

Incorporating Intercultural Communication into College English Teaching

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Abstract: Globalization has become an irreversible and self-evident truth in today's world. With globalization, the range and amount of intercultural communications have surpassed those in any other time in human history. This paper examines some texts in *New Horizon College English—Reading and Writing*, analyzes the challenges in intercultural communication and cultural adaptation reflected in these materials, and aims to put forward some suggestions for teachers to incorporate intercultural communication knowledge into college English teaching.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication; *New Horizon College English*; College English Teaching

1. Challenges in IC and adaptation

Globalization has become an irreversible and self-evident truth in today's world. Multinational companies, international students, and international marriages have become common terms to people around the world. With globalization, the range and amount of intercultural communications have surpassed those in any other time in human history. Realizing that different cultures have their specific values and customs means that we will very probably meet with challenges in intercultural communications. As Larry A. Samovar, Richard E. Porter and Edwin R. McDaniel (2007) have contended that to become a competent intercultural communicator means “having the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with members of another linguistic-cultural background on their terms”. Therefore, we need to equip our students with intercultural communication knowledge so as to avoid potential misunderstandings and perform better in intercultural situations.

This paper examines some texts in *New Horizon College English—Reading and Writing*, analyzes the challenges in intercultural communication and cultural adaptation reflected in these materials, and aims to put forward some suggestions for teachers to incorporate intercultural communication knowledge into college English teaching.

1.1 Challenges in Intercultural Communication

When people venture into a new culture, they may encounter some potential problems because many things in their lives are different from their lives at home, such as language, food, dressing style, customs, religion, etc. As Steve J. Kulich (2002) reflects his first impressions of China, “one of my most difficult adjustments came from the dense population of Asian cities”. And problems like this will cause a feeling of anxiety, loneliness and confusion. When people experience such feelings, they are meeting with one of the major challenges in intercultural communication—culture shock.

1.1.1 Culture Shock

According to Samovar et al. (2007), “Culture shock is a mental state that comes from the transition that occurs when you go from a familiar environment to an unfamiliar one and find that your old, established patterns of behavior are ineffective”. The symptoms of culture shock may include sadness, loneliness, insomnia, loss of identity, and lack of confidence, to name just a few. With more opportunities of intercultural communication open to students, it is of great significance to prepare students with knowledge about culture shock. And one of the best materials should be the textbook.

In *New Horizon English 2—Reading and Writing*, Unit 1, Section B, the text is about culture shock. It introduces the definition of culture shock, its four stages, as well as its significance. At the very beginning, the text points out that though leaving home to study in a different country is a new and fascinating experience, there are also some challenges you will encounter because of different beliefs, norms, values and traditions between two cultures (Zheng, 2011). This brings to light the term of culture shock. Since more and more students have the opportunity to study abroad, they might be very interested in this topic. So that before continuing to read the text, teachers can present some examples of culture shock and ask students to explain the possible reasons, which can help students get familiar with the topic to some extent.

Then the text goes further to describe the four essential stages of adjustment during culture shock—the honeymoon stage, the hostility stage, the recovery stage, and the adjustment stage. This part explicitly explains the changes students might experience when they venture into a new culture. As Samovar et al. (2007) have pointed out, these stages depict “the initial optimism and elation in the host culture, the subsequent dip in the level of adaptation, and the following gradual recovery”. Again, to help students better understand these stages, teachers can provide some examples to ask the students to identify the different stages of adjustment during culture shock.

The last part of the text argues that “when you have completely adjusted to a new culture you can more fully enjoy it. You learn how to interact with other people, and you learn a considerable amount about life in a culture that is not your own. Furthermore, learning about other cultures and how to adjust to the shock of living in them helps you learn more about yourself” (Zheng, 2011). Other scholars have also displayed similar views. As Adler (1997) notes, “Severe culture shock is often a positive sign indicating that the expatriate is becoming deeply involved in the new culture instead of remaining isolated in an expatriate ghetto”. Culture shock can make individuals develop a better understanding of themselves as well as their own culture, and “stimulate personal creativity” (Shi & Peng, 2008). These comments help the students realize that despite the fact that one might suffer from physical and emotional discomfort, culture shock provides a great opportunity to learn and acquire new perspectives.

1.1.2 Causes for Culture Shock

It’s necessary to help students get some insights into the reasons of culture shock after they get familiar with the concept. In Unit 3, Section B—“Rich Meeting His Future Mother-in-law”, students can find some clues through the funny story and humorous tone. It’s a story about the first meeting between a Frenchman and his future Chinese mother-in-law, only that the one being shocked is the mother-in-law. First, he brought a bottle of French wine as present, something the mother-in-law could not appreciate. Second, “he made the mistake of drinking not one but two frosted glasses full, while everybody else had a half-inch just for taste” (Zheng, 2011). It is not inappropriate to find that Rich shocked the mother-in-law in their very first meeting.

The worst happened when Rich criticized the cooking of the mother-in-law. It is well known that the Chinese are modest, and they tend to use negative remarks about their dressing, performance, cooking, etc., while expecting others’ compliment. However, when the mother-in-law says, pointing to her famous steamed pork and preserved vegetable dish, “Ai. This dish not salty enough, no flavor”, Rich replied, “You know, all it needs is a little soy sauce” (Zheng, 2011). After that, he just poured “a riverful of the salty black stuff on the china plate” (Zheng, 2011). Of course we can imagine the mother-in-law’s response. She just watched Rich with “shocked eyes” (Zheng, 2011). No wonder Rich failed miserably in the mother-in-law’s eyes.

