

## On Chinese Culture Infiltration in English General Education

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### Abstract

English education is an integral part of general education, with humanities course as its core. Among them, Chinese culture is an important part. However, over-emphasis on English language and culture gives rise to “Chinese culture aphasia” in China. Therefore, it is necessary and significant to integrate Chinese culture into English teaching. Chinese cultural infiltration contributes to Chinese culture dissemination, and strengthens cultural identity.

**Key words:** English general education; Chinese culture aphasia; Chinese culture infiltration

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### INTRODUCTION

For the past three decades, English education has made considerable progress in China. Moreover, the idea of combining language teaching with culture teaching has been reached an agreement, which is conducive to improving intercultural communication. However, having made a survey of English teaching at various levels, we find the introduction of material culture, institutional

culture, custom culture and spiritual culture in the English world have been reinforced, while the English expressions of Chinese culture, the background culture of one communicative subject, are practically in a state of being ignored.

As a result, many Chinese English learners know little about their native language, for example, they don't know how to convey China's traditional festivals, daily necessities in English, let alone introduce Chinese culture in English. The end result is the phenomenon of “Chinese culture aphasia”. (Cong, 2000, pp.10-19)

For this reason, some experts and scholars are deeply concerned and put forward countermeasures in their essays. The Teaching Syllabus for English Majors revised in 2000 regulates that “English majors should have some knowledge of Chinese culture; lay a strong foundation of Chinese language...know Chinese cultural tradition well...have strong communicative abilities in Chinese both orally and in written form.” What's more, as is stated in the College English Curriculum Requirement,<sup>1</sup> college English is not only a language course that provide basic knowledge about English, but also a capacity enhancement course that helps students to broaden their horizons and learn about different cultures in the world. It not only serves as a tool, but also has humanistic values. When designing college English courses, therefore, it is necessary to take into full consideration the development of students' cultural capacity and the teaching of knowledge about different cultures in the world. The detailed rules by the Examinations Board of CET-4 and CET-6 (2013) make adjustments that college students should develop the ability of introducing and translating materials related to Chinese culture into English.

It occurs to many people that college English is an indispensable part of general education. It is gradually fitting into the trend of general education, which is bound

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.docin.com/p-487837749.html>

to be the orientation of English education in the future. Furthermore, the implementation of general education has been established in some universities and colleges in China. Such changes are gratifying, while college students' Chinese levels and abilities of expressing Chinese in English are still not optimistic, for Chinese culture is an important part of general education-based English teaching. Therefore, it is necessary for us to stay calm and ponder over the solutions to improve Chinese infiltration in English general education.

## 1. GENERAL EDUCATION AND COLLEGE ENGLISH

General education hails from Western Liberal arts education, emphasizing the edification of humanism spirit and strengthening the role of humanities and social sciences in higher education. In 1829, A. S. Packard in Bowdoin College of America associated general education in university education for the first time, constituting the content of higher education together with professional education. General education is life education with universal significance, the aim of which is to foster "whole man" with four abilities: To think effectively, to communicate ideologically, to make proper judgments and to distinguish between various values. In America, general education has made remarkable achievements. The practices of general education in Harvard, MIT are popularized all over the world. It occurs to more and more countries that general education is an important part of the integrated college education.

College English plays an important role in general education. The essence of general education is to spread liberty and human tradition, which are in accordance with the nature of college English, thus determining the role and status of college English in college general education. Over the past 30 years in China, more and more scholars have conducted the studies of China's higher education from the angle of general education. For example, Huang (2006) points out that an important way of enhancing college students' awareness of their native culture and reconstructing the subjectivity of college education is to carry out general education. It is argued that English belongs to liberal education and will possibly be an important turning point of foreign language teaching in the future. As an integral part of higher learning, College English teaching aims at training qualified citizens with comparatively strong cultural awareness, rich knowledge, a good command of English, ability of intercultural communication, to distinguish between varied cultural values, and to think independently.

In the context of general education, on one hand, on one hand, language learners try to grasp the essence of foreign culture for self-improvement. On the other hand, they should try their best to carry forward their native

culture while learning foreign culture. Therefore, English education should develop students' English language proficiency, and meanwhile improve their expressing ability of thoughts and ideas, as well as enlarge their horizons by imparting humane knowledge and transferring varied cultures of the world.

