

Cultivation of Undergraduates' Intercultural Communication Competence in English Teaching

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Abstract

Under the context of present globalization, it's urgent to develop undergraduates' intercultural communication competence (ICC). On the explanation of related theories of ICC, this paper will analyze the main obstacles in the improvement of undergraduates' intercultural communication competence in English teaching with an aim to probe into some solutions as to how to cultivate students' ICC in the process of English learning.

Key words: Intercultural communication; Intercultural communication competence; Undergraduates

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INTRODUCTION

There is always an embarrassing situation for Chinese undergraduates in the process of English learning, that is, although they may master a lot of English vocabularies and grammatical rules, and could get high scores in English exams, they could not make themselves understood by foreigners and sometimes cause misunderstandings in real intercultural communication. Thus, it's urgent to carry out some researches to find the obstacles that hinder the improvement of their communication competence, and probe into solutions of this problem.

1. DEFINITION OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

The achievement of non-obstacle communication needs communicators possess qualified communication competence. As for the real meaning of ICC, Kim viewed that ICC is "located within a person as his or her overall capacity or capability to facilitate the communication process between people from differing cultural backgrounds and to contribute to successful interaction outcomes" (Kim,1988).

In the field of foreign or second language teaching, the idea of communicative competence is associated with the advocates of the communicative approach under the influence of Dell Hymes, the essence of whose original concept of communicative competence is that speakers of a language have to have more than grammatical competence in order to be able to communicate effectively in a language; they also need to know how language is used by members of a speech community to accomplish their purposes (Hymes,1964). Byram points out that intercultural competence is "more complex than communicative competence, precisely because it focuses on 'establishing and maintaining relationships' instead of merely communicating messages or exchanging information"(Byram,1997). Intercultural communication (also called "cross-cultural communication") refers to the communication between native speakers and the non-native speakers (Lustig & Koester, 1999) and also refers to the communication of the people in any different languages and cultural background.

2. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND ENGLISH TEACHING

With regards to the relationship between language and intercultural communication, language is the reflection

of culture while culture impacts the use and development of language. Communicators should follow the cultural and pragmatic rules of the language in the intercultural communication. The ultimate goal of English teaching is to enable students to master and skillfully use authentic language, foster the ability of combining the cultural norms of the target language with its culture and finally be qualified to communicate with foreigners with accurate target language.

The cultivation of English learners' intercultural communication competence is the ultimate aim of English teaching, which is also regarded as a starting point to design English teaching. Teachers should possess the awareness of ICC in English teaching and take the responsibility of improving the cross-cultural awareness of students. In China, people's awareness of the importance of intercultural communication in English teaching is comparatively low. Most people hold the opinion that mastering knowledge of English grammatical rules and vocabularies is equal to the ability which they can be qualified to communicate with English-speaking foreigners and deal with any real situations in communicating. However, language is not some words or sentences one can only speak it or read it, but a product of the culture with profound cultural connotations. It is common that one behavior is polite in this culture while regarded as rude in another culture. The accurate expression of an idea is closely related to cultural background when referring to different objects. "How to say" and "say what" sometimes is more important than "what to say". It is not enough to communicate with the foreigners only with using the correct syntax of a foreign language.

Since English teaching is more than just to impart learners with knowledge of the language, it should also be responsible to cultivate students' communicative competence, that is, it is the responsibility of English teaching to develop students' cross-cultural communication competence as well as impart to students with English language knowledge such as words or grammatical rules. From this aspect, it is appropriate to point out that cultivation of student's ICC is also the core of English teaching.

3. HINDRANCES OF IMPROVEMENT OF ICC OF UNDERGRADUATES IN ENGLISH TEACHING

3.1 Lack of Cultural Input in College English Teaching

Under the context of traditional English teaching, teachers' main task in class is to imbue undergraduates' with mastery of English vocabularies, grammatical rules, and the analysis of sentence structures other than the input of knowledge related to cultures, or how to use those sentences in real communication. That is, students learn English partly, or completely isolated from the real context of language use. This phenomenon leads to the result that students may pass those certificated exams with

high scores, such as CET4, CET6 or TEM4 etc., but could not communicate in real foreign situations, or could not implement their learning into authentic usage. Besides, the isolated input of language information from cultural background will become ambiguous and could not arouse students' interests in learning.