When learning this text, teachers can ask the students to analyze the reason for Rich’s failure, and help them to realize the root cause—different cultures have different norms and customs. In order to communicate more effectively, new comers had better make some efforts to learn the host culture.

Through analyzing culture shock and its reasons reflected in *New Horizon English 2—Reading and Writing*, the above part shows that by making full use of the texts, teachers can prepare students with some knowledge about culture shock, so that they might not be confused and perform better in intercultural communications.

1.2 Intercultural Adaptation

As mentioned above, with widespread cross-cultural interactions, many of the newcomers meet with difficulties while adapting to the new culture. And this leads to the concept of acculturation. Acculturation, as Samovar et al. (2007) define it, “is the process of learning to live in a new culture” (p. 400). According to Kim (2001), “activities of intercultural contact, communication, and new cultural learning is the essence of acculturation”. It not only brings about the individuals’ respect of the new culture, but also provides them with “a new way of appreciating beauty, fun, joy, as well as despair, anger, and the like” (Kim, 2001). There are mainly four forms of acculturation—assimilation, separation, integration and marginalization. The following part first analyzes cultural separation and cultural integration in the light of the textbook; it goes further to provide some suggestions as to how to adapt to the new culture effectively.

1.2.1 Cultural Separation

“It occurs when immigrants value holding on to their native culture, turn their backs on interaction with the host culture, and turn inward toward their native culture” (Samovar et al., 2007). It specifically refers to the separation of humans into racial or other ethnic groups in daily life, namely racial segregation. Separation occurs when individuals hold on to their native culture, and reject the host culture.

In *New Horizon College English 4—Reading and Writing*, Unit 8, Section A, “Slavery Gave Me Nothing to Lose”, we can find plenty of illustrations of cultural separation. The author starts with “Up to my thirteenth year I lived in the little Negro town of Eatonville, Florida. It is exclusively a black town. The only white people I know passed through the town going to or coming from Orlando, Florida” (Zheng, 2011). These descriptions show that the black and the white did not live in the same section. And if the author’s family see her speaking to the white people, “the conversation would be rudely broken off” (Zheng, 2011). Obviously, because of racial discrimination, the black people turn their backs on the white people. They refuse to interact with the dominant culture and forbid their children to do so. Teachers can use these descriptions to illustrate the concept of cultural separation to students, so that students will get to know some intercultural knowledge as well as the history of another culture.

1.2.2 Cultural Integration

It is a form of cultural exchange in which one group assumes the beliefs, practices and rituals of another group without sacrificing the characteristics of its own culture. As Samovar et al. (2007) describe, “it occurs when individuals are able to adopt the cultural norms of the dominant or host culture while maintaining their culture of origin” (p. 401). This means that cultural integration is positive because nothing is lost. Seen from this light, cultural integration is a healthy intermingling of the beliefs and rituals of two unique cultures. Teachers are obliged to help students realize the importance of cultural integration if they want to develop healthy relationships and become functioning members of their new communities.

Again in “Slavery Gave Me Nothing to Lose”, we can find evidence of cultural integration. Unlike her family, who turn their backs on the white people, Zora “usually spoke to them in passing. I’d wave at them and when they return my wave, I would say a few words of greeting” (Zheng, 2011). This shows that Zora sees herself as equal to the white people, and she interacts with them in a very normal way. However, when she was sent to school in Jacksonville, she was forced to realize their difference. As she writes, “Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the granddaughter of slaves” (Zheng, 2011). Even in this case, she sees the situation in a positive light, contending that “No one on earth ever had a greater chance for glory—the world to be won and nothing to be lost” (Zheng, 2011). It is this attitude that enables Zora to live an equal life and keep a healthy relationship with the white people. She can sit in a restaurant with a white person chatting about any little things that they have in common. Teachers can ask students to compare the attitudes and behaviors of Zora and those of her family, so as to inspire the students to get a more comprehensive understanding of cultural integration. By doing this, students will be more likely to maintain a healthy relationship with people from other cultures.

1.2.3 Intercultural Adaptation Strategies

After introducing to students some basics of intercultural communication knowledge like culture shock and acculturation, it's time to give them some instructions on intercultural adaptation strategies. And all the texts we have analyzed above can give the students some insights.

For example, in "Culture Shock", the author mentions that "acquisition of understanding alleviates much of the stress" (Zheng, 2011). By this the author means that new comers should try to understand the things that make them feel uncomfortable or strange. This requires them to firstly be aware of the differences between two cultures and keep an open mind. In this way, they can learn new cultures and new people, and know better about their original culture and themselves.

In "Rich Meeting His Future Mother-in-law", Rich should have claimed that the steamed pork and preserved vegetable dish is the best he has ever eaten instead of pouring "a riverful of the salty black stuff on the china plate" right before his future mother-in-law's shocked eyes (Zheng, 2011). The lesson we can learn from Rich's failure is that he should have made an effort to learn some common "rules" of Chinese culture. This includes religious orientation, political system, key values and beliefs, verbal and nonverbal behaviors, family organization, social etiquette, language, etc.

In "Slavery Gave Me Nothing to Lose", Zora, unlike other black people in her town, is able to communicate with the white people comfortably. She appreciates the difference between black and white cultures, and in turn, she wins respect from the white people. Zora's case shows that only by accepting and appreciating the differences between cultures, showing mutual respect to each other, can we be more tolerant of each other and adapt to the foreign culture more successfully.

Through analysis of culture shock, intercultural adaptation, and their manifestations in the textbook, this part of the paper shows that if fully used, this textbook would serve as a wonderful source to prepare students with useful intercultural communication knowledge, which can help them to live more comfortably and work more effectively in intercultural environments.

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