In line with the 2007 Requirements, general education based College English courses should combine required and elective courses of comprehensive English, language skills, English for practical uses, language and culture, and English of specialty together to ensure that students at various levels can acquire adequate training so as to use English in a well-rounded way and communicate effectively by improving learning strategy and cultural awareness. It is conducive to solving the current "cultural aphasia". To some extent, it will probably be a turning point for college English teaching practice in China.

## 2. TRADITIONS OF CHINA FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

In light of time division, Chinese culture encompasses traditional culture and contemporary culture. What is emphasized by the educational worlds refers to strengthen Chinese traditional culture education. The basic contents of Chinese culture are as vast as ocean, ranging from unique languages, a multitude of classics, technologies benefiting the world, brilliant literature and art, wise philosophy and religion, to deepen and complete ethics (Zhang, 2004, p.7). Such broad and profound Chinese culture is an important part of world cultures, and makes great contribution to the civilization of human being. There is no doubt it is an essential part of general education.

All along, Chinese foreign language education attaches importance to Chinese culture. As early as in the 1920s, the Faculty of Arts in the original Centre College (the current Nanjing University) established compulsory courses including Chinese Literary History Outline, China Cultural History; the elective courses involved Xiaoxue Essentials, Poetics, Aesthetics, Life form, Study of Art and the like. The English Department of the Southwest Associated University set up its courses, mainly consulting the programs in Harvard University. Meanwhile, it still established some Chinese courses such as History of Chinese Literature, Introduction to Philosophy.

As is proved by the doyens in foreign language and translation circles, it is indispensable for foreign language learning and communicative ability in developing to fully master native language and culture. Xū Guozhang, a famous scholar in China's foreign language world, has recalled his childhood experience, when he learned ancient Chinese prose, and the influence exerted by Qian Zhongshu, a master of Chinese culture and Western

culture. The survey of the 26 best Foreign Language learners all over China, made by Hu Wenzhong and Gao Yihong in 1991, reveals that the grasp of native language and culture promotes and reinforces the grasp of foreign language and culture. The two cases above both demonstrate that what mother tongue and cultural impacts foreign language learning is by no means negative transfer. Instead, deep foundation of mother tongue and extensive knowledge of native culture can facilitate and improve excellent foreign language level and communicative ability.

### 3. CURRENT SITUATION OF CHINESE CULTURE TEACHING IN ELT

Many scholars and experts have reached an agreement on the importance of culture teaching in foreign language learning. Naturally, it is needful to attach importance to the culture of the target language in foreign language teaching. As a result, a large number of knowledge concerning cultures and customs of English-speaking countries, especially Britain and America, have been introduced into English teaching materials in ELT in China. The trial of integrating language learning with its culture has made considerable progress, improving students' knowledge of Western culture. However, over emphasis on the cultures of target language contributes to the phenomenon of "Chinese cultural aphasia", totally neglecting the proper input of Chinese culture. As a result, even college students can't express things specifically related to Chinese in English.

For this, the inappropriately-set teaching materials may be the reason. The investigation of English teaching materials in China indicates that nearly 90% of contemporary texts involve English essays, short stories, and the like. There is no exception of some popular textbooks, such as *Experiencing English Integrated Book*, *New Horizon College English*, *21<sup>st</sup> Century College English*, and *New College English*. Intercultural communication is a two-way activity, concerning both foreign culture and native culture. However, most teaching materials in the textbooks seldom concern the learner's real life, so that they are not favorable to improving the learners' practical communicative competence. In terms of Kramersch, foreign-language learning takes place neither in a learner's home-language culture nor the target language, but in a "third place" that lies in between the learner's first culture and the foreign language culture. Initially, learners might synthesize the target culture with their own, and in learning English they may use it in ways that express meaning in their own culture (Kramersch, 1993, pp.205-206). Therefore, foreign language learners should be exposed to teaching materials covering a variety of targets and native culture.

In ELT in China, English is not only a resource for learning foreign cultures but a platform of cultural interaction. Thus, the notion of culture teaching involves an interaction between target culture and home culture. English, as an international language, should do not belong to a single nation but reflect the learners' native cultures, for language is a mirror of a specific society. Consequently, in the background of China, it is possible for English learners to express their everyday life with apparent Chinese characteristics. Moreover, Chinese even modern people are deeply influenced by Chinese traditional culture. It's natural for them to embed Chinese culture into English in intercultural communication.

