

Developments of approaches to Culture Teaching in Foreign Language Education and Culture Teaching at Extracurricular Time

Yujiang Deng

School of Foreign Languages, Changchun University of Science and Technology, Changchun
130022, China

Abstract

Nowadays, college English has become one of the most important compulsory courses in universities and colleges in China. Most of college English teachers consent that the goal of college English teaching is to equip students with ICC so that foreign language teaching should involve target culture teaching. Due to the close relationship between language and culture, in both western and eastern countries, it is common to stress culture teaching in language instruction. In this thesis, the author makes a general introduction to the developments of the approaches to culture teaching in college English teaching, and the strategies of how college English teachers incorporate cultural knowledge at extracurricular time.

Keywords

approaches to culture teaching; strategies; extracurricular time.

1. Developments of approaches to culture teaching in foreign language education

1.1 Knowledge-Based Approach

The Two World Wars stimulated and promoted many countries' efforts in international understanding and foreign language teaching. At that time, there was a strong belief that content about foreign countries and peoples must be added to language programs. After World War II, achievements in anthropology and sociology began to deeply influence foreign language education. In the United States, "Area Studies" which derived from anthropological view was introduced into some American universities. (Hall, 1947) By "Area Studies", language educators believe that understanding foreign culture and comparisons between cultures are necessary components of language education. (ChenShen, 1998)

It is clear to see that adding explicit content about a foreign culture to a language program is fundamentally knowledge focused. The knowledge learned by the students lays a foundation for their further exploration of foreign culture. As Robinson says: "...that cross-cultural understanding involves more than knowledge of how and why other people think and behave as they do...Understanding someone from another culture involves modifying one's own cultural repertoire..." (Robinson, 1985)

1.2 Behavior-Based Approach

The 1970s and 1980s can be regarded as the era of communicative teaching. Communicative language teaching was a European-British phenomenon though it quickly spread to North America and then to the world. Many linguists put forward their propositions according to experiments.

D. Hymes, the well-known American socio-linguist, proposed the concept of "communicative competence" in 1972. Following the theoretical premise of communicative competence, the practice of teaching for communication has been implemented. One of earliest and most well-known endeavors is the Functional-Notional syllabus. (Wilkins, 1976) This naturally brings culture into the teaching of language since the content of language must be associated with a particular culture.

A concern for learners' communicative needs has prompted language educators to design "learner-orientated" syllabus in which language content should be more specified. This endeavor has resulted in the "task-based" syllabus, according to which, the tasks allow us to integrate the teaching activities for learning language as well as culture.

The communicative approach is obviously behavior-focused. Because it has strengthened the assertion that foreign culture is taught through teaching language learners to behave; in other words, to use the target language for communication.(ChenShen, 1999)

1.3 Meaning-Based Approach

A new discipline known as "Intercultural Communication" has been promoted since the late 1970s in the United States, which has shed the new light on the issue of teaching culture. (HuWenzhong, 1994) Based on this discipline, large numbers of publications have emerged in the discussion of how to teach culture through foreign language education in the 1980s and 1990s.

Byram provided a systematic analysis on how to treat first language, foreign language, home culture and target culture learning at different stages and on different levels. His study broke the limitation of additive cultural information by introducing the concept of learner's internal cultural knowledge and by trying to answer how to help learners gain this knowledge so as to achieve ICC. Byram's propositions have

great influence on second language cultural teaching. (Byram, 1989)

Kramsch (1993) viewed language as a social signifying practice and extended the notion of "context" which covers five dimensions: linguistic, situational, interactional, cultural and inter-textual. In her opinion, text and context are mutually defining. She provides many examples of case studies to demonstrate her strategies of how to teach culture in foreign language classroom.

The study of this period lays a special eye on the implicated cultural meaning of a person, so the study of this period can be called "meaning-based approach".

In china, many scholars also contributed much to the study of culture teaching. Casting a historical review of culture teaching in China, we can find many questions such as whether the foreign culture should be taught, how to teach the foreign culture in the foreign classroom, etc. The solutions to those questions are largely determined by China's relations with other countries and political factors in China. (ZhangYong, 2002) Due to this reason, the teaching of culture in foreign language classroom in

China has not been very consistent or systematic.

It was not until 1978, with the open-door policy and the development of researches on applied linguistics, that foreign language teachers and linguists in China have paid more and more attention to culture teaching in foreign language education. Huge numbers of Chinese students have begun to go overseas to learn advanced science, technology, business management, and even applied linguistics. When they contacted the foreign culture directly, many of them had experienced "cultural conflict" or "cultural shock" and realized the importance of culture study in foreign language learning. Therefore, since the middle of 1980s, many scholars have paid more attention to the relationship between language and culture and the influence of culture on foreign language teaching.

Since the late 1980s, a special attention has been paid to the teaching of foreign culture in foreign language education. Many monographs and theories on foreign language and culture were published, such as, Language and Culture by DengYanchang and LiuRunqing (1989), Culture and Communication edited by HuWenzhong (1994), Foreign Languages Teaching and Culture by HuWenzhong and GaoYihong (1997), Intercultural Communication written by JiaYuxin (1997), The Teaching of Cultures in Foreign Education by ChenShen (1998). In these works, most scholars focus their attention on the following topics: the relationship between language and culture in terms of anthropology and socio-linguistics; the influence of culture on the foreign language learning; contrastive analyses on Chinese culture and foreign cultures; how to carry out cross-cultural

communication; how to avoid cross-cultural pragmatic failures; how to foster the foreign language cross-cultural awareness and ICC and so on.

