

## On Cultivating Intercultural Awareness of High School Students in English Teaching

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### Abstract

This paper emphasizes the crucial role of culture teaching in senior high school English teaching and intends to explain how to effectively promote the target culture learning and cultivate high school students' cultural awareness in a China.

**Key words:** Culture; Cultural awareness; High school English teaching; Cultural awareness cultivation

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## 1. CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION

### 1.1 Connotation of Culture

Culture, in the view of etymology, it comes from the Latin word "colere", meaning "cultivating" and growing. It is the exact term that has been widely employed in social science and has different shades of meaning in different disciplines and context. Edward Burnet Tylor, the forerunner of cultural anthropologists, put forward a definition of culture in his book "Primitive Culture and Anthropology" in 1871, defining it as "Culture, or civilization, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, 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". In the eyes of anthropologist, culture means the total way of life of a

people. As for the psychologist, culture is a term used to describe generalized behavioral responses, which have a foundation in psychological processes. The founder of intercultural communication, Edward T. Hall, defined that culture is communication and communication is culture; in the field of foreign language education, scholar regarded culture is "with a big C and a small". According to Allen and Valette, culture with a big "C" focuses on "the sum total of a people's achievement and contributions to civilization: art, music, literature, architecture, technology, scientific discoveries and philosophy" and "culture with a small c" includes

the behavior patterns of the life style of people: when and what they eat, how they make a living, the way they organize their society, the attitudes they express towards friends and members of their families, how they act in different situations, which expressions they use to show approval and disapproval, the traditions they must observe, and so on.

### 1.2 Characteristics of Culture

Opinions vary from the characteristics of culture are in discussion. According to the analysis of many scholars, the characteristics of culture can be briefly summarized as follows:

(a) Culture is learned

The term "enculturation", which usually takes place through interaction, observation, and imitation, denotes the total activity of learning one's culture. Members of a culture have learned their patterns of behavior and ways of thinking since infancy until most of them become internalized and habitual. The cultural learning can also be either conscious or unconscious.

(b) Culture is systemic

As all independent system, culture consists of subsystems with specific function. Different standards can divide culture into a different system. The simplest example is the two broad categories—material culture and spiritual culture.

(c) Culture is dynamic

It is the accumulation in the evolution and expansion of human history. Culture cannot be formed in a short time, namely, it has certain stability when it forms; conversely, cultures are constantly being confronted with ideas and other conditions changing, in this sense, culture changed from time to time. In a word, culture is relatively stable, and its variability is absolute.

(d) Culture is inheritable

As Richard Brislin (1993) said, "if there are values considered central to a society that have existed for many years, these must be transmitted from generation to another". Culture develops as a continuous process, which predecessors' knowledge, the belief, the values, the way of behavior and so forth transmit. Valdes even indicated that culture would be disappear if there is any break in the learning chain.

In the field of foreign language education in China, culture can be classified into two levels: overt culture and covert culture. The former refers to those visible ones, such as art, architecture, village, geography, etc. it is the descriptive framework of the national cultural entirety; the latter is invisible, including custom, thought, and value, etc. it is the cognitive orientation of the culture.

### 1.3 Communication

Communication is the word from Latin "economic" that means common and share. In the sense, "common" and "share" are the first step in communication. At the same time, they are also the purpose of communication. Through communication, people can gain more "shared" things in "common". Samovar and Porter (1994, p.8) defined communication in this way: "Communication is a dynamic and systemic process in which meanings are created and reflected in human interaction with symbols." It has eight ingredients: source, encoding, message, channel, receiver, decoding, receiver response and feedback. Encoding and decoding are of special significance in intercultural communication. For instance, a message is encoded in one culture but is decoded in another, thus misunderstanding in intercultural communication took place. In brief, the characteristics of communication can be concluded that: Communication is a dynamic process, not only symbolic but also systematic, both synchronic and diachronic.

### 1.4 The Relationship Among Culture, Communication and Language

Language and culture are closely related. Language is not only a part of culture but also the carrier of culture, it is affected by culture and reflects every step of its development. When it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture. Carter (1996) argued that "A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which the members of a speech community communicate interact and transmit their culture." Language expresses, embodies and symbolizes

cultural reality (Kramsch, 2000). Language, as a system of symbols for human communication and cultural transmission, is an indispensable part of culture and have profound effect in it; on the other hand, language, which is influenced and shaped by culture, reflects culture. From the definition of culture, it is a kind of knowledge that can be learned, transmitted, perceived through communication. Therefore, culture and communication will work together to make people fully understand others and escaping from culture shock.

