross-cultural awareness; Culture; EFL

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INTRODUCTION

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the vision of a global village (McLuhan, 1962) is no longer considered an abstract idea but a virtual certainty. The planet Earth is not shrinking, but time and space are. Trains, planes, telephones, televisions, the Internet, and other forms of modern transportation and communication reduce the time and distance that once kept the peoples of the world apart. Even people who do not travel far from home live in the global village. In the metaphor of the global village, nations are like families and continents are like neighborhoods. As in a village of the nations of the world are dependent on one another. Time and space no longer isolate or protect nations and groups from each other. A global environmental problems become more serious, people realize that the river of the world flow and the winds of the planet blow without regard to national boundaries. The economic, political and military actions of other nations are the actions of our neighbors. It's impossible to treat them as distant events that do not concern us. The world, people and societies are always in a state of change. This ongoing process continually produces new sets of social dynamics with which we must deal. Indeed, it's challenging to live in such a global village. To meet those challenges people everywhere need to learn about other cultures. They need to know their neighbors. They need to do more than know about them. They need to know how to get along with them and how to solve problems that inevitably arise. To do this, it is necessary to learn how to communicate across cultures. That means residents of the global village need to learn to think, feel and behave in new ways. The reality of the global village challenges all its residents to develop a broader worldview, more global psychology or international psychology (David & Buchanan, 2003), and the cultural skills necessary for building relationships and solving problems across cultures.

As China further carries out the policy of reform and “opening-up”, Chinese have frequent opportunities to interact with foreigners and cross-cultural communication is indispensable. Nowadays in the international environment of globalization (which means the integration of global economy), the goal of education is to improve the students’ ability of survival in the global competition and promote rapid economic development. Therefore, teenagers in particular, need to be prepared to be global citizens who have the awareness and competence and hence will understand and interact successfully cross cultures.

With the further development of English curriculum reform in China since 2001, special attention to cultural-awareness has been paid to the cultivation of teaching English in middle schools. The English Curriculum Standards for Nine-Year Compulsory Education (Ministry of Education, 2011), which place even greater importance on the cultivation of cultural-awareness than ever before, point out that cultural-awareness is one of the five general objectives of the English language curriculum, and that it is viewed as critical in the appropriate use of the target language. Moreover, the relevant teaching objectives and demands on cultural awareness cultivation are put forward in detail. The cultivation of cultural awareness could benefit the development of students’ language skills, such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, which are all partly based on the target culture. So the appropriate attitudes and beliefs of English culture would promote the students’ abilities and skills in using the language in communication. Cultural awareness cultivation would also contribute a lot to the students’ all-round development because it’ll facilitate the students’ psychological change and make them refresh themselves before cultural conflicts, and develop their proper feelings and attitudes to both Chinese and English culture and rebuild their morality further. So teachers are required to teach not only language but also culture so as to help increase student’s cross-cultural awareness.

However, in an exam-oriented environment as China’s EFL content, cultivating students’ cultural awareness may be still new to most junior high school teachers. Cultural factors in junior high school English classroom are only taken as subordinate and handed over students in a nonsystematic way. Furthermore, for a long time in China, the grammar-oriented perspective leads to the emphasis on the linguistic competence instead of ICC competence (Gudykunst & William, 2003), which results in the inefficiency of EFL in China. Most attention has been on cultural knowledge to itself and a rightful place has not been given to the cultivation of students’ cross-cultural awareness in Junior high school teaching practice.

1. RESEARCH ON THE STATUS QUO

1.1 Purposes of the Study

On account of the present situation of culture teaching in junior English teaching, this research aims at finding out how much knowledge about English culture the students have mastered by a test of cultural knowledge, investigating the students’ attitudes towards culture teaching by a questionnaire, and collecting the teachers’ opinions about culture teaching and cultivating students’ cross-cultural awareness in teaching practice by an interview.

1.2 The Design of the Research

There are two parts in the cultural test. Part 1 includes 10 items about culture as communicative skills, the first 5 for non-verbal cultural knowledge and the last 5 for verbal cultural knowledge. Part 2 consists of 10 questions about culture as knowledge, the first 5 questions selected from the textbook, and the last 5 beyond the textbook. These questions cover a large amount of culture, and can be used to test the students’ mastering of knowledge of English culture.

The questionnaire for students and the interview paper for teachers consists of five similar types of questions respectively, namely: (a) the necessity of culture teaching /learning; (b) the means of culture teaching/learning; (c) self-assessment about their knowledge of English culture; (d) the aim of culture teaching/learning; (e) what they want to teach /learn if no English exams exist.

