

An Analysis on Cultural Immersion in English Teaching in Universities

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Abstract: The culture immersion should be brought into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in Chinese universities. Understanding English culture can help Chinese students deepen the understanding of the English language and communicate more effectively in English. This paper introduces the concept of culture and links culture with language teaching. In literature review, the author describes historical status and current reform of English education in Chinese universities as the background of this research. Then, this paper explains the reasons for integrating culture with English teaching in Chinese universities. Strategies for integrating culture with English teaching are studied to provide feasibilities for this practice. The author generalizes difficulties in culture immersion in the EFL classroom. In the last part, recommendations are made for practice. The aims of this paper are not only to identify the importance of culture immersion to Chinese university students, but also to explore feasible ways for improving cultural immersion in university education.

1. Introduction

Traditional methods of English study in universities in China includes grammar translation and audiolingual methods. These methods put heavy emphasis on repetition and imitation. Many mechanical exercises are assigned to students. In the classroom, the teacher dominates the class, while the students merely enjoy the teacher's presentation. They have few opportunities to participate in interactive activities.

The grammar-translation method is currently used in most universities in China. It is impossible to trace the method back to an originator; but its roots can be found in the formal teaching of Latin and Greek for many centuries^[1]. In China, the main features of English teaching methods in universities remain as follows: The teaching begins with rules, isolated vocabulary items, paradigms and translation. Vocabulary is divided into lists of words to be memorized but there is little relationship between the vocabulary of successive lessons. Pronunciation is either not taught, or is limited to a few introductory notes. Grammar rules are memorized as units, which often include illustrative sentences. The main problem of the method is the neglect of learning communication skills. A great deal of stress is put on knowing rules and exceptions, but the method gives limited

training in actively using the language. In this system of English teaching as a second language in universities, students learn English solely to prepare for examinations. To deepen the understanding of the English language and develop the students' communicative abilities, knowledge of culture, including literature, history, culture and so on, should be added to the current context of teaching English as a second language in Chinese universities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Culture in English Teaching

Before the 1960s, culture is traditionally viewed as “fine arts”. It was also accepted that the patterns of daily life was also emphasized in sociological/ anthropological culture. Brooks combined these two aspects of culture and suggested that “formal culture” meant history or fine arts, and “deep culture” indicated the meaning of sociological aspects of culture. Thus he defined culture as “everything in human life” (sociological definition) and “best of everything in human life” (fine arts)^[2]. Seelye defined culture as “a broad concept that embraces all aspects of human life, from folktales to carved whales” (p.22)^[3]. He added that it encompassed everything that people learn to do. The terminologies of “Big C” (fine arts with a capital letter) and “Little C” (sociological culture with a small letter) were also widely used in professional studies. Today, the domain of concepts of culture is broadened. Many researchers put concepts of cultural awareness, cultural shock into culture studies ^[4] ^[5]. Grammar-translation oriented teaching has decreased the value of English teaching. It is difficult to conceive of a language teaching procedure involving no oral practice but instead rule memorization for its own sake^[6]. The new foreign language standards emphasize the need to integrate culture immersion in the language curriculum ^[7]. This is because of the importance of cultural learning: (1) language study is an essential part in the formal education, because it can lead to a deeper understanding of international culture, and (2) both language and culture will have an effect on the other.

2.2. Integration of Culture and Foreign Language Education in China

It is also widely recognized that Chinese learners spend a large part of their study memorizing texts and lists of words. For many Chinese learners, vocabulary learning involves the systematic memorization of bilingual word lists. By accepting uniformed and centralized textbooks and curriculum design, students seldom achieve their communicative objectives of learning a language. Extra-curricular activities are completely ignored. Some researchers in China have also done research on teaching culture, as well as language, to students in English courses. Hu introduced the relationship between culture education and English teaching. He illustrates three relationships, including English teaching with cultural dimension, culture teaching as a parallel to English teaching, culture teaching as an integral part of English teaching^[8]. In the current system of foreign language teaching, cultural courses are added to courses in only a few schools and universities. Cultural knowledge, cultural understanding and cultural awareness are taught to some extent. Wang has discovered that the main objective of English courses in middle schools and universities is to teach language points^[9]. The research program of current status of English teaching in China shows that culture teaching is not highlighted in most schools and universities, although most teachers and researchers have agreed on its importance^[10]. Communicative methodology is one of the most widely used methods in teaching English culture to improve the students' English skills and their communicative abilities.

Since the 1990s, many universities in China have tried to duplicate the techniques favored in the intensive language courses for English majors. Nowadays the authorities in academia have

acknowledged the importance of the application of linguistic principles to language teaching as well as the collaboration of specialists in various fields in the production of language teaching materials. For the last 10 years, the authorities have taken action to initiate programs of teacher education, materials development, and research in modern-language instruction. The development during this period may be described as one with an emphasis on the ability to communicate in the foreign language. However, the studies on teaching English culture in universities are not enough in current education research in China. Some studies in culture education only focus on the university students whose majors are English literature. There should be more academic studies focused on the method or process of improving university students' understanding of culture.

