A Study on Cultural Teaching for Non-English Majors
Based on Cultural Acquisition

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Abstract. Language acquisition is a complicated process. Only with grammar knowledge can the international talents never satisfy the need of the new century. However, language skill and cross-cultural communication is greatly restricted by cultural factors. The second language learning includes both language acquisition and cultural acquisition. The teaching mode on the basis of the second cultural acquisition theories is concerned about the fusion of language and culture. It is an organic combination of language teaching and cultural teaching. This paper breaks through the traditional thinking pattern and makes a systematical analysis about language learners’ learning motives, psychological process of the second cultural acquisition, and the learning results through the method of a questionnaire survey. Then, the introspection is proposed in both aspects teaching and learning, in order to achieve the goal of gradually improving non-English majors’ second language and cultural acquisition level and cross-cultural communicating ability. It is of practical significance for the future language and cultural teaching.

Introduction

Cultural teaching is proposed by some sociologists and linguists who are well aware of the strong affinity between language and culture. Sapir in 1921 pointed out that language could not exist alone without culture. Language expresses, embraces, and symbolizes cultural facts (Kramsch 1998). Language is rooted in culture and serves as the carrier of culture. Language teaching model cannot be implemented without cultural teaching.

From years of English teaching experience, we have realized that the lagging cross-cultural teaching results in poor cross-cultural communicating ability and weak cross-cultural awareness among non-English majors, which is indicated as: (1) some students hold a negative attitude towards cultural leaning because they assume falsely that cultural knowledge is not included in the formal English test programs; (2) students’ understanding about English cultural knowledge is confined to the surface culture such as literature, history, customs, holidays, etc., but they know little about the deep culture such as communication rules, thinking patterns, and values; (3) with the native tongue interference, most students tend to think from the angle of Chinese language and culture when they communicate or write with English. Those problems restrict the improvement of their language ability and cross-cultural communicating ability to a great extent.

In the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, international talents are required to have solid language skills, adept cross-cultural abilities, wide international views, and broad Chinese spirit. As an organic component in higher education, college English teaching should keep in step with the times and bring out the best of English as the “international communication tool and cultural carrier”, to make an effective combination among language skills, cultural knowledge, and communicating abilities and realize a substantial development of cross-cultural teaching.

Culture and Cultural Acquisition

Culture is created by a group through great efforts. It is social legacy of values, customs, and common sense, consisting of implicit thinking and explicit behaviors. In daily life, clothes, food,
architecture, literature, technology are obvious cultural forms. However, customs, values, beliefs, and human relationships are invisible[1].

Since 1950s, western scholars have begun to concern the second language acquisition, without noticing the second cultural acquisition. Hymes (1971) proposes the idea of “communicating ability”, which includes language ability, language skill, discourse ability, and socio-cultural ability. Since 1980s, some scholars have explore the adjustment problem of language learners, that is, language learners will experience the process of cultural adjustment gradually and they will encounter cultural shock in learning; others have studied the second cultural acquisition from the angle of coherence of language and culture and cultural diversity. Cultural acquisition research has remarkably developed in the approach of cultural acquisition[2].

In China, cultural acquisition has just been mentioned and concerned by scholars. It is worth studying and exploring. Now that only a few English cultural courses are provided for non-English majors in China, it is significant and practical to study their second cultural acquisition process.

Difficulties do exist in cultural acquisition. One is cultural difference. Chinese students are deeply influenced by the Confucianist and Daoist ideas. For instance, on the contrary to the individualism in the west, the collectivist value is highly praised in Chinese society, which meaning sacrificing individual interests for collective interests. Comparing with learners from non-English speaking countries in Europe, it is more challenging for Chinese learners to perceive and understand the western values. The other is the recessive cultural characters. According to the definition of culture, the visible cultural phenomena are only superficial. The explicit behaviors are determined by the underlying implicit ideas. How to understand profound cultural factors through surface cultural facts are much more important.

Research Subjects and Contents

English teaching aiming at training cross-cultural communicators determines that cultural acquisition should run through the teaching process. Apart from providing opportunities to learn and understand the target culture, cross-cultural teaching encourages students to understand their native culture, leads them to form a cultural outlook, helps them to have the same open mind and reflection awareness for the target culture and treat different cultures equally, and guides them to improve their cross-cultural communicating ability.

The purpose of college English teaching in China has always been the basic language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation. This static teaching purpose results directly in exam-oriented teaching: students are sluggish and teachers are monotonous, which is time-consuming and ineffective. Furthermore, the non-English majors do not pay attention to knowledge of humanities and social sciences, especially the foreign traditional cultural knowledge. It is not helpful for the training of highly qualified interdisciplinary talents.

