

The Application of English-Chinese Comparison to Culture Teaching

APPLICATION DE LA COMPARAISON ANGLAIS-CHINOIS A L'ENSEIGNEMENT DE CULTURE

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Abstract: This thesis is a tentative endeavor to employ English-Chinese comparison to culture teaching so as to help English learners overcome negative transfer from their native culture and learn more idiomatic English.

Key words: the English language, the Chinese language, comparison, culture teaching

Résumé: Cet essai tente d'employer la comparaison anglais-chinois à l'enseignement de culture afin d'aider les apprenants de l'anglais à vaincre les transferts négatifs de leur culture native à la culture anglaise et à apprendre davantage un anglais impeccable.

Mots-Clés: langue anglaise, langue chinoise, comparaison, enseignement de culture

1. INTRODUCTION

Language and culture are inseparable. Language is an integral component of culture. The ultimate goal of EFL teaching is to make learners achieve better intercultural communicative competence, a fuller understanding of the target people, their way of life and their society as well. Therefore, in addition to linguistic knowledge itself, language learning and teaching should involve corresponding sociocultural background knowledge of the target language, and aim at conquering the interference from one's own culture and habits.

2. THEORETICAL BASIS

At the very beginning of 20th century, linguists began to compare English and Chinese and gain an insight into both the homogeneity and heterogeneity of the two languages. The early contributors involve Ma Jianzhong, Ya Fu, Wang Li, etc. It is their great efforts and findings that establish a theoretical framework and practical foundation for the later study and application in teaching. Since 1970s, linguists and foreign language specialists employ gradually the principles and findings of comparison of English and Chinese to guide foreign language and culture teaching. As famous linguist Lu

Shuxiang (1982) indicates, by comparison only, the characteristics of Chinese and English are revealed and easier to learn and teach. Lado (1957:1), at the beginning of his influential work, *Linguistics across Cultures*, quotes words of Fries: "The best textbook is like this — its standing point should describe scientifically the second language learned by students; On the other hand, it provides a paralleled description of the first language of students and compare them attentively." So, it is utterly necessary for English teachers to draw a systematic English-Chinese comparison in their English language and culture teaching.

3. CAUSES

Nevertheless, after having received several years of formal English teaching, students still remain deficient in the ability to actually use the language, and to understand its use in normal communication. Most students lack the ability of using proper language in proper situation. It is mainly caused by different cultural background of the people in contact. Interlocutors from different cultural background are apt to share different beliefs, manifest different behaviors, and no two interactants have the identical perception of the social world. Hence, there are conflicts of values between the different cultures and different assessments of relative power. Different cultures have different culture

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conventions. Different language has different language conventions. When a person learns and uses English, he is confronted with the problem of cultural inappropriateness. As Lado (1957:2) states, individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture —both productively when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture, and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the culture as practiced by the natives. For example, once a Chinese student met with a foreigner who was lost in his way back to his hotel. The student said that he happened to go in the same direction and if he followed him he could show him the right way back. When they went on, the Chinese student tried to break the ice by a questionnaire:

“Where are you from?

What’s your name?

How old are you?

Where are you going?

Just follow me.”

The questionnaire sounds very kind to a Chinese ear and the five sentence structures are correct. However, as it happened in this case, it is a pragmatic fault, because it made the foreigner nervous and mistakes the student for a policeman in plain clothing.

Thus, the comparisons of the English language with the Chinese language concern with not only their structural differences but also their cultural differences. It is very imperative for English teachers to apply English-Chinese comparison to culture teaching in order to help English learners overcome negative transitive transfer from their native culture. As Byram mentions, “ There is a central role for comparative method in language and culture teaching... Comparison, and especially contrast, is a means of helping learners to realize that this process will not do justice to the reality lived by other people, to their culture and cultural values and meanings (Byram & Morgan, 1994:43).

