

## On a Contrastive Method of Teaching Culture in ELT Classroom for College-Level Students

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Received 20 September 2012; accepted 24 November 2012

### Abstract

It has become an agreement that language teaching is reinforced when ESL teachers have an awareness of incorporating culture teaching in the classroom. Language and culture are intertwined. In any language, it is more than just words that convey meaning. All cultures have their preferences, practices, values and traditions that interwoven with the language. From the humanistic perspective, the education of different cultures aids students in getting to know different people, which is necessary for understanding and respecting other peoples and their ways of life; therefore contrastive study between the two languages and cultures is imperative for ESL teachers. Students would master the second language better, if teachers have an adequate understanding of both native and target culture and actively spread it. The aim of language teaching is more than the manipulation of syntax and lexicon but to foster well-rounded students that can understand and respect other cultures at the same time spread Chinese culture to promote the communication and interaction between China and western world. In terms of methods of teaching culture in college-level ESL classroom, it would be more effective that teachers design a series of students "hands on" activities. Teachers can make those cultural features an explicit topic of discussion rather than being taught implicitly, imbedded in the linguistic forms.

**Key words:** Language and culture; Contrastive study; Culture instruction activities

CHU Xiaonan (2012). On a Contrastive Method of Teaching Culture in ELT Classroom for College-Level Students. *Higher Education of Social Science*, 3(3), 22-25. Available from <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/hess/article/view/j.hess.1927024020120303.Z914> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.hess.1927024020120303.Z914>

The problem is quite common in China that a college student still cannot communicate fluently with foreigners after 10 years study of English. The reasons are many and various. Lack of cultural knowledge is one of them. Many students of mine used to have the question that after "Hello" what they should say, though they can speak grammatically correct sentences. It would sound uncomfortable or even offending for an unfamiliar foreigner if the student adopts the Chinese typical way of greeting "Where are you heading for?" or "What are you going to do?" Many foreigners do complain that their privacy is often offended by those Chinese "warmhearted" questions, such as "How much would your husband earn?"; "How many children do you have?" Thanks to most English teachers' increasing cultural awareness, Chinese students rarely ask "How old are you?" nowadays. It is the culture differences that cause obstacles in intercultural communication. Linguists and anthropologists have long recognized that the forms and uses of a given language reflect the cultural values of the society in which the language is used. Linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language (Krasner, 1999). Language is the most representative element in any culture that shapes people's outlook of the whole world. Only in light of the pattern of behavior practiced by native people can ELS students fully understand the second language. In other words, knowledge of its codes of behavior of another people is inseparable in the

intercultural communication in the target language for a foreign language student. "We can predict and describe the patterns that will cause difficulty in learning, and those that will not cause difficulty, by comparing systematically the language and culture to be learned with the native language and culture of the student." (Lado, 1957)

What is more, from a humanistic aspect, the study of different cultures aids students in getting to know different people, which is a necessary proluision to understanding and respecting other peoples and their ways of life. It broadens students' horizons when language education combined with the instruction of the similarities and differences in the life of various cultural groups. Nowadays, most of the Chinese college students live in a monolingual and monoculture environment, who are prone to draw premature and inappropriate judgments due to the gap of cultural knowledge. This can inhibit the learning enthusiasm and even cause them to hold the view that the foreign people whose language they are learning as very strange and even ill-mannered. There are mainly two current views on language and culture teaching. One emphasized on the impart of cultural facts, which are composed of mines of information, i.e., immersion in literature and the arts, and the superficial information, which may focus on the festivals, customs, habits, and everyday life (Kramersch, 1993). All that it provides is just facts without the deep understanding of the meanings behind. The other standpoint, taking a step forward, embeds target culture into a known framework and establishes connections between one's own and the target country. However, this approach also has its limitation. Without analysis and understanding in depth, the students who have already acquired their own Chinese pattern of assumptions, beliefs and mindsets are apt to favor one over other groundlessly. This paper is dedicated to improving the later approach to integrating culture into ELT classroom.

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## CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

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As a matter of fact, the idea of teaching culture is nothing new to second language teachers. As early as sixties, Nostrand's (1966) paper on "describing and teaching the sociocultural context of a foreign language and literature" put forward the idea as a challenge by suggesting two educational purposes of FL teaching: "cross-cultural communication and understanding". To date, the development of the social sciences resulted in a more widespread understanding of culture, and a rising focus on the interdisciplinary study with anthropology and sociology. More and more linguistics and scholars in other disciplines pay special attention on the relationship between language and culture. Many ethnographers such as Buttjes (1990) have tried to present that "language and culture are from the start inseparably connected" (Buttjes,

1990, p. 55). As the evidence, he summarized: 1. Every society sets up the ways in which children are involved in particular situations, and this, in turn, influences the form, the content and the function of children's utterances; 2. the primary concern of the person who takes care of the child is not with grammatical input, but with the transmitting of sociocultural knowledge; 3. the children also acquire the pattern of behaviors and the kinesics of his or her culture, in addition to language (ibid).