Based on cultural acquisition theories, we implement an orienteering teaching program to non-English majors in Wuhan University of Technology to improve their second cultural acquisition level. Then, through surveys and interviews, we compare their cross-cultural communicating ability and learning effect before and after they take cultural courses.

To Investigate and Analyze the Reason of the Second Cultural Acquisition of Non-English Majors (Psychological Factors and Social Factors)

Similar to the first cultural acquisition, language learners’ second cultural acquisition is influenced by psychological and social factors. On the one hand, learners have their own learning motives, e.g. studying abroad, communicating with foreigners, which probably produce some psychological desires to positively perceive and master the second culture; on the other hand, with the development of globalization, learners are shocked by various foreign cultural facts, e.g. western movies and shows, eating habits, which are all the social factors to affect cultural acquisition. Both make the learners understand, learn, and accept the second culture consciously or subconsciously.

As for non-English majors, this paper will investigate and analyze the psychological and social
factors for their second cultural acquisition. Do they have positive psychology for being eager to obtain more language and cultural knowledge? Or do they have any psychological obstacles for lacking humanities and social knowledge? Can they know about different culture and lifestyle? Or do they have no chance to contact any foreign culture?

To Investigate and Analyze the Process of the Second Cultural Acquisition of Non-English Majors (Cognition, Conflict, Trade-off, Fusion)

Different from the first cultural acquisition, the second cultural acquisition is the expansion and change of the learner’s first cultural system. It is mainly reflected as a process of cognition, conflict, trade-off, and fusion. This paper will investigate and analyze how the non-English majors absorb some factors of the second culture; how they distinguish the first culture and the second culture; how they accept and reject some factors in both cultures; and whether they can realize the fusion of corresponding proportion in both cultures.

To Investigate and Evaluate the Fruit of Non-English Majors’ Cross-cultural Communication Acquisition

Subjectively, personal attitude towards the target culture determines the success or failure of foreign language learning. This paper will investigate and evaluate their language skills, their second cultural acquisition level, and their cross-cultural communication level, and compare those three variables.

Research Results

To match up the college English course reform, we establish a set of analysis and evaluation system for non-English majors’ cultural acquisition.

Investigation

We take the non-English majors of Grade 2015 in WHUT as subjects, and select 8 classes at random for the investigation of questionnaire survey between May, 2016 and April, 2017. Questionnaires are distributed from Wenjuanxi website (http://www.wjx.cn)[3]. Students complete the questionnaires on line, and 226 questionnaires are taken back. There are 26 questions in the survey, mostly multiple choices. The questions cover the channel, motive, purpose, level, expectation, problem, and barrier of cultural learning, and the point of language and cultural teaching in class. Then 8 students of different genders, majors, and English levels are interviewed to study and analyze the influence of psychological and social factors on their cultural acquisition and cross-cultural communication ability.

Cross-cultural Awareness. Surprisingly, it is found that in the overall background of globalization even the non-English majors’ need for target cultural knowledge is greatly increasing and their cultural awareness is gradually improving. In question 2, there is overwhelming majority (94.25%) who think “it is necessary to improve cross-cultural ability in English teaching”, while only a few (5.75%) think “unnecessary”; in question 7, almost half (49.12%) think teachers should aim to “improve communicating ability”; in question 12, most students are “very interested” (31.42%) or “a little interested” (49.56%) in English culture, while very few (2.56%) are “not interested”; in question 19, most students think “it is important to develop the cultural awareness in English learning”, and some of them realize they “have not attach enough importance to it” (30.53%).

Still, we should notice that the traditional learning belief of “scores go first” exists in English learning. For example, in question 1, more than half (56.64%) believe that “in class, teachers should pay more attention to students’ listening, speaking, reading, and writing and test ability”; in question 7, some students (25.22%) think that “teachers’ should aim to help students pass CET-4 and CET-6 tests”.

Cultural Acquisition Channel. The survey indicates that students acquire some English cultural knowledge by learning in class, reading books, browsing internet, viewing movies, which are all
social factors influencing their cultural acquisition and helping them understand, acquire, and accept the second culture. In question 15, 71.24% of students acquire English cultural background knowledge by “internet, books, and movies”; 62.39% by “English textbooks”; 64.16% by “teachers’ introduction”.

**Motives of English Learning.** In question 8, it is found that there are various motives of English learning, such as “find a good job”, “study abroad”, “pass CET-4 and CET-6 tests”. However, many students (44.25%) think English learning is for “know about western countries and culture” and “make cultural exchange between east and west”, which shows their cross-cultural awareness and ability is improving, and their psychological factor of cultural acquisition has gone beyond “cognition” and “conflict” and developed into “trade-off” and “fusion”.

