

## The Application of Culture Comparison in English Teaching for Chinese Mongolian Students

ZHAO Lili<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup> Department of Foreign Language Teaching, Inner Mongolia University for the Nationalities, Tongliao, China.

\* Corresponding author.

Received 20 March 2013; accepted 20 May 2013

### Abstract

The Chinese Mongolian students are one of the ethnic minorities. They have specific folk features. Most of the Mongolian students haven't learned English before. Therefore, the particularity of their nationality and their poor English backgrounds determine the particularity of English teaching. From the aspects of social customs and nonverbal communication, I introduced culture comparison into English teaching. In this way, the teacher attempted to cultivate students' culture awareness and found some feasible teaching methods to improve students' command of English and thus enhance English teaching effect.

**Key words:** Culture comparison; Mongolian students; Social customs; Nonverbal communication; Teaching methods

ZHAO Lili (2013). The Application of Culture Comparison in English Teaching for Chinese Mongolian Students. *Higher Education of Social Science*, 4(3), 64-67. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/hess/article/view/j.hess.1923669720130403.1667>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.hess.1923669720130403.1667>

### INTRODUCTION

English teaching for Mongolian students has its particularity. In our university, the Mongolian students are mainly from Inner Mongolia and its surrounding areas such as Heilongjiang province and Jilin province. Many students are from rural areas, which are remote and backward. Their native language is Mongolian. Most of

the students' English proficiency is low, and even some of them only know a few English letters. Their characters have obvious folk features. However, they are bold and enthusiastic. And they are capable of singing and dancing. Besides, as ethnic minority, they are very cohesive. Different social backgrounds, and cultural backgrounds as well as their different English backgrounds decide the English teaching methods should be different. Effective and targeted teaching methods should be carried out to help the students improve their English proficiency. Therefore, the application of culture comparison is confirmed to be efficient in English teaching.

### 1. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURE TEACHING

According to the definition of culture given by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), culture is the knowledge acquainted by social life, while language is the knowledge system, which is acquainted by the inspiration of human's acquired social language environment. Language is the main part of culture, and it reflects its culture. It is nowadays a commonplace in language pedagogy to stress the importance of culture teaching and to say that language and culture are intertwined, and it is not possible to teach a language without culture, and culture is the necessary context for language use. Culture teaching derives from social and cultural anthropology, which aims to provide a comprehensive description of the way of life in a society. The main ideas of Hammerly's (1982) culture teaching goals are as follows: a) The development of interest and understanding toward the second culture; b) Understanding of cross-cultural differences; c) The understanding of intercultural institutions and differences; d) The development of an integrated view of the second culture; e) The development of empathy toward a second culture and its people.

Culture teaching provides context, without which language remains an empty code and lacks credibility from the learner's perspective. Culture teaching offers the opportunity for a carefully planned introduction to the new environment. Every country has its own living ways, customs, etiquette, ethnic psychology and traditional ideas. The ignorance of culture teaching can't help students master the language. Students can't cultivate their ability of language communication by learning mere language, leaving alone cross-cultural communication ability. Any language teaching without culture penetrated is tedious, and lacks vigor. Thus, it is important to cultivate the students' intercultural awareness. As Hanvey (1979) has illustrated, intercultural awareness refers to the sensitivity of participants to cultural factors during intercultural communication. This awareness is helpful to language patterns and strengthens the understanding of language output depending on the culture of the target language. Cultural awareness requires learners to have the skills of "empathy" and "cultural integration". Therefore, a comparison between two different cultures in class is deemed as a feasible way to improve language teaching.

### **1.1 Cultural Comparison of Social Customs Between Mongolian People and American People**

Take a teaching practice as an example. When a teacher talks about the holidays in America in class, he lists some famous holidays such as Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter, etc. on the one side of the blackboard. While on the other side, he lists some famous Chinese holidays such as Spring Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival etc., then ask the students to find out the similar holidays in China and America, and share the different ways of festival celebration with the others. Meanwhile, because the teaching targets are Mongolian students, their special ethnic features enlighten teachers to teach students from their cultural point of view. As for Mongolian students, their native language is Mongolian and there are some Mongolian customs and holidays. The teacher may take some typical Mongolian holidays such as Nadam Fair of the Mongolian people, Luban Festival and so on as examples. In this way, the Mongolian students will get the topics that they are familiar with and they will get interested in the topics. As a result, they may be eager to actively take part in the discussion or classroom activities.

In a party, when your friends asks "Would you like another piece of cake?", if you want to refuse the cake, you should say "No, thank you". And if you want it, you should say "Yes, please." This is different from Chinese, who will give an opposite answer out of courtesy. That is usually where misunderstanding occurs. Although the Mongolian people are very hospitable, there are many taboos that a foreigner should take care. When the guests are invited to the yurt, they must pay attention to their outfit. It is not acceptable to roll up their sleeves and tuck their shirts into their belts. The guests are not allowed to

bring the riding whip into the yurt. They should put the whip upright on the right hand of the yurt. Neither is it permitted to sit before the shrine after the guests entering the yurt. Otherwise, the owners will think the guests don't respect them and will give the guests the cold shoulder.