3.2 Lack of Cultural Imbuement of Teaching Materials and Teaching Mode

The structure of English textbooks is mainly composed by three parts, i.e. vocabulary and phrases, text and exercises with no regards to the importance of cultural imbuement in most teaching materials of English. Additionally, the chosen content of textbook is greatly oriented to scientific discoveries or technologies and less part is related to literature progress. It is common that scientific discoveries also are based on certain cultural background, however, in these teachings, teachers always neglect those cultural elements. As for teaching modes, although multimedia has been widely implemented in class teaching, most teachers could not use this equipment efficiently. Most teachers simply regard multimedia as a substitute for traditional blackboard, and follow traditional teaching modes.

3.3 Under-Developed Level of Teachers and Students' Intercultural Awareness

English teachers, the guider of English class, should possess high-level intercultural awareness in their own life and in the process of teaching, that is, they should find ways to improve their own intercultural abilities and add and emphasize culture teaching in their teaching plans, teaching aim and testing. However, influenced by outer situations, most English teachers in universities pay less attention to improving students' communication abilities but pay much attention to their ability of mastering language grammatical and syntactic rules.

As for the students' respect, except for English majors, non-English majors only regard English as a course to gain scores to ensure their graduation so that their main purpose is to remember those vocabularies, grammatical rules or techniques of passing exams in the process of English learning.

4. STRATEGIES OF IMPROVING STUDENTS' ICC IN ENGLISH TEACHING

However, under the context of current trend and the widespread of globalization, the traditional English teaching in universities could not satisfy the change of time. It's important to enhance the status of intercultural communication competence in English teaching.

4.1 Necessity of Changes From English Teachers

4.1.1 Cultivation and Improvement of Teachers' Intercultural Awareness

Flechsig believes that a journey toward trans-culturalism requires the acquisition of at least five fundamental skills that students and their educators must have

mastered before significant international “trans-cultural” interactions can take place (Flechsigg, 2000). One of those five fundamental skills is cultural awareness, which originates from multicultural alertness, tolerance of different cultural differences and reflection of one's own culture and values. As guiders of English learning and communicator of intercultural knowledge, teachers should absorb intercultural knowledge of different countries as much as possible to widen their own horizons and be qualified to impart sufficient intercultural knowledge to students in English teaching. “The main purpose of inter-cultural communication teaching is to arouse the students' cultural awareness of diverse culture, improve their competence of cultural difference, eventually to adjust to the development of globalization.” (Gao, 2012) Then, English teachers should immerse themselves in the exploration of intercultural knowledge in the whole teaching process by means of multimedia or internet materials. When teaching the content of text, teachers should introduce the cultural background of texts, and deepen the knowledge of cultural background to even further corresponding cultures.

4.1.2 Necessity of Changing Teaching Modes and Attitudes

Enhancement of ICC in English class requires teachers change teaching mode and attitude and take a new role in the teaching process. They should change from the knowledge of the initiator to the cultivation of intercultural communication competence leader. Teachers should be qualified to design the class in a new way, i.e. they should possess the ability to combine culture with text content naturally and lead students to immerse in such context unconsciously. For example, in the introduction of text, teachers can transmit cultural knowledge and background as much as possible; and in the process of text appreciation, teachers can make comparison between two different cultures to enhance students' intercultural awareness. Meanwhile, teachers can encourage students to take part in activities to enhance their ICC, such as role play, group discussion, sitcom acting etc..

With the development of techniques, teachers can widely make full use of multimedia equipment in class and after class to inform students with relatively authentic cultural knowledge. There are sufficient sources from internet broadcasts, TV series, electric magazines and cartoons from European countries to create conditions for students to cultivate their ICC. Only immersing in authentic communicative context, can students really feel to touch the essence of foreign cultures, understand foreigners' real daily life from various aspects and finally enhance their cultural understanding.

4.1.3 Cultivation of Multiple Teaching Methods in English Teaching

Teachers should possess qualifications of developing teaching methods in English teaching. Teachers can

develop a concentrated and systematic introduction way to introduce information related to customs, historical allusions, local customs or practices of English speaking countries to students through the open cultural teaching elective courses or a series of culture lectures. In order to make the students to get further extension and expansion of English language ability, the teachers can create a strong cultural atmosphere of English class, which makes the students experience different cultural atmosphere consciously or unconsciously, and provides a wider stage of English communication for them. Through these dominant and recessive teaching activities, students can build and improve the cultural sensitivity and awareness.