1.3 The Choice of Samples

The cultural test and questionnaire for students sample 120 and subjects of junior 2 students from 4 different junior schools in Chongqing (Southwestern Municipality in China), including two key schools and two average schools, 30 subjects from each school. The students of junior 2 may reveal the culture teaching reality in junior English. 30 English teachers (in charge of junior 2) in junior schools in Chongqing are sampled for opinions and attitudes to culture teaching. They are from different schools with different genders, posts, years of teaching and professional titles. All the subjects have at least one year of junior teaching practice.

1.4 Data and Major Findings

1.4.1 Cultural Test

We conducted the cultural tests on “culture as communicative skills” and “culture as knowledge”. The numbers given in the chart 1 are the average values of the questions done correctly by the students in the cultural test. (The total number of every item is 5). They demonstrate the students’ cultural knowledge seems to be poor. Then analyzed in detail, the chart can be translated as follows: students’ knowledge about culture as communicative skills is obviously better than that of culture as knowledge; in the culture as communicative skills, their knowledge of verbal cultural knowledge is

comparatively better than that of non-verbal; in the culture as knowledge, their cultural knowledge learnt in textbook is much better than that beyond textbook; when compared with the students from average schools, the students from key schools did relatively better.

Table 1
Results of Cultural Test on Communicative Skills and Knowledge

Students	Culture as communicative skills		Cultural as knowledge	
	Verbal	Nonverbal	In text	Beyond text
Key school	4.22	3.50	4.2	1.07
Average school	3.88	3.36	3.37	0.98

A succinct analysis of the results of cultural test as above shows: (a) In culture teaching, teachers draw more attention to culture as communicative skills than to culture as knowledge. Maybe they consider that culture as knowledge will not impact on successful communication directly. (b) The students have mastered verbal cultural knowledge better than non-verbal cultural knowledge in cross-cultural communication. (c) The students perform better on the cultural knowledge of textbooks and 10 teachers, but show little interest in cultural knowledge out of class. (d) The students from key schools do better in cultural test fully indicates culture teaching should be paid more attention to for the benefit of the students' English learning.

1.4.2 Questionnaire and Interview

There are 5 questions on the similar topics for the teachers and the students respectively:

1.4.2.1 Necessity of Culture Teaching/Learning

Most of the teachers interviewed agree that it is necessary to conduct culture teaching in junior English teaching and also improve their understanding of the relationship between language and culture. Only 3 junior teachers, who are used to the grammar-translation teaching method (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), have different opinions about the consideration as to the pressure of Entrance Examination for Junior (EEJ, Zhong Kao in Chinese). They insist that culture teaching will waste too much time in class and inefficient for the exams. However, more than 80% of students choose C or D, thinking it's necessary or quite necessary to get more knowledge about the target culture in English learning. For the attitudes to the necessity of culture teaching, both teachers and students have already realized the important role of culture in English learning.

1.4.2.2 Self-Assessment of Their Cultural Knowledge

For this question, half of the teachers frankly claim that their knowledge of the target culture is inefficient and that they should further their study. The other half, however, just thinks they can deal with the cultural knowledge

involved in the textbook with the help of reference books, but they believe that's enough for teaching the junior school students. The students' answers to this problem are totally surprising, only one student thinks he has mastered a lot of cultural knowledge, and 35% of them admit they have got some cultural knowledge, while the rest choose A and B, thinking that they have got a litter or nothing about cultural knowledge. Now that they have realized the importance of English culture in English studying, why their cultural knowledge is still so poor?

1.4.2.3 Methods of Culture Teaching/Learning

More than 30% of teachers say they are fully occupied by dealing with language points so they have no time teaching cultural knowledge in class; the other 60% admit they do explain some cultural knowledge involved in the textbook to the students and sometimes even supply some cultural background for the students; the remaining 10% often encourage students to acquire more cultural knowledge by reading literature works and newspapers as well as watching TV in addition to the cultural knowledge in the textbook. The students' answers identify those of the teachers: more than 60% of students get cultural knowledge from the teacher's introduction of the target culture, the rest gather it by participating in classroom activities and watching TV. Only a few reveal they study cultural knowledge autonomously with the help of their teachers. From these results, we can find that the methods of teaching and learning culture is simple and arbitrary, no wonder the students' cultural knowledge is so poor although they have realized its importance in English learning.

1.4.2.4 Aim of Culture Teaching/Learning

For the aim of culture teaching, nearly 80% of teachers take the teaching of cultural knowledge for granted, that is, their aim of culture teaching is to enrich the students' cultural knowledge and stimulate their interest in English learning. The remaining 20% conduct culture teaching for developing students' appropriate attitudes and beliefs about the target and Chinese culture so as to help the students for all-round development. The students' aim of learning culture is simple: nearly all of them believe cultural knowledge can help them communicate with foreigners. This shows that both teachers' and students' aim of culture teaching and learning are not clear-cut. They fail to realize cultural awareness is more important than cultural knowledge itself.