Culture, undoubtedly, is complex. It is multi-layered and multifaceted. Some scholars have likened it to an iceberg of which only the top is visible while a massive part remains unobservable below the surface of the water. Others have compared culture to an onion (Geert Hofstede, 1991, p. 1) with its many layers. After one layer is peeled, another layer lies beneath, waiting to be examined. Both metaphors powerfully illustrate the complexity of culture.

Considering the active role of people in their culture, Patrick R. Moran defined culture as: Culture is the evolving way of life of a group of persons, consisting of a shared set of practices associated with a shared set of products, based upon a shared set of perspectives on the world, and set within specific social contexts. (Moran, 2004)

Byram (1988) argued that language has no function independent of the context in which it is used, thus language always refers to something beyond itself: the cultural context. In an important contribution to the discussion of the cultural component of language teaching, Claire Kramersch differentiated two definitions of culture, one from the humanities, and the other from the social sciences. The one focuses on artifacts of everyday life, and the mechanisms for their reproduction and preservation through history. (Kramersch, 1996) The other refers to "the attitudes and beliefs, ways of thinking, behaving and remembering shared by members of that community" (Kramersch, 1996).

Since language is a direct display of culture, a society cannot be totally appreciated or understood without knowledge of its language. The other element of culture is the history of civilization. Traditionally representing the "culture" element in ELT classroom, it includes history, literature, geography, and achievements in the sciences and the arts. Since they represent the heritage of a nation and thus must be aquatinted by the students who expect to understand a new target language and culture.

As McKay (2003) advocated that culture affected language teaching in two ways: linguistic and pedagogical. Linguistically, it has an influence on the semantic, pragmatic, and discourse levels of the language. Pedagogically, it impacts the choice of the language materials because language materials with cultural content and the cultural-based teaching methodology are to be taken into consideration while deciding upon the language materials.

## CONTRASTIVE LINGUISTICS AND CONTRASTIVE STUDY OF CHINESE AND WESTERN CULTURE

Contrastive linguistics (showing in what ways the two respective languages differ, in order to help in the solution of practical problems, e.g. translation), since its appearance by Robert Lado in the 1950s, has often been linked to aspects of applied linguistics, e.g., to avoid interference errors in foreign-language learning (Wikipedia).

Contrastive linguistics has been applied in translation course for many years. Belonging to different language families with great differences, the Chinese language and the English language do share some similarities; for example, “subject + Predicate + object” is a basic sentence pattern in both languages, while there are many differences on every level of the languages. Those contrastive studies arouse the interests of the students to ponder these matters further by themselves, thus enhancing their translation ability.

The task of the cultural anthropologists, linguists and the sociologists is to identify these differences develop materials based on those differences; the task of the foreign language teacher is to be conscious of these differences and to be ready to teach them; the task of the student is to learn them. The study cannot be understood by a purely linguistic study and rejected by many as an applied discipline. In spite of the criticism of applied contrastive linguistics, contrastive studies were continued, and their scope was broadened. Although Lado included a comparison of cultures, early contrastive studies focused on what has been described as micro linguistic contrastive analysis. With the broadening of linguistic studies, contrastive studies became increasingly concerned with culture contrastive analysis.

Contrastive Culturology is newly coined. Yang Zijian's paper *On the Establishment of Contrastive Culturology* (1994) advocates the necessity of establishing Contrastive Culturology in China to foster intercultural communication and develop Chinese culture. As a matter of fact, the contrastive study of western and Chinese culture can date back to more than a century ago. Most of the studies are done by Chinese scholars (such as Liang Suming, Fang Dongmei, Qian Zhongshu, Jin Kemu, Huang Jianzhong, etc.), due to the dominance of western culture and the deficient introduction of Chinese culture. However, those studies have been fruitful and given ESL teachers abundance resources. Contrastive method should also be brought to ELS classroom. Forasmuch as culture is so pervasive and subtle, we often take native culture for granted and have some stereo type of other cultures. The comparison facilitate the understanding of other culture as well as instill the students the knowledge which part of Chinese culture can carry forward and which part should be improved through learning the other culture.