## 2. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

Hill (2006) argued that intercultural understanding "encompasses both cognitive and affective domains." The cognitive aspect of it comprises knowledge about their own culture and others as well as the similarities and differences between cultures. Lustig and Koester had given a more comprehensive definition

Intercultural communication is a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process in which his degree of difference between people is large and important enough to create dissimilar interpretations and expectations about what are regarded as competent behaviors that should be used to create shared meanings. (Lustig & Koester, 1993)

Another related concept is Intercultural sensitivity, which was put forward by Straffon (2003), indicating a person's affective response to intercultural differences. The aim of intercultural communication is to enable people from different cultures to understand each other and to reach more "common" and "share", to eliminate the obstacles in the process. Intercultural competence involves the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from other cultures (Perry & Southwell, 2011). Lusting and Koester (2006) argued that intercultural competence is related to the following dimensions: Knowledge, motivation, skills and behaviors. Arasaratnam (2009) defined Intercultural communication competence as "the ability to effectively and appropriately communicate with people from different cultures". Arasaratnam and Doerfel's (2005) argued that five qualities: Empathy, intercultural experience/training, motivation, global attitude, and ability to listen well in conversation are related to intercultural communication competence.

## 3. IMPORTANT ROLE OF CULTURE IN ENGLISH TEACHING

Apparently, culture is closely related to language and influent it, so teaching English well demands more than merely teaching phonetics, vocabularies, and grammars. In fact, Chinese English teachers have been traditionally inclined to put more emphasize on grammar and

vocabulary ignoring the culture part in their teaching. Valette (1977) argued that a language course demands that the learner should come as close as possible to the people who use language, the way they live, what they do, think and dream, because the reality of people and places constitutes the specific contribution of a culture syllabus.

In the information era, the importance of understanding the target culture and developing intercultural communicative competence is an increasingly acknowledged aspect in the teaching and learning of foreign languages. Chen (2001) hold that the teaching of culture and teaching of language are naturally integrated by focusing on language use in communication, also reveals the evolution of three main models (additive, integrative and comprehensive) in the teaching of language and culture, introduces and analyzes many effective strategies of teaching language and culture and provides various examples to demonstrate the culture teaching methods used in practice.

## 4. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINESE CULTURE AND WEST CULTURE

Since culture is important in giving a language its characteristics, cultural differences have great impact on the communication between people from different cultures. Oriental culture with its Sino-Tibetan languages and Western culture with its Indo-European languages, differ from each other in many aspects.

### 4.1 Different Systems of Value

Respecting the old and taking care of the young is regarded as a tradition in China. Elderly people like to be called "Lao(old) Liu", for example, from which they feel they are much respected and greatly satisfied. Young people show respect to the old by listening to the old talking because they believe that the old person is wise and experienced, so according to the Chinese tradition, the term of "elderly people" is accepted by all the people. Conversely, such expression is not popular in western society due to their attitude towards the old. In their eyes, old age is not a happy time, which means they do not be independent, stay young and thin, or get special honor, so even an old man over sixty would not like to be addressed as "old people" or even the "elderly people", what he prefers is the term "senior citizen" or "golden age".

Due to the different conventional concept of value, people have different attitudes towards life. Chinese people support well by the belief of cooperation while the English-speaking people tend to compete more with individualism in mind.

Individualism, spelled out by 17<sup>th</sup> English philosophy John Lock, refers to the doctrine that individual is unique, special, completely differently from all other individuals and it is the basis of human nature. Westerners believe that

individual's identity and personality should be recognized and reinforced. The essence of Individualism is the pursuit of personal happiness and achievements, which are highly valued, earnestly believed and well appreciated as a fundamental social virtue. However, the term "individualism" for Chinese people are not the case, it symbolizes "selfishness", which deviates from its original meaning. Chinese people, on the other hand, they have been instructed to sacrifice individual interest whenever necessary. The philosophy of Confucianism, which has gone through thousands of years of perfection and purification, centers on collectivism. Collective cultures lay emphasis on cooperation among group members and believe that individuals should attribute their success to the collective effort of the staff in a group or community.