4. APPLICATION OF ENGLISH-CHINESE COMPARISON TO CULTURE TEACHING

4.1 A comparison of English-Chinese lexicons

Language attaches particular words and phrases to the most frequent and most important cultural meanings. Each culture attaches a great variety of associations to its lexical items, the meanings of which remain deep in the connotations which one can’t get from the superficial conceptual meanings. To compare the

difference associative meanings on the same words in English and in Chinese while teaching vocabulary is utterly necessary for students’ full understanding of the words as well as the texts. In the textbook *College English* for non-English majors, we can find some culture-loaded words which students can not fully understand. For example, in Unit 3 of Book 1 “The Present”, the maid of the old lady gave her a bunch of marigolds as a birthday present. Students assume that the maid purposely selects “marigold” to express wishes of happiness and long life to the old lady like marigold’s implication in Chinese culture. But, this kind of understanding is just opposite to what the author of the article intends to mean. The original meaning of “marigold” is “the flower for the virgin Mary”, the flower which was dedicated to Mary who was in deep sorrow for the death of Jesus. So, in English culture the implication of “marigold” is “grief”. The author of the article selects this word to symbolize the sad and lonely life of the old lady, which contributes effectively to the theme of the article.

4.2 A comparison of English-Chinese idioms

Idioms are combinations of words, the meaning of which can’t be determined from the meanings of the parts. Idioms are culture-specific expressions; they contain profound cultural connotations. Because of their close identification with a particular culture, idioms usually carry more impact than non-idiomatic expressions. Idioms are connected with historical background, economic life, geographical surroundings, customs, religion and value orientations of a culture. They depend very much on a specific social or ecological setting. So they are just like a mirror which can obviously reflect the characteristics of a culture. Comparing different cultures of English and Chinese through idioms in teaching may prove to be quite valuable in promoting learners’ cultural awareness of history, geography, convention and cognition.

For the reasons of history, custom and value systems, different cultures have difference ways to express the same meanings, and use different vehicles in the figures of speech. For example, in unit 6 of Book II in *College English*, there is a phrase “have butterflies in one’s stomach.” This phrase is used to indicate the feeling of nervousness, and in Chinese we have a two-part allegorical saying which expresses the same meaning. In explaining this phrase, teachers may generalize and compare some other similar idioms like the following:

In English	In Chinese
drink like a <i>fish</i>	drink like a <i>cow</i>
as strong as <i>horse</i>	as strong as <i>cow</i>
as slippery as <i>eel</i>	as slippery as <i>loach</i>
like <i>mushrooms</i>	like <i>bamboo shoots</i>
fish in the <i>air</i>	moon in the <i>water</i>

All these idioms reflect the different associations on the same images in different culture. Without a careful comparison on these idioms, students may be completely at sea when coming across them in reading, and they can hardly be expected to fully understand the material.

4.3 A comparison of English-Chinese background information

To provide cultural background information for students in intensive reading course proves to be quite necessary. Unit 10 of Book II in *College English* gives an account of the "Profits of Praise". In explaining the text, teachers might as well make a comparison between the different attitudes towards praise in both Chinese and English cultures, and point out the fact that it is a great difference in value system that causes the different responses to praise. Some eastern cultures tend to value the modesty maxim much more highly than western countries. That is why Chinese are inclined to deny the compliment by saying "No, not at all good", while the westerners usually say "Thank you very much" when complimented. According to Albert, a value system

"represents what is expected or hoped for, required or forbidden. It is not a report of actual conduct but is judged and sanctions applied" (quoted in Samovar, Porter & Stefani, 2000:60). Thus, it is quite necessary for teachers to compare the western value systems with the eastern value systems, which are the main obstacles to students in reading comprehension. This may help to sensitize learners to cultural differences so that they can learn not to judge and interpret the behavior of the people from difference cultures according to their own cultural standard.

5. CONCLUSION

Due to the solid theoretical foundation and an urgent practical need, English-Chinese comparison should be placed on an important position in culture teaching. Although the waters of innovative course seldom run smooth, and we will find ourselves facing with so many difficulties in practice, we still hold that the application of this method to culture teaching will be necessary as well as valuable and need to be judged and replenished in the teaching practice.

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