To fill in the gap of the research in teaching English culture in Chinese universities, this paper will examine aspects of English culture knowledge. This study focuses, in particular, on aspects of formal and semantic knowledge and addresses the following questions: How does understanding English culture help a student learn English? How should the teaching of culture be added to the curriculum of English in Chinese universities? Are there any difficulties in teaching English culture in Chinese universities? And if so, how to solve these problems?

3. Reasons for Integration of Culture Studies in the EFL classroom

“Cultural awareness” has become an important feature of the modern foreign language curriculum^[11]. Teachers are encouraged to set language learning within a cultural context because language and culture are always linked in most occasions. In one aspect, culture relates to traditions, habits and customs of a country. This is an anthropological interpretation. This interpretation tries to explain the differences that existed between people and societies. Culture can also be seen as the best that humanity can aspire to and as providing access to things that are universal value. From this perspective, “culture” is dynamic, progressive and potentially a unifying force. In the school curriculum, many emphases are put on anthropological interpretation of culture. While the universal cultural value is not emphasized as well. Current culture education emphasized differences in daily routines, or some habits. Through this kind of education, cultural comparisons are more likely to be encouraged to seek for what people and societies have in common with each other.

4. Strategies for Culture Immersion in the Foreign Language Education

Researchers have stated that language classes must include the cultural annotations of linguistic units as part of the course content. This is very important, although many teachers have experienced a paradox in integrating culture and foreign language teaching. They may forget their task of teaching language when engaging in literature in culture too much, or they may teach culture unrelated to classroom activities. Culture must be taught systematically in addition to purely linguistic concerns. Seelye stated that foreign language teachers should develop instructional strategies that could be used in and out of class so that they could integrate culture with foreign language teaching^[12]. To be more effective, strategies and activities must include new simulation techniques, sensitivity training, culture capsules, semiotic approaches, and audiovisual aids^[12].

An ongoing question in China over the last two decades has been whether or how communicative approaches can be used in English language teaching^{[13] [14] [15] [16] [17]}. Their researches suggest that there may be specific Chinese culture of learning in terms of beliefs, expectations and practices, which may affect ELT and students' use of English, and that these may be linked to learners' identities. Thus techniques of integrating foreign language teaching and culture, especially for Chinese learners should be looked for in classroom curriculum.

5. Difficulties in Integrating Culture with English Teaching in Chinese Universities

5.1. Class Size

It is very difficult for the teacher and students to communicate and interact with each other in a large class. It is unsurprised that the classroom curriculums are based on book-based or teacher-centered style in the EFL classroom in China. ELT methods are now at the forefront of educational change in China. It has become quite common to see pair work or group work being used effectively, often for practicing dialogues or developing reading and oral tasks. If class size is small, it will be easier for both teachers' teaching and students' learning. That will be of great help for the students to develop their communicative abilities.

5.2. Teacher Education

Bringing culture into the EFL classroom is a great challenge faced by English teachers. Knowledge of pedagogy, anthropology, sociolinguistics and literature is needed to realize the integration. Although in recent years continuing education program for teachers has been developed, the quota is still too limited and the materials for training program are not well organized for culture teaching.

5.3. Students' Attitudes

Chinese students are not open or active in communicating with foreigners. They lose some opportunities to get the knowledge of culture because they are too shy to open their mouths. Although they expect to know foreign culture, they are not active enough to catch the opportunities to grasp knowledge of foreign culture.

6. Recommendations

The application of multiple media is a good way to compensate for the limitation of schedule of English lessons. Multiple media include Internet, videos, cassettes, TV and radio programs and so on. These media should be provided to students as learning media outside the classroom.

Flexible-scheduled training programs for the students are feasible ways to learn culture. In these programs, students are encouraged to study independently. They are not always taught by the teachers. Sometimes they study independently under the teachers' guidance. According to flexible-scheduled training programs, students should discuss their plans with the teacher, individually, in pairs or in groups. After deciding their study plan in detail, the students will study independently according to the plan. The teachers are the guides of the students. They help the students plan the study program, give suggestions on choosing materials and media, help them solve the problems in the process of independent study. At the end of these programs, free talks or discussions should be organized by the teachers to let the students share their experiences and outcomes. Another suggestion on these programs is that the assessments on the programs should be made by both teachers and students, because assessments are valuable for their future teaching and study.

Overseas immersion is also a good way to develop English teachers' abilities of teaching English culture in Chinese universities. Although in recent years, Ministry of Education in China has selected many English teachers to study abroad, social resources are still limited to send all the teachers to study abroad within a short period. It is more practical to invite those who are being trained or have been trained in foreign countries to organize seminars or study groups to share what they have learnt abroad with the teachers who don't have the opportunities to study abroad. This

will be helpful to improve most English teachers' abilities of teaching English culture.

7. Further Study

Teaching Chinese university students English culture will provide a new area of foreign language teaching. In further study, evaluation of the culture teaching should be added in curriculum. And longitudinal researches should be done to identify and solve the problems in teaching culture in the EFL classroom. This will promote the development of foreign language teaching in China.

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