**Experiences of Cross-cultural Communication.** The survey reveals that students generally have very little cross-cultural experience. In question 4, most (86.73%) “cannot communicate with foreigners fluently with English”; in question 6, most (79.65%) “do not have a chance to practice oral English”. In fact, Wuhan is a large international city where a great number of foreign people are studying, working, traveling, and even living. It is possible for students to contact them. Perhaps, apart from some psychological reasons such as “the obstacle of very little vocabulary (87.17%)”, “different thinking patterns between east and west (46.46%)”, and “different traditions and customs (37.17%)”, there are some external factors such as “busy with study”, “little contact with society”, which also influence cross-cultural experience.

**In-class Cultural Input.** According to the survey, the awareness of teachers’ training cross-cultural communication in class is not adequate, although improved gradually. It has not met the increasing demand of the modern world. In question 23, some (40.27%) think the teaching focus should be on “training students’ listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities”, others (29.2%) think on “guiding students to learn vocabulary and grammar in texts, and still others (28.32%) think on “ training students’ cross-cultural awareness and ability”; in question 25, most believe that cultural teaching should be “greatly increased” (41.15%) or “properly increased” (50%); in question 26, only some (31.86%) are “very satisfied” with cultural teaching in class, most (63.27%) feel “basically satisfied”, a few (3.98%) are “not satisfied”, and even several (0.88%) are “never satisfied”, which shows further improvement of cultural teaching and cross-cultural ability will be practiced in the future.

**Exploration**

Based on data and records in the survey, we try describing and analyzing the cultural acquisition process of non-English majors in learning cultural courses.

In English learning, nothing is better than motives to influence acquisition. Wen Qifang classifies motives into deep motives and surface motives. Surface motives are for the superficial material stimulation, for instance, learning English for higher scores, better school, better job, or higher income; while deep motives are for interests or knowledge instead of material stimulation. The division line between them lies on interest. Generally, interests can be changed and developed. Thus, these two types of motives are mutually transformed[4]. The motive difference will result in different learning results. Learning motive is a key factor to success or failure. Besides, in the background of globalization, learners are shocked by various foreign cultural facts, such as western movies, western eating habits. They are social factors, influencing their cultural acquisition and helping them understand, study, and accept the second culture consciously or subconsciously.

Cultural courses are characterized by complicated system, numerous contents, large vocabulary, which makes students produce fear psychology. Even with some language knowledge, students are easily directed into a wrong area, that is, they take the detailed points as the learning target, instead of the comprehensive cultural system, not to mention the cross-cultural comparison. Some students study hard. They are interested in western culture and familiar with the western geography and history. But when communicating with foreigners or appreciating western movies, they feel difficult to understand the cultural foothold.
Therefore, stimulating the learning motives should be brought into cultural teaching. The teaching materials and difficulty level should be chosen and the teaching progress should be controlled according to different motives, in order to create effective external stimulation for students’ cultural acquisition. By understanding the positive role of culture for language learning, students come to realize that language learning is not only the simple grammar learning, but communication. Students are equipped with independent environment and reasonable materials, and teachers should arrange some suitable tasks for them, both challenging and acceptable. The abundant multimedia teaching tools are adopted to help students obtain more perceptual novelties and acquaintances and improve their interests and enthusiasm. With all those methods, most students can conquer their anxiety and develop their interests in the foreign culture, achieving cultural tolerance and fusion to some degree.

**Introspection**

In English teaching, teachers should carefully reflect and evaluate teaching ideas, objectives, contents, strategies, and effects to enrich the teaching practice and promote the cognition development. In the meanwhile, they should guide students to reflect and evaluate their own studying process to improve their English level. Students’ introspection includes: to begin with, their principal knowledge, thinking pattern, cognitive level, learning style, interests, and thinking characteristics; then, what strategies and methods are adopted in their learning, how are those strategies and methods found, which ones are summarized as experiences, which ones are lessons, and what problems still exist in their learning; finally, consider the gap between the actual learning effect and the anticipated result, evaluate their own learning process, and find out the problems and come up with remedies. Self-reflection and self evaluation will help to promote cognitive development, adjust teaching strategies, modify teaching status, enrich teaching practices, and therefore, improve the teaching efficiency and quality.

Cultural teaching is a new attempt in college English teaching. It has reformed and developed the traditional language teaching, meeting the need of training international talents. Students’ cognitive level and language ability also greatly influence the cross-cultural awareness. Further research is needed for more detailed and profound analysis.

**Conclusion**

The second cultural acquisition has always been an important aspect in the research of the second language acquisition and teaching. It is necessary for the development of language teaching to realize the relationship between language acquisition and cultural acquisition and stress the importance of cultural acquisition in language teaching. On the other hand, the research of the second culture should begin with the first culture, to obtain the balanced and dynamic development between. Finally, cultural acquisition will promote language acquisition to improve the college English teaching level for non-English majors.

**References**