## **1.2 Comparison of Nonverbal Communication Concerning Culture**

### **1.2.1 The Connotation of Nonverbal Communication and Its Relationship Between Culture**

Nonverbal communication is "all those messages that people exchange beyond the words themselves." It is a system of symbols, signs and gestures developed and used by members of a culture to bring specific messages to expression. Nonverbal communication involves all nonverbal stimuli in a communication setting that is generated by both the source and his or her use of the environment and that has potential message value for the source or receiver. Nonverbal communication depends heavily on the actions, postures, movements and expressions of our bodies. Nonverbal communication includes body language (general appearance, dress, gestures, eye contact, facial expression, posture, touching), paralanguage (silence, pitch, volume) and environment language (space, time). Nonverbal communication serves the way of repeating, substituting, complementing, regulating and contradicting a conversation.

Nonverbal communication is an indispensable and inseparable part of human interaction and communication. Nonverbal language is a symbol system people use to exchange ideas, transmit messages, and express feelings. It has its own characteristics and functions. Nonverbal communication is universal, conventional, vague, and contextual. We use nonverbal communication to emphasize, repeat, complement, replace, regulate or even contradict our verbal behavior. Nonverbal communication also has the functions of expressing feelings and conveying interpersonal attitudes. Nonverbal communication system is the result of a certain social culture. It has its own cultural specific features. Nonverbal behavior may convey different meanings in different cultures. And because of their different culture backgrounds, communication rules or lack of understanding their cultures and nonverbal behaviors, neither of the communicators can understand each other. Nonverbal differences between cultures may hinder communicating. Thus, it is necessary for us to make some strategies to solve the problems that may happen in cross-cultural communication, for the important role that nonverbal actions play in human interaction.

### **1.2.2 The Significance of Nonverbal Communication in the Teaching Process**

Communication theorists assert that in face to face communication, less than 30% of communication is verbal in nature. Over 70% of communications take place nonverbally. Miller (1981) explains why humans use nonverbal communication in such a degree: (a)

Words have limitations. It is easier to explain the shape of something or give directions using hand gestures or head nods. (b) Nonverbal signals are powerful. They primarily express inner feelings and evoke immediate action or response. (c) Nonverbal messages are likely to be more genuine. Nonverbal behaviors are not as easily controlled as spoken words with the exception of some facial expressions and tone. (d) Nonverbal signals can express feelings too disturbing to state. These feelings of superiority or dislike or feelings of etiquette or rules may be prevented from being stated verbally.

Classroom teaching is a process of communication between teacher and student. Meanwhile, the classroom is a process of encoding and decoding verbal or nonverbal signals transmitted from both teacher and student. A survey shows that most teachers feel the nonverbal is a more effective tool for improving student-teacher relationship than verbal.

Most of the Mongolian students are from remote and rural areas. Because of its previous poor teaching conditions, the students' English base is not so good. Before they get into university, some of them even only know the basic English letters. Therefore, everything is fresh in college for them, especially the English teaching environment. They are curious and eager to learn. While they are shy, intimidated, and inferior in class due to their poor English base. Because of their different family backgrounds, cultural backgrounds and social backgrounds, they have various learning psychology. They need the teacher's understanding and encouragement. Since the Mongolian students only know a little English, too much verbal communication will only make them feel confused and hard. Nonverbal cues can provide more information that can't be perceived in teacher's verbal language. In order to make students understand the teacher's words, the teacher should speak mainly in English plus some Chinese explanations. Besides, in the teaching process, the teacher must depend on nonverbal communication to make himself understood. When the students can't understand the teacher's words, the teacher's nonverbal expression plays an important role. Nonverbal behaviors are the key factors to achieve a successful classroom teaching.

### 1.2.3 The Comparison of Nonverbal Communication Between Mongolian People and American People

We can see one difference from the example below. A poor mother led a hard life with her children. They had some money in the bank. When they met difficulties, they dared not take the money out. The following were the deficit of the dialogues between the mother and her children.

Mama pursed her lips "We do not" She reminded us gently," "want to have to go to the bank." We all shook our heads. In the dialogue, the phrase "shook our heads" means an agreement. American people use negative gestures to show their acknowledgements and affirmative

postures to express their denial, which is absolutely different from Chinese people. Besides, Chinese people would like to touch the new clothes someone is wearing, and even enquire the price. This is a taboo subject in English speaking countries. Chinese people will pat a lovely baby's head to show their love, but it is considered impolite for American people.

