

On Intercultural Communication Teaching and Learning in TEFL

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Abstract: In order to make students have a good command of English, teachers in TEFL should pay more attention to the cultural learning of target language, because language and culture are inseparable. In the teaching practice, What TEFL teachers do first is help students learn to know and obtain pleasure from the exploration of new things. And then create authentic cultural contexts for learners to understand both the target language and the target culture. What is the most important is that teachers and language learners should have cross-cultural communication perception.

Keywords: Cultural learning; TEFL; Pleasure; Perception

1. Introduction

For a long period of time, influenced by instrumentalism, people used to regard language as a kind of instrument. So people only attach importance to the language itself, but pay no attention to culture. They thought, through focusing on phonemes, morphemes, words, phrases and sentences, they could communicate with native speakers effectively by grasping the language itself. Yet, various surveys conducted by Chinese scholars show clearly that our students are quite unable to communicate successfully with foreigners despite their accurate pronunciation, grammatical competence, and a good command of English vocabulary^[3]. They tend to consider customs of other countries in their own, and frequently impose their own system of values on that of the target culture. Thus communication breakdown and even culture shock may occur. In 1971, Hymes put forward the theory of communicative competence^[8]. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACEFL) put forward to five standards of C: communication, culture, connection, comparison and community.^[1]It is generally acknowledged that language and culture are closely associated with each other. And nowadays people have realized that language teaching should not only cultivate the learners' linguistic competence but also their communicative competence that is closely related to cultural factors. One cannot hope to have a good command of a target language without adequate knowledge of the culture related to that language. In this sense, acquisition of information about foreign culture is as important as language learning itself.

2. Relation between language and culture

Many linguists explore the relation between language and culture, which is an extremely complex issue to discuss. Nida holds the view that "language and culture are two symbolic systems, everything we say in language has meanings, designative or sociative, denotative or connotative. Every language form we use has meanings, carries meanings that are not in the same sense because it is associated with culture and culture is more extensive than language"^[5]. It is commonly agreed that language and culture are inseparable.

Cultural studies provide learners with insights into the target culture, offering an opportunity to understand other countries, peoples and life styles without direct experience. People may become more tolerant of other cultures and less narrow-minded. Cultural studies may broaden people's horizons and develop their personality. Just as is proposed by Rivers, one of the objectives of teaching a foreign language is to give students the experience of expressing themselves within another framework, linguistically, kinesthetically and culturally, and another is to bring students to a greater understanding of people across national barriers, by giving them a sympathetic insight into the ways of life and ways of thinking of the people who speak the language they are learning^[7].

Moreover, many of the factors that give rise to linguistic variation are sometimes discussed in terms of cultural differences^[9]. It is not unusual to find linguistic features quoted as identifiable aspects of “working class culture” or “African-American culture”, for example. In the study of the world’s cultures, it has become clear that different groups not only have different languages, they have different worldviews that are reflected in their languages.

Sapir-whorf hypothesis suggests that our language mould our view of the world^[2]. It can be perceived that there exists a close relationship between language and culture. So in the practice of teaching English as a foreign language, focusing on developing learners’ cultural capacity is very important. Principally, there are at least three objectives for us to teach culture in our language class: 1) To get the students familiar with cultural differences; 2) To help the students transcend their own culture and see things as the members of the target culture will; 3) To emphasize the inseparability of understanding language and understanding culture through various classroom practices. All this leads to a belief that a good understanding of structural things in some cases has much to do with a conscious understanding of the cultural background of the target language from language learners. In other words, a successful master of a given language has much to do with an understanding of that culture, because language and culture are correlated with each other at different levels of linguistic structure.

3. Approaches adopted to culture learning

To know another culture is a rather difficult job. To act or behave appropriately in another culture is a more demanding task. In order to develop learners’ cultural capacity, teachers must be aware of several steps in bringing about change in learners. What TEFL teachers do first is help students learn to know. That is to say, teachers should help students to make a change from ignorance to awareness of foreign culture and foreign countries. Information about foreign people, their ways of life, their countries and the achievements of their civilization are needed in TEFL classroom. The pleasure of learning a foreign language can derive from learning the culture which is conveyed by language itself. Language is the vehicle of culture. If learners can learn not only the language system itself but also acquire some cultural knowledge, they will surely obtain pleasure from the exploration of new things. Human beings are intelligent beings, and they will feel tired and uninterested if they are not intelligently satisfied. If teachers can introduce some cultural knowledge in the teaching language, students will surely grasp linguistic data, and at the same time broaden their scope of knowledge. And also students can come to realize the importance of grasping cultural capacity.

However, the possession of knowledge about foreign culture does not guarantee an understanding of foreign culture. So next step, it is necessary to provide practical materials and create authentic cultural contexts for learners to understand both the target language and the target culture. Materials carry the potential to have powerful effects on the people with whom a person may interact. The person must be keenly aware of the effects his or her message have on other people. The most effective way for a TEFL learner is to participate in the community in its cultural environment. A complete and honest intercultural ethical perspective provides similarities and tells the differences. But this is unrealistic for most TEFL learners in China, where it is not easy to communicate one another in English. Without language by using which people communicate, it becomes difficult to understand the culture the language contains. However, as Breen calls, classroom of culture is a real environment where the learner may begin to understand the foreign culture (Xiang Chengdong, 2004: 96). The classroom is an artificially created cultural environment in which culture is created and enacted through the dialogue and activities between students and between teachers and students. Through their dialogue and activities, participants can intimate the context of culture and then understand it internally.

It is generally acknowledged that Western culture originated in Greek, Roman and Celtic culture, which is known as classicism. What’s more, Language and culture influence each other. Though learning culture do the learners grasp language, and through language do the learners understand culture. English is a vital language to understand Western culture. All of this requires that a competent intercultural communicator be able to listen, observe, analyze, and interpret and apply these specific behaviours in a manner that enables him or her to achieve his or her goals of learning language. Hence, in TEFL the teacher and the learners should keep perception in mind, which is also the basic step for other two steps. Perception is the means by which you make sense of your physical and social world. Perception is the process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting sensory data in a way that enables us to make sense of the world.^[6]

4. Conclusion

English, then, is a lower-context language than the Romance language descended from Latin (French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese), while the Romance languages are lower context than most Asian languages. However, a look at the communicating scale and its ranking of cultures from most explicit to most implicit shows that language is not the whole story.^[4] With the increase of widening of cultural knowledge, English learners will inevitably encounter some knowledge related to values, beliefs and religions

of the target language. So teachers of English are responsible for guiding their learners in holding sound views of the cultures of English-speaking peoples. Since the dawn of civilization, when the first humans formed tribal groups, intercultural communication occurred whenever people from one area encountered others of another area and discovered they were not same, not only in language but also culture. From the absence of multicultural awareness and tolerance to cultural exchanges having accelerated, societies around the globe have been interwoven into a complex and complicated fabric. Learning a foreign language has become a very significant tendency, in the process of which to understand culture is inevitable. Perception is the basis of the steps, and the others also play very important roles.

On the whole, if teachers combine culture teaching with language teaching, students can obtain pleasure from understanding the differences and similarities between their mother-tongue culture and target-language culture. Needless to say culture teaching is an essential supplement in TEFL.

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