1.4.2.5 What They Will Do If No Exams Exist

This question attracts both teachers and students. Nearly all of the teachers think they would like to teach students knowledge about foreign traditions, literature, history and whatever. Nearly 90% of students admit they would choose to learn more about English culture. The results show it is the exam-oriented tendency in school administration that hinders teachers and students from

spending time and energy in conducting culture teaching and learning.

2. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

According to the data and findings above, the status quo of culture teaching in junior can be summarized as follows: (a) culture teaching is neglected or is just taken as subordinate to the language teaching in junior English teaching practice; (b) the teaching of non-verbal cultural knowledge (Andersen, 2007) is paid little attention to in culture teaching; (c) culture as knowledge is regarded as unimportant factor in English teaching; (d) the ways of culture teaching is arbitrary and simple; (e) the aim of culture teaching is mistaken for the teaching of cultural knowledge only, so the cultivation of cultural awareness nearly is wholly ignored in junior English teaching. Some misconceptions and inefficient practices in relation to English teaching and learning account for the present situation of culture teaching, especially it accounts for the ignorance of cultural awareness cultivation.

2.1 Influence of the Old English Teaching Method

Though foreign language educators have realized the relation between language and culture, English teaching in China has been influenced by the theory of linguistic competence (Chomsky, 1965) for a long time. Worse still, the approach of grammar-translation (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) is still being used in some areas by numbers of English teachers. When teaching a new lesson, the teacher will teach the vocabulary first, and then explain the difficult sentence patterns or grammar, finally study the text by translating it sentence by sentence into Chinese. This approach is efficient for language teaching, such as phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, but it leads to dumb English in the future. Since this method does not take culture into consideration as an integral part of English teaching, it totally neglects cultural factors, which in turn results in the students' poor communicative skills and poor cross-cultural awareness.

2.2 Pressure of the Exam-Oriented Education

Most junior schools are obsessed with EEJ (Zhong Kao in Chinese) when teaching English, so the sole motivation of teaching English is just to pass the exams and get high scores in English proficiency tests, under such circumstances, the teachers and their students are taken just as the facilitators of realizing this goal. If the teaching of English culture did not benefit the so-called proficiency of English, there would be no need for teachers and students to spend time on it. Driven by this misconception of English teaching, the teachers show the greatest concern with the students' mastery of language knowledge and skills. As a result, the teaching of culture becomes totally unessential, let alone thinking over how

to integrate it with English classroom or doing a kind of research like this. English culture divorces from the English language.

2.3 Teachers' Lack of Cultural Knowledge and Cross-Cultural Awareness

Most junior English teachers, who were educated in the "exam-oriented context", are lacking in sensitivity and understanding towards cultural awareness and cultural knowledge (Tomalin & Susan, 1998). In classroom teaching, teachers spend most of their time in teaching the students vocabulary, structure and grammar by giving lots of drills and many more to practice and consolidate them. They even spare no time thinking about the significance of culture in language teaching. In fact, they, for this reason or that, have little chance to promote their cultural awareness and ability.

2.4 An Obscure Understanding of Culture Teaching

Even if some English teachers are aware of the importance of culture teaching in English classroom, they are deep in the shadow of traditional classroom structure and concentrate their time and energy on language teaching, and just adding some cultural background knowledge or reference to its relative dialogues or texts in order to make the class lively and interesting. This shows that the English teachers have only an obscure understanding of culture teaching, which aims at cultivating students' cultural awareness but not just the acquisition of cultural knowledge.

The status quo of and problems in English culture teaching in junior English teaching practices loom so large and their negative impact continues so seriously that some effective measures must be taken to better the present situation.

CONCLUSION

(a) The reasons for the current practices

This research investigates the current problems of culture teaching in junior English teaching, namely, the students are poor in knowledge about the target culture; the approaches of culture teaching is arbitrary and simple; culture teaching is misunderstood as only the teaching of cultural knowledge; the cultivation of cultural awareness is totally ignored.

These problems pose the obstacles to attempts at cultivating students' cultural awareness in junior English teaching, they are: (i) The exam-oriented conception of teaching. The current English exams have not covered the realm of culture, but only focus on testing students' linguistic proficiency, so culture teaching is mostly neglected. (ii) The teacher's misunderstanding of culture teaching. Most English teachers think that cultural knowledge teaching is the only aim of culture teaching

and cultural awareness is totally strange to them, which result in the students' poor cultural awareness and poor cross-cultural communicative competence. Of course, cultural awareness itself is one of the most difficult dimensions to attain (Hanvey, 1979). (iii) The teacher's lacking in cultural knowledge and cultural awareness. Their attitudes to the target culture always have effects on those of students. (iv) The lack of real communication with foreigners. That's an important obstacle for the cultivation of cultural awareness. Lacking in cross-cultural communication, the students will have no motivation and passion to master English culture.