As for Mongolian people, there are some cultural specialities that we should pay attention to. Mongolian people convey their greetings in the means of worship on bended knees, making bows, embracing and shaking hands. They will bend down their knees with their heads lowered to give regards to their elders. When they see their children off, they will kiss their children's right cheek. If a man wants to show his respect to someone, he will take a half step forward with his right foot, bend forward his right knee with his upper body bending forward and put his right hand on his right knee and then put his left hand on his right hand. Women will hug each other if they are good friends. If they meet for the first time, they will shake hands with each other.

## 2. ADVANTAGES OF INTRODUCING CULTURE TEACHING INTO ENGLISH TEACHING

Therefore, when a teacher teaches Mongolian students English, he should know Mongolian culture well, and pay attention to comparing the differences and introduce the culture differences into language teaching. He should find some topics related to culture backgrounds for students to discuss as well. There are some advantages to put culture differences into English teaching practice. Firstly, students can get to know the taboos of American people and avoid making some misunderstandings. Secondly, the comparison between two different cultures can offer the students an opportunity to take part in the classroom activities, such as group discussion, role plays, etc. In this way, students can get a familiar topic to talk about, which greatly stimulates the students' initiative. Thirdly, the teacher can promote the feeling of harmony and amity with students since the teacher is acquainted with their culture and the students may feel there is no barrier between them.

## 3. STRATEGIES OF INTRODUCING CULTURE TEACHING INTO ENGLISH TEACHING

As it is mentioned above, there are many aspects that the Mongolian people differ from American people. The teacher can take full advantage of the comparison of different cultures to find the exact topics that can motivate students' interest and get them involved in the classroom

activities. The effective teaching methods are as follows:

a) Foster the students' culture awareness of history, religion, literature, convention and cognition. The English culture is extensive and profound. The way of simply transmitting English grammar and rules to students will make students feel bored. Only from comprehensive aspects to integrate the culture teaching can the teacher offer student opportunities to gain further insight into English language.

b) It is particularly important to create an authentic classroom environment for the learners to express themselves freely. Hence, classroom decorations and displays of all kinds, posters, cartoons, maps, newspaper cuttings, and exhibitions of regalia should be taken into consideration by the teachers in the culture teaching process.

c) Teach culture by means of visual materials as well as acoustic materials. For example, take the advantage of English tapes and films in foreign language teaching and discuss the cultural details in groups.

d) Teach culture through internet. Teacher can use the internet to convey and exchange cultural information with students. Arrange some homework connected with English social customs, music and stories. Then students have a group discussion in class.

e) Divide the students into several groups to do role play. Let students perform different cultural customs. By cultural comparison, students will get a deep understanding of cultural connotation it conveys. In addition, it is bound to create a lively classroom atmosphere and make students take an active part in classroom activities.

f) Just as an old saying goes: Genuine knowledge comes from practice. The teacher ought to arrange some singing competitions or dancing performances both in English and Mongolian for students to participate in. This serves a good way for Mongolian students to understand the essence of different cultures.

---

## CONCLUSION

Kramersch (1993) remarked "Native speakers of a language speak not only with their own individual voices, but through them speak also the established knowledge of their native community and society, the stock of metaphors this community lives by, and the

categories they use to represent their experience". Culture introduction is an indispensable part in foreign language teaching due to learners' limited contact with native speakers and insufficient authentic language input.

The comparison of culture is very important in English learning and English teaching. The introducing of culture teaching is not only valuable but also feasible for Mongolian students. In case the teacher pay attention to putting cultural factors into language teaching, and find some topics that can generate the students' empathy, the students will get the common topics to share, and their interest and motivation to participate in activities will be aroused. A sound policy on culture teaching will recognize the difficulties inherent in presenting the target culture, but will also affirm its legitimate place in second language education. Chen Shen (1999) proposed a three-dimension treatment of culture introduction into language teaching: learning to know; learning to do and learning to interact. The three levels of culture introduction are not isolated from one and another. They are overlapping and interrelated. By means of culture comparison, the Mongolian students are not only provided with different conceptions, world outlook and value but also an opportunity to display their own culture. Hence, it is the teacher's duty to help Mongolian students not only grasp the connotation of culture but also put culture factors into practice. Only in this way can teacher achieve his teaching goals and thereby improve students' language proficiency.

---

## REFERENCES

- Hammerly, H. (1982). *Synthesis in Second Language Teaching*. Blaine, Washington: Second Language Publications.
- H. H. Stern (1992). *Issues and Options in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hanvey, R. G. (1979). *Cross-Cultural Awareness*. New York: Newbury House.
- Kroeber, Kluckhohn (1952). *A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*. Cambridge Mass.
- Kramersch, C. (1993). *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. Oxford: OUP.
- Miller, P. W. (1981). *Nonverbal Communication*. Washington, D.C: National Education Association.
- Chen Shen (1999). *Culture Teaching in Foreign Language Education*, Beijing: Beijing language and Culture University Press.