## CULTURE TEACHING ACTIVITIES IN ESL CLASSROOM

Without the study of culture, foreign language instruction is inaccurate and incomplete. In many regards, culture has been taught implicitly, imbedded in the linguistic forms that EL students are learning. To lead students being aware of the cultural features manifested in the language, teachers can make those cultural features an explicit topic of discussion and provide well-prepared and in-depth analysis on it. Culture is a dynamic evolving way of life instead of static and unchangeable facts, which made it really difficult to give a panorama of every culture. Foreign language teachers can begin with the comparison of different dimensions and try to help the students promote their culture general ability. Wang Yuanhua (1986) said though Cultural development consists of constant changes along the history, there must be some common nationality traits unchangeable and continuous. There are four dimensions given by Wang Yuanhua (1986):

- Manifestation of national creativity. Toynbee argues that the civilization is the outcome of challenges and responses, and creation is the outcome of an encounter, that genesis is a product of interaction. Different nation may response differently in front of the challenge. That is the unique manifestation of its national creativity which is viewed as one of national cultural traits.

- Common national psychology
- Thinking mode
- Values

The dimensions present accumulation and tradition of each culture. To begin with, teachers may adopt a general view to contrast the two cultures, for example, referring to Western mode of thinking, Qian Xuesen (1986) said: “Abstractive thinking seems to be linear or branch-like, while referring to Chinese mode”, Shen Xiaolong (1990) said: “This is a circular dialectic mode of thinking with a strong plastic, flexible and stochastic nature”. Western medicine examines parts of the body through tests and X-rays while Chinese medicine puts emphasis on general physical condition which can be examined through pulse, complexion, tongue coating, etc..

Cultural activities and objectives should be carefully organized and incorporated into lesson plans to enrich and inform the teaching content. In terms of design the teaching activity, ELS teachers can lecture or present cultural material and engage the students to discuss or assign them to compare the two cultures in respects of Core values, World view, Outlook on Arts, Outlook on time, Modes of thinking and Linguistic expression. Some teachers and researchers have noticed it effective to present students with ideas or objects that are typical to the target culture but are unfamiliar to the students. Thus the students are given background information and clues which related to the objects and ideas so that they can incorporate the new information into their own world

view. With the appropriate guidance, the students act as anthropologists, exploring and understanding the target culture in relation to their own. In this manner, students achieve a level of empathy, appreciating that there is its own coherence in each cultural pattern of behavior. As for those similar norms and traditions, teachers can ask students to illustrate the similarities and differences of them and try to explain the deep reason. For instance, discussion of common proverbs in the target language could emphasize how the proverbs are different from or similar to proverbs in the students' native language and how differences might reflect their respective historical and cultural background. For some proverbs, we can find exact equivalence in Chinese, such as silence is golden; the palest ink is better than the best memory, while some do not have equivalence in Chinese. No one can deny that the translation do enrich Chinese. Which of them are easily accepted by Chinese, and which are not. EL Teachers can combine those language forms with thought-provoking questions. It has provided a way to explore culture in addition to analyze the stereotypes about and misperceptions of the culture, as well as a way for students to explore the values that are often represented in the proverbs of their native culture. During the process students get to know the target culture by reference of Chinese traditional and general culture.

It is also important to help students understand that cultures are not monolithic. A variety of appropriate behaviors are possible for any type of interaction in any given culture. Teachers must allow students to observe and explore cultural interactions from their own perspectives to enable them to find their own voices in the second language speech community.

Using authentic sources from the native speech community helps to engage students in authentic cultural experiences. Sources can include films, television shows, and news broadcasts; magazines; Web sites; and newspapers, restaurant menus, and other printed materials. Teachers should adapt their use of those materials to meet the age and language proficiency level of the college students. Film is a frequent choice, since it provides a more current and comprehensive ways to encapsulate many aspects of a culture. Literary texts are often carrying a wealth of cultural information and evoke memorable effects for readers. With specific goals in mind, texts that are elaborately selected for a given group of students can be very helpful in aiding students to gain insight into a culture. The teacher can engage the students in discussion of the cultural norms illustrated in them and what these norms might represent the values of the culture.

Culture capsules, developed by Taylor and Sorenson (1961), are one of the best-established and best-known

methods for teaching culture, which are generally prepared out of class by a student but presented during class time in 5 or 10 minutes. It is a brief description of certain aspect of the target language culture followed by contrasting information from the students' native language culture.

When integrating culture into ELT classroom, besides providing the students with some terms in order to talk about culture, what teachers should always have in mind is to raise their students' awareness of their own culture and target culture, which is helpful for developing the understanding and empathy for other people and culture. Teachers should also foster intellectual and objective views for intercultural analysis that is helpful to develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture in terms of supporting evidence. What is more, the cultivation of an understanding of the culture from an insider's perspective allows student accurately appreciating it. All these are better carried out in a systematical and structured way and adjusted in time according to the students' feedback.

Foreign language education should be a humanistic pursuit with the intention to sensitize students to other cultures, to respect for the differences among peoples and appreciation of similarities among them. Thus, culture must be fully incorporated as a vital component of language teaching. The contrastive method with sufficient resources and cooperative learning environments can bring a contextual language and culture knowledge into college-level ESL classroom with the hope that it will keep students motivated and will result in positive attitudes, greater awareness, and academic success.

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