### 4.2 Different Word Connotations

The same word may have different meaning to people from different cultures. For example, Chinese and westerners have dissimilar preference of animals. "Dragon" the totem image in Chinese history, is always considered as a deity within conceivable power and brings people good luck. In the feudal periods, dragon even was a symbol of the emperor. Chinese people called themselves as the descendants of dragon, and people who were born in the lunar year of dragon feel very proud. But in western culture, "dragon" is a crocodile that symbolizes evil, making people horridly, and the phrase "the old dragon" means a monster. When westerners describe someone as a dragon that means the person is arrogant and domineering. When the Chinese idiom "Wang zi cheng long" is translated into English as "to hope that one's son will become a dragon", it will make westerners wonder that what kind of people parents expect their children to be.

Cultural differences are also evident in different implications associated with the same color. Color "red" indicates happy events, joyful occasions, and delightful things. In the traditional Chinese wedding ceremony, the bride wears red dress from head to toe: her head covered with a red cloth to express good wishes of her new life. Besides that, "red" is also related to success and victories, the phrase "kan men hong", "hong hong huo huo" are good cases in point. Oppositely, in English color "red" become the sign of terror, fight, and blood, and is frequently associated with anger and crimes: "a red battle" means a fierce, cruel struggle, "red rag" refers to something that excites violent anger. Take "white" for another example. In Chinese "white" relates to sorrow, misfortune. In a funeral, people wear in white with white flower on the breast to mourn for the dead person. However, in English "white" indicates nobility, justice, purity. In American wedding, bride wears in white, symbolizing the pure and perpetual loyalty and love between husband and wife. The phrase "white war" refers to a war during which no man bleeds and "white lie" means a lie without evil intention.

## 5. IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGLISH TEACHING IN HIGH SCHOOL

The development of foreign language teaching in China is synchronous with that in the West. The mainstream teaching methodologies in FLT, including the grammar translation method, the direct method and the communicative method emphasizes language skills more than cultural study, the intercultural communicative competence. Obviously, acquisition of language skills simply cannot satisfy the need for intercultural communication. Language learning may not be sufficient for culture learning; disequilibrium need not lead to dissatisfaction (and thus an attempt to learn); cultural contact does not necessarily lead to competence and cultural contact does not always lead to significant reduction of stereotypes (Bennett, 2008). Foreign language teaching includes the cultivation of learners' language competence, pragmatic competence, social cultural competence and intercultural communicative competence and social cultural knowledge is the most relevant factor to students' Intercultural Communication Competence. Therefore, it is necessary to increase the cultural factors in English courses, especially in high school English class when the students have strong desire to acquire language knowledge. The following methods can be adopted in Culture teaching. Firstly, introduce the background information of target culture. In English practices, especially reading and listening, profound background knowledge will help a lot. English texts include the writing types, all kinds of subjects, such as politics, economy, industry, history, region, customs, social sciences and arts, which forms a block in readers' understanding of the text. If students have knowledge about the customs, behavior patterns, important historical events, and geographical conditions and so on, they would be able to predict extra information from the text and help them understand it better. Therefore, teachers can add cultural factors in their class to enrich students' background information storage about English-speaking countries. Secondly, introduce some cultural connotation words. The striking cultural differences, both in terms of conceptual meaning and cultural meaning between English and Chinese language at the lexical level, might be great impediments for Chinese students in English learning. Thirdly, Enhance students autonomous learning competence. From the cognitive aspect, students need to be aware that learning is a passive activity, which requires them consciously adjusts their behaviors. Besides, the role of integrative motivation is the crucial requirement for successful language learning. Hereby, teachers are required to improve their own cultural awareness and optimize teaching methods so that they will not be limited in the traditional English teaching methodology, adding cultural factors in the teaching materials, class, and extra-class activities to stimulate students' learning interests.

## CONCLUSION

Language and culture evolved together and have been dependent through their history. Culture plays an extremely important role in English teaching. Illustrating cultural differences may help greatly to raise learners' intercultural awareness for it is the main barriers to successful intercultural communication. Therefore, English teacher should play a positive role in cultivating students' intercultural awareness and assist students to develop intercultural communication competence.

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