Entering the new century, with the issuing of "College English Curriculum Requirements", ICC is regarded as one of essential competences for all language learners. Many schools have realized the importance of culture teaching and begun to integrate culture teaching with language teaching in their English classrooms.

Moreover, enlightened by their experiments with culture teaching, some colleges have worked out some strategies of culture teaching that really work in language classrooms within a Chinese Context. (LiuZhenguo&HaoGuoqiang,2000; HangAiping, 2004)

2. Strategies of Culture Teaching at Extracurricular Time

2.1 Culture-lecturing

Culture-lecturing is one of the effective culture teaching methods. In order to provide students with basic cultural knowledge, teachers can offer some lectures on special topics of the target culture in accordance with the teaching and learning requirements, each one focusing on one topic.

A successful culture lecture is characterized by interaction between students and the teacher. While delivering the lecture, the teacher should keep a close eye on students' response. During the lecture, students are encouraged to put forward questions concerning the present culture topic so as to provoke their thinking and to avoid any puzzle or misunderstanding, and if time permits, a small discussion can be held at the end of the lecture. Participation in discussions will reinforce the cultural information students have got from the lecture. During the lecture, various pedagogical aids, such as videotapes, cassettes, slides, can be employed to make what is said more vivid to students.

All these lectures, when done systematically, are anticipated to contribute to the students' understanding of the cultural traits of other peoples and to the development of their ICC.

2.2 Extensive Reading

At extracurricular time, students should read extensively for cultural information since various reading materials provide different cultural features of the target society. The reading materials may cover a wide range of fields: history, literature, religion, philosophy, education, and science, so on and so forth. With cultural details gained by reading, students can have a better understanding of the target culture and behave properly during the intercultural communication. More specifically speaking, students can read the following kinds of works at the extracurricular time.

Reading literary works is of great benefit to college students. As Stern(1992)says: "In many cultures, particularly those whose languages are widely taught, literature performs an important role in society. Literary works sometimes epitomize the thoughts, feelings, and values of the target culture in memorable ways. The literary message may be superior to a formal exposition and can provide an excellent entry into a new world of thoughts and feelings". Generally speaking, literary works can epitomize cultures, help readers gain deeper insights into the target society and enable them to have a better understanding of the national characters of the people as well as the values they cherish. If literary works can be compared to a treasure house, then paying a visit to it will enable us to absorb cultural information stored in it.

Informative works that contain aspects of the target culture provide another source of cultural information. These books are usually written by historians, sociologists and anthropologists who devote themselves to the study of the target society. Students can benefit a lot from reading these books as they may provide them with a detailed explanation or description of the target culture.

There are some other reading materials such as newspapers and magazines. They are associated closely to the daily life of the target society. The Daily Telegraph, New York Times, or Washington Post Newstreet, World Report and Reader's Digest are available and very popular among English learners. The authentic and true-to-life contents in them expose students to a large amount of cultural information ranging from current affairs, entertainment, fashion and stories about geography, history,

customs and religion to social problems. Keeping a keen eye on this kind of reading materials will also help students gain abundant information concerning the target culture. To have better understanding of the content in such materials, both linguistic competence and cultural competence are needed. They are vehicles for teaching or learning a cultural focus.

While reading, students should pay due attention to cultural specifics and take down those which make them confused, so that they can consult teachers later.

2.3 Video Films Watching

Video films have played an important role in language teaching for more than 30 years. Compared with any other kind of teaching aids, video films in fact have quite a lot of unique advantages in introducing foreign cultures. Moving pictures in video films are more accessible, perceptible and authentic. Besides the plots, video films present students with a kind of systematic observation and recording of features of everyday situations. Not only linguistic factors such as pronunciation, intonation, words, grammar, etc., but also many non-linguistic factors as facial expressions, body gestures, patterns of behaviors, social and geographical environments etc, can be directly picked up by students. For example, when a picture in the video film that indicates striking cultural features appears on the screen, the teacher can press the "pause" button to freeze the picture for further discussion. If needed, a certain part of the video films even can be played again and again for the purpose of culture teaching.

In practice, video films should be used more as an aid to improve culture teaching than as entertainment. Goals of culture learning can be achieved more effectively if teachers assign and organize some culture-related activities for students when video films are played.

At present, there are countless video films produced for different purposes and audiences. Teachers must make efforts to choose the proper materials suitable for culture teaching, design a series of questions according to teaching purpose and prepare some appropriate comments on those cultural traits in advance, and ask students to share their impressions of the videos and movies. In this way, students can apply what they have learned in the videos or movies to real intercultural communication in the future.

2.4 Internet Surfing

Information technology has brought about great revolution to foreign language teaching. Nowadays, Internet has been used widely in education and has gained more and more popularity among students. With the development of economics, many students possess personal computers and Internet is available on campus. As a result, teachers can take advantage of students' keenness on Internet surfing to promote their culture learning. Since much information about the target culture can be found by Internet surfing, students should be encouraged to obtain such information from Internet. In addition, the instantaneous communicative systems on Internet such as QQ and MSN make communication with foreigners more convenient and interactive.

Through this kind of online communication, students can improve the fluency and accuracy of spoken English and expose them to the target culture. In short, the application of Internet makes the cultivation of students' ICC highly efficient.

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Author:

DengYu-jiang, Lecturer teaching English in school of foreign languages, ChangChun University of Science and Technology ChangChun ,130022 China. Research field: English for specific purpose (ESP) Email: custcust@126.com.