Students should be encouraged to be aware of, absorb and experience the cultural differences actively by a variety of ways. Students can be divided into groups in the class and assigned with a relevant cultural topics every week, such as, being required to make a comparison of eastern and western holidays and the ways of their celebrations, or make a comparison of eastern education system and western educational system, or compare the eastern and western dressing way to find their similarities or differences. By such assignments, students can be stimulated to accumulate relevant materials out of class through the network, newspaper, magazines or books etc. In addition, in the process of accumulation and materials compassion, students can develop various and different abilities in information collection and selection.

Moreover, teachers can use a direct way to create an authentic cultural environment to help students to imbue themselves in. In such environment, students can practice oral English, learn and experience foreign culture, and appreciate its cultural connotation and finally improve their intercultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence. Teachers should make full use of all kinds of conditions to create and enjoy the exotic culture atmosphere for students, but also give full consideration to the students' language level and cognitive ability in these activities. Foreign language teaching should make full use of various modern audiovisual media and the Internet to guide students to find online information, listen to the radio, watch TV, understand, grasp the rich cultural background knowledge. At the same time this strategy can enhance students' ability of cultural communication and develop their ability to obtain information in an initiative way.

4.2 Necessity of Changes of Students

4.2.1 Enhancing One's Own Icc Actively in the Process of English Learning

Improving of ICC requires undergraduates' actively take part in the activities of enhancement. As English learners, undergraduates should read famous classics, original English magazines which may cover cultural background, native and local customs widen horizon. Reading classics is an important channel for undergraduates to

improve their cultural taste and aesthetic temperament, develop healthy personality and improve mental state. Moreover, students can enhance their own cultural appreciation by means of watching English movies, TV series which exhibit real life of people from English speaking countries, for the reason that knowledge from textbooks is greatly emphasized in the universities rather than knowledge from western literature and classics by reading. Wide reading can enrich students' with cultural knowledge so that they can foster sensitivity to cultural differences and form sensible intercultural mode in the intercultural communication. In order to enhance their own ICC, undergraduates can also join English saloon, English corner to strengthen communication with foreigners. Moreover, students should avoid stereo-type opinion of foreigners by means of learning cross-cultural knowledge from books or extensive reading. It's important to bear in mind that in real cross-cultural communication, it's a specific individual who communicates with you and different individual may be endowed with specific character or temperature. Never hold the opinion that person from U.S.A is always outgoing, non-serious, loving informal occasions and loving jokes, that is not the truth. In some occasions, Americans may be more serious or formal than Chinese.

4.2.2 Fostering Rational and Sensitive Cultural Mentality Or Developing One's Own Intercultural Communication Awareness

English, a wide-spread used language, is an important carrier of intercultural communication. With the globalization of economy, culture is also globalized. Globalization of cultures urges students to treat intercultural communication from a different perspective because English learning has profoundly included mutual cultural contact, influence and collision into its category, other than superficially understanding of western history, politics and culture. This change requires students foster new concept of culture and treat the relationship between native culture and the foreign culture in a correct way. "Learning a foreign language is not merely a matter of becoming proficient in the language, but also of developing personality" (Anne-Brit, 2008, p.275). It's a common phenomenon in cross-cultural communication that one may speak English fluently or correctly but use it inappropriately in specific occasions. Some events or free talks which are quite common and acceptable in Chinese culture may cause foreigners confused or misunderstood. The writer once took part in a lecture, which content was related to cross-cultural communication, the lecturer, who is a foreigner, illustrated some examples he encountered in real communication with Chinese people from different fields in China. One example he gave was his free talk with a Chinese colleague who had asked him how many classes he had in the new semester, however, to his surprise or confusions, after hearing his answer,

the Chinese colleague concluded that I had more classes than you this semester. After hearing this conclusion, the lecturer said he was confused with the Chinese colleague's comment and thought whether he/she thought he was lazy or not. From Chinese colleague's point of view, there is no hidden meaning in his/her conclusion, since such free talk between Chinese teachers and colleagues were quite common and natural without any illocutionary meaning. That is to say, Chinese teachers usually take about such free talk just in order to find some topic to make communications. From the above example, it's necessary for one to bear in mind that something that is natural and common in one culture may become offensive or unacceptable in another culture. In real cross-cultural communication, it's quite necessary for students to enhance inter-cultural awareness to avoid offense to others.