(b) The significance of cultivating cross-cultural awareness for junior students

Cultivating cultural awareness is the essential demand of cross-cultural communication and English learning. In China, culture teaching is closely related to Chinese modernization and the policy of open-up and reform, so cross-cultural communication has become the ultimate goal of FLT. However, cultural difference is the barrier for cross-cultural communication. How to overcome the communicative barrier caused by cultural difference remains a problem. In English teaching, introducing cultural knowledge and cultivating cultural awareness in junior English teaching practice is an important way to understand and decrease cultural difference. The cultivation of cultural awareness can improve the learning and use of English. Developing the communicative competence is the base of language communicative competence, but it's not enough. More and more educators (e.g., Bachman, 1990; Canale & Swain, 1980; Chomsky, 1965; Hymes, 1966; Karimnia & Izadparast, 2007; Leung, 2005; Savignon, 1997) agree that communicative competence includes five aspects: four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) and the social ability (the ability of communicating and melting with people from different cultural background). We must know that language competence and language using competence interact each other, understanding cultural knowledge and the cultivation of cultural awareness are the important aspects of forming communicative competence.

Cultivating cultural awareness is good for developing students' correct attitudes to the home and the target culture. With the globalization, communication in culture is more and more frequent. Under the pressure of large amount of foreign culture flooding into the home culture, there is no doubt that the students may wonder: How to treat the foreign culture? How to treat the home culture? Some students may look down upon their own national culture; others may be timid when communicating with foreigners. The middle school students are in the period of forming their worldviews; they may experience every cultural shock without the ability of distinguishing. Once the improper cultural awareness is formed, it will be difficult to be changed, so cultivating their cultural awareness is especially important. In English teaching,

teachers should make the students be aware that every culture has its features so as to understand cultural difference, correctly recognize the home culture and absorb the excellent part of foreign culture, and treat cultures with objective and reasonable attitude.

(c) The changing roles of teachers

Traditionally, the role of teachers is fixed and non-negotiable. The teachers mainly act as a knowledge transmitter and a problem-solver. With the goals of English teaching redefined in the Curriculum Standards (Ministry of Education, 2001, 2011), teachers are now required to play a range of roles that are flexible and negotiable, such as a good organizer, a loving guide, a patient listener, an active participant and a useful facilitator. The primary role of teachers is to create a relaxed condition for students to learn effectively, cognitively and communicatively. Teachers should create a friendly and negotiable classroom atmosphere, which is non-threatening to the students in order to meet the students' affective needs and accept all kinds of ideas and be tolerant to the students' errors. The teachers should exercise as little control as possible over students, try to develop an environment that will motivate students to participate in classroom activities and work cooperatively on group tasks. Meanwhile, they should encourage students to learn to adapt to more individual responsibility for their work and build up their confidence and enjoyment in what they are learning. Teachers should guide the students to explore what they are going to learn, develop the students' creativity and initiative to help them construct the new knowledge upon their previous knowledge. They should draw the students' attention from what and how the cultural information is provided to how the students' ability to gain knowledge about culture is developed by themselves. Teachers should try to regard themselves as a guide for gaining access to knowledge about the target culture, not only the source for the students' knowledge. Knowledge is constructed on the base of learners' previous knowledge just as the theory of Constructivism proposes.

(d) Ways out for cultivating students' cultural awareness

Cultural awareness is the sensitivity and insight to the native and target culture (Tomalin & Susan, 1998). The cultivation of cultural awareness, which is the goal of culture teaching in junior English teaching, should be conducted in the whole process of English teaching. Culture teaching has mainly 2 levels, namely, the level of cultural knowledge and the level of culture understanding. The cultivation of cultural awareness should be based on the level of cultural knowledge, but not be limited to it, and arrive at the level of culture understanding beyond the level of cultural knowledge. Thus, cultivating students' cultural awareness in junior English teaching practice should involve both the cultural knowledge in the textbook and some related cultural knowledge to promote students up to the

level of cultural understanding, the students should be encouraged to experience the target culture actively in out-of-class activities to develop their awareness of the target culture and affect the students' inner change.

There are really difficulties in the practice of cultivating cultural awareness, but if the students and teachers can change their minds to culture teaching, apply suitable approaches, for example, some suggested in this thesis, and integrate culture teaching with English teaching, the goals of cultivating the students' cultural awareness will all be attained.

According to the reality of China and the basic goal of ELT (Ministry of Education, 2001, 2011), the cultivation of students' cultural awareness should at least include the following four elements: the awareness of cultural equality, the awareness of cultural understanding, the awareness of cultural spreading and the awareness of cultural introjections. These four elements of cultural awareness are not separable from each other but interrelated, so in the process of cultivating students' cultural awareness, it would be very beneficial to stick to these elements.

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