It's gratifying that some Chinese scholars have seen the frustrations and problems because attention is paid exclusively to target culture in foreign language teaching, which they define as a new form of Western culture domination or Western cultural imperialism. It is argued that if the trend continues blindly and much emphasises are put on target culture, it would lower the confidence in learning Chinese language and hinder the spread of Chinese culture. Even so, it's relieved to see that some scholars and experts have been familiar with the situation and launched a series of empirical studies to change the existing problems. Especially, as notions of "world Englishes" and "Chinese English" are increasingly recognized, it is a new orientation and turning point of reform for English education to input Chinese culture into ELT.

### 4. EXPLORATION OF CHINESE CULTURE INFILTRATION IN ENGLISH GENERAL EDUCATION

As is analyzed above, college English is an indispensable part of general education, and it is of great significance to input Chinese culture in ELT. Reforms must be conducted to innovate the existing concepts in college English teaching and learning and reinforce the objective of college English teaching, which is to cultivate the students' general and humanistic values in the teaching practice. College English not only involves imparting knowledge and skills in the English language, but also develops the competence of intercultural communication to enhance the students' ability and boost up their general awareness of culture. However, the objective of improving general awareness of culture has been totally neglected in college English teaching practice. For this, college English should shoulder the responsibility of innovating the existing concepts and introducing English general education.

So how can we implement Chinese culture teaching in the context of general education? The suggestions are as follows.

#### **4.1 Necessary Readjustment for English Teaching Materials**

As is mentioned above, the current textbooks of college English are compiled nearly all in the setting of Western culture, neglecting the native cultural background of teachers and students, which can't contribute to the intercultural communication but results in an unbalanced one. In addition, the increasingly influence of Chinese culture also appeals for an urgent readjustment of English teaching materials.

Teaching materials, mainly in the form of textbooks, play an important role for teachers' to implement their teaching syllabus and achieve their terminal objectives of English education. They are also of vital significance for students to enhance their linguistic skills and intercultural communicative competence. Therefore, the reasons why many students fail to express Chinese culture in English can be partially ascribed to the adoption of textbooks. Massive knowledge of western culture is presented in English textbooks, while there is a total lack of Chinese culture in the teaching materials as well as in English classrooms, which restricts the students' access to Chinese culture expressed in English and hence leads to unbalanced intercultural communication. Consequently, it's urgent to readjust English teaching materials so that English learners in China can apply English freely and fluently in the context of Chinese culture.

In the context of general education and according to the new teaching syllabus, textbook compiling should be made from a new perspective, which is to reflect the awareness of home culture and enable students to communicate effectively and appropriately in varied communicative contexts. As a result, the native culture of English learners should be a necessary part English teaching materials. Whereas, at the same time, we should avoid going from one extreme to another, as Wang Rongpei warned. Once in the history of English teaching in China, Chinese political terms were dominated in English teaching materials. When the circumstances change with the passage of time, the trend gives away to the all-around introduction of western culture, resulting in "Chinese culture aphasia". Therefore, it is critical for English material writers to estimate the future trend in college English teaching. From the perspective of survivability, they should make sure that the English materials will not be out-dated in the process of being implemented. In this case, the teaching materials in EFL should not be confined to Western culture only, but should involve home culture of English learners.

Currently, it is no controversy that Chinese culture is necessarily introduced in ELT. Nevertheless, the choice of Chinese culture content involved in English materials should be made discreetly in Chinese culture is too rich and vast and rich to cover in a set of textbooks. Here, we can refer to the teaching materials for foreigners to learn

Chinese language for reference, which is a well-developed discipline whose primary emphasis is over Chinese culture. And its teaching content of Chinese culture is well organized and selected systematically. In addition, the books for foreigners to learn Chinese are written bilingually, both in Chinese and English. Foreigners can learn Chinese culture step by step, which meets the needs of intercultural communication for the language learners. From it, we can draw on the reference to readjust English teaching materials.

#### **4.2 Necessary Improvement of English Teachers' Native Culture Expertise**

In above, the significance of English textbooks, which reflect the concept and determines the practice of English teaching, has been acknowledged. Whereas, up to now there are no perfect textbooks totally and successfully integrating language points with cultural information. Nor are there any textbooks presenting the western and Chinese culture equally without any cultural bias. Meanwhile, we have to admit that even well-compiled textbooks can not guarantee the successful implementation of cultural teaching and learning. Hence, here comes the indispensable role of English teachers. Without flexible roles of English teachers to consistently exploit and modify the textbooks, English learners may not benefit from the improvement of English materials.