4.2.3 Developing One's Own Agility of ICC

Students should foster the ability of containing the existence of cultural differences of different languages. Since language is essential to successful communication, whenever possible, both parties involved in intercultural communication should seek a common language and attempt to understand cultural differences in using the language. Language is not only a vehicle of communication but a specific carrier of cultural life style, ways of thinking and different patterns of interacting in the process of intercultural communication.

One important method for students to make appropriate communication is that they should have a tendency to developing empathy. Developing empathy can help students form different views to others so that they can better understand and adjust themselves to communicating with foreigners. Jiang Zuochao in his paper *The Development of Cultural Empathy in Intercultural Communication* summarized four main factors of developing empathy, that is Constant self-focus, Ethnocentrism, Dogmatism and Lack of Motivation (Jiang, 2013). In real intercultural communication, if one is consumed with thoughts of oneself, it's difficult for him to give ear to any different ideas; if one is consumed with ethnocentrism, he/she will hold the opinion that he/she is superior to others and keep others from expressing their real opinions; if one holds a dogmatic attitude towards others, he/she will usually criticize or ridicule others, which results in no disclosure of information from others; if one is lake of motivation in communication, especially lack of interests in knowing about more cultural information of other countries, it's impossible for he/she to get further communication with people from different cultures.

By cultural empathy we mean that, in intercultural communication, the communicator consciously and willingly shifts from his or her own cultural pattern and actively projects himself or herself into another cultural pattern, feeling,

understanding and appreciating another culture, and at the same time maintaining his or her own perspective on the situation. (Jiang, 2013)

No matter how unusual or strange one action or words of others may appear (or even downright ridiculous) in one' own opinion, he/ she should learn to respect them. If students possess the ability of empathy, they can avoid unnecessary conflicts or misunderstanding in intercultural communication,.

4.3 Changes From Outer Environment

Universities should broaden channels to cultivate or improve students' ICC by means of opening more cultural courses, enrich internet sources, or cultivate more platforms for students to take part in intercultural practice. There are many defects in foreign language teaching in the teaching environment or teaching process in university classes. It is difficult to reach the deep level of cultural education or improve students' intercultural awareness within limited class time. In order to make up the deficiency of the classroom teaching, the school should provide the opportunities of understanding of English culture and cultivating communicative competence by combining activities of the inside and outside class scientifically. For example, the school can organize the students to participate in the English speech contest or English debate, drama activities, and can also establish English corner, English salon at the same time. It can also regularly carry out some games with full of knowledge and interests of culture. Additionally, the school can still organize some English lectures, film and television parties or music concerts, which provide more opportunities for students to have access to the authentic situation in the aspect of study, life, work, and other fields of the English-speaking countries.

It is also an effective way to open cultural courses to cultivate students' ICC besides the course of College English as the only channel of learning English. Universities can widen selective channels for students to choose courses according to their own interests or requirements. Design of courses should take students' different needs into consideration other than doing this randomly. Moreover, universities or colleges can organize intercultural activities or explore more opportunities for students to make short-term exchanges which provide more opportunities for students to experience western cultures in person. By exchanging, students can acquire knowledge from visiting countries and master intercultural communication techniques.

4.4 Principles in Intercultural Teaching

In intercultural communication teaching, English teachers should follow certain principles. Firstly, the teaching content should be related to students' cultural content closely, especially related to the content which is applied by students in daily communication; secondly, teaching

processes and requirements should be developed in an orderly way and gradually; thirdly, teachers should be qualified to bind the new culture and integrate the synchronic and diachronic culture; and lastly, teachers should carry out equal communication activities in intercultural teaching and foster appropriate foreign language teaching emotion attitude, such as: equality, mutual respect and reserving differences on the basis of seeking common ground.

CONCLUSION

Language is the carrier of culture, the major form of culture and is also the component of the society and the national culture. Different nations have different cultures, histories, customs and the local conditions. Language cannot leave the culture and culture relies on language. Since English teaching is the language teaching, it cannot leave the cultural education. The basic purpose of foreign language teaching is to enable learners with rich cultural knowledge and language knowledge to communicate with the people from different countries. It's urgent for Chinese universities to take steps to make changes in English teaching approaches or aims and find ways to improve the efficiency and quality of English teaching.

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