As mediators between different cultures, English teachers shoulder the responsibility to cultivate English learners to acquire the capacity for balanced intercultural communication, and to arouse their interest in Western culture. Therefore, the roles of English teachers do not mean absolutely required work of being teachers. Instead, they play a quite different role. While introducing the target culture, English teachers should enhance the English learners' intercultural development through a joint effort with learners and an interaction with them.

Gonzalez (1989) argues that language teachers need to be trained for cultural knowledge and awareness. They should learn about both target and native cultures to cultivate the awareness of intercultural communication, as diplomats do in dealing with international affairs. On the one hand, besides English proficiency, language teachers should be in command of both Western culture and Chinese culture, and intercultural awareness to realize the teaching goal of enhancing students' intercultural communication competence. On the other hand, English teachers should be capable of teaching Chinese culture in English. However, most of English teachers in China are not qualified to handle cultural affairs effectively and confidently owing to their shortage of relevant knowledge. It is investigated that 80 percent of English teachers in China, who have received test-oriented education, are young people at the age of between 28 to 48. Literally, most of them are lack of Chinese culture, especially Chinese traditional culture. Therefore, it is

absolutely necessary for English teachers to enlarge their knowledge of Chinese culture.

After all, English teachers are the transmitter of Chinese culture in the English language teaching practice. Their function is to spur the learners to reflect upon their local culture rather than neglect it. With a good knowledge of Chinese culture, they will be capable of dealing with intercultural differences as well as similarities. Traditionally, the senior Chinese English learners are usually in a good command of Chinese culture. Take Lin Yutang for instance, a well-known Chinese writer, whose representative works are all written in English spreading Chinese culture to the world, while he achieved systematic education of Chinese traditional culture. Concerning this, it is necessary for English teachers to be trained for Chinese culture. Only when English teachers are knowledgeable enough in culture can students be motivated to learn Chinese culture express it in English. Thus, English teaching and learning will be in the right direction.

### 4.3 Tentative Ways to Input Chinese Culture in ELT

The application of comparative and contrastive approach to English teaching is one of the effective ways in intercultural teaching. Lectures and discussions by a comparative and contrastive approach can analyze and explain cultural issues in different backgrounds. It will actually provide foreign language learners with tolerant and unbiased viewpoints and take a positive attitude in intercultural communication. By comparison and contrast, English learners in China can acquire a cognitive awareness of cultural difference between the West and the East. What's more important, the learners come to learn more about splendid Chinese culture and the essence of Western culture through the contrast and comparison, and further make sense of cultural differences between Chinese and Western culture. In this way, students' learning interest may be aroused and they are more active in intercultural communication. As a result, they will become more tolerant and enhance the national sense of pride. Anyway, the method of contrast and comparison is proved one of the best methods in culture teaching and learning.

Since no two languages are totally equivalent because of the interwoven relationship between language and culture. However, to some extent, they are similar to a certain degree. But in English language teaching practice, what we emphasize is more differences more than similarities between the two cultures. So some language

teachers propose that more attention should be paid to cultural similarities rather than cultural differences, just as Robinson claims stated (Robinson, 1985, p.54), "how people perceive other people are influenced by the degree of similarity perceived. If we can make full use of the similarities between different languages, it will contribute to expressing things on specific Chinese culture idiomatically. At the same time, it is equally important to face the existing cultural differences. What's more, the principle of cultural equality should be carried out in culture teaching, since no culture is superior over another one. Language teachers should hold a neutral standpoint, dealing with cultural affairs fairly.

## CONCLUSION

College education needs both international visions and native feelings. Only when we deeply learn about our native culture can we absorb the essence of the foreign language better. Nowadays, it is essential for any country to improve her soft power beside her hard power of economic and military so as to possess the right of speech internationally. It is often said that culture is the core of soft power, which implicates great power. Therefore, it is critical and urgent for educators to spread Chinese culture in English to reinforce the international influence of China and Chinese culture. Especially in the context of general education, English education should take the responsibility of infiltrating Chinese culture in English teaching and learning, which are the trend and turning point of English general education.

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