The Cultivation of Cross-cultural Communicative Competence in ELT in Higher Vocational Colleges

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Abstract

Higher Vocational English teaching involves not only the teaching of basic knowledge of vocabulary and grammar but also the cultivation of students’ intercultural communicative competence. In order to improve their abilities in cross-cultural communication, language teachers should develop not only their language competence, but also communicative competence. This paper presents an understanding on the general cultural differences between the west and China, analyzes the current situation of Higher Vocational English teaching in China, and gives some suggestions concerning the goals of foreign culture acquisition and the ways of culture training.

Key words: Intercultural Communication, ELT in Higher Vocational Colleges, China

1. INTRODUCTION

With the globalization of world business, the problem of cross-cultural communication arises gradually seriously between China and its culturally different Western partners continues to increase at an unprecedented rate. In general, China stresses the social role of the group, whereas Western people emphasize individuality. Collectivism is believed to generate more submissive behavior among Chinese in group interaction processes. Specifically, the collectivist concern of Chinese to avoid interpersonal disharmony becomes salient, and this concern can consequently encourage an Chinese group member to avoid open disagreements with other group members and shift toward the majority position more often than Westerners do. Compared with their Western counterparts, Chinese are more situation-centered and are more externally oriented. Westerns admire the self-made person—the one who, with neither money nor family influence, fights his or her way to the top. Chinese culture stresses the importance of maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships and acting in a manner appropriate to one’s position in a hierarchical social situation. Therefore in group interaction processes, they are inclined to be more restrained, cautious, patient, and self-contained, and less impulsive, excitable, spontaneous, and natural than Westerns.

2. The Importance of Cultivating the Awareness of Cross-cultural Communication in ELT

The teaching of a foreign language inevitably involves the teaching of foreign cultures. As is known to us all that language is a tool for people to communicate with each other. It contains documents, articles and words people often write. And culture is often referred to the country, the language, the people, the religion, the political institutions, the economy, the social welfare, the mass media, the social behaviors and attitudes and so on. Therefore, language is a part of culture and a means of the culture transmission at the same time, language is influenced by culture and influences culture itself, too.

English, as a foreign language in China, should be regarded not only as a resource for learning foreign cultures

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but also as a means of cultural interaction. In fact, it necessitates cultural interaction. But in the past, especially in higher vocational colleges, the overemphasis on language structure treats English as a set of abstract linguistic rules, an empty code system or a culturally neutral instrument. However, by focusing on the teaching of language structure in higher vocational college, we may not establish a foundation for developing learners’ capability for interaction, given that a good understanding of both home culture and foreign culture is the basis for interaction. Therefore, the study of culture, to some extent, may lead to liberation of the mind, to greater international understanding and cooperation, and an acceptance of other people’s ways and values. Nevertheless, it is too simplistic to think that the study of foreign culture will automatically lead foreign language learners to develop creative power and capacity for change. In other words, the learners may gain cultural knowledge through cultural studies, but this does not guarantee an understanding of the target culture and change of attitude. The knowledge and awareness of the differences that exist between cultures does not mean the application of cross-cultural communicative strategies. Knowledge and awareness provide little more than the building blocks upon which attitudes can be erected: individuals can hold undesirable and intolerant attitudes, while still being knowledgeable and aware.

In recent years, China's higher vocational colleges is also booming, but in today's teaching process of higher vocational college, it is difficult to realize the goal of improving students’ cross-cultural communicative competence. Higher vocational schools pay more attention to professional training, while neglect English teaching. The English teachers in higher vocational college attach more importance to English knowledge but less to cross-cultural communicative competence. Therefore, nowadays English is taught as a subject but not as a communicative tool in most higher vocational colleges in China.

In attempting to solve this problem, we suggest that we should focus on developing Chinese students’ cultural creativity in ELT of higher vocational colleges, Cultural creativity refers to a capability which is to be achieved through acquiring knowledge about foreign culture, embedded in language and beyond language, through using this knowledge in the performance of inter-cultural communication and creating new thinking for a new action. Cultural creativity is a kind of creative power to be obtained through language and culture learning. We use “creativity”, rather than “capacity” here, for the notion of cultural creativity pays more attention to the students’ capability to take part in cultural interaction rather than his/her ability to use a language. To develop students’ cultural creativity, first of all, we should consider how to help the Chinese student gain knowledge and raise their cultural awareness. When a person knows little about foreign people and countries, they assume that the ways of life of people in foreign countries are exactly the same as those at home.

As a result, they use their own norms of behavior to interpret foreign people’s thinking, behavior and even appearance. So Chinese students should be exposed to sufficient information about foreign culture and then they can turn external knowledge into their own internal knowledge. Secondly, Chinese students should understand foreign culture and their home culture on the basis of previous experience and new knowledge. Finally, from knowledge to understanding, Chinese students should be encouraged to develop an independent ability to perceive “their previous perceptions” so that they establish a dialectical relation with reality.

3. The Strategies of Cross-cultural Awareness Cultivation in ELT
Cross-cultural awareness acquisition is one of the major goals of foreign language teaching. Cultural awareness is the term used to describe sensitivity to the impact of culturally induced behavior on language use and communication. In order to improve students’ consciousness on intercultural communication and cultivate their socio-cultural abilities, the best way is to immerse them in the English cultural atmosphere and make contact
with native speakers in person. For doing this, we cannot only get some rational knowledge on their culture, but also learn their culture through the perceptual comparison between their culture and ours. Some strategic measures are recommended here to help English-learners in higher vocational colleges better perceive and understand cross-cultural awareness:

3.1 Creating western cultural atmosphere

We can create Western cultural atmosphere, make ourselves plunged in the atmosphere and learn to speak proper language in different situations. On the cultural atmosphere’s creation, we can achieve this by watching movies or by cultural performance. It is an effective method for us to improve our socio-cultural abilities through cultural performance. For example, we can imitate the situation in daily life, such as greetings, chats, reserving by telephone, sending a birthday present, etc. We play the roles and realize the cultural differences, and then we can enhance our understanding and endurance on their culture.

3.2 Introducing some original textbooks in classroom teaching

For many years, our textbooks, especially some primary textbooks have put much emphasis on linguistic style while neglect their social meanings and usage in real workplace situation. We often break westerners’ cultural rules in Chinese school textbooks, but in the original books, there are no such problems. Thus, we have to learn from the original books and understand more about their culture, customs and workplace rules.

3.3 Cultivating students’ intercultural awareness by reading literature widely

Many people think that reading comprehension is a process of understanding words, sentences, and then translating them into our native language. In fact, reading is a complicated thinking process, it’s a process in which one’s language knowledge, cultural knowledge and other specialized knowledge are affected together, and also it’s a process of guessing and correcting our thoughts by using this knowledge. It is generally accepted that literature is a reflection of real society. Society’s view, values and beliefs: a reflection of the social, political, cultural development of any society. It reveals people’s ideas and dreams in the most creative and imaginative way. Literary works live in time--in the past, at the present, in the future; there is also a certain continuity of time. This continuity can be interpreted in the following way: in the literature of the past we can find the roots of the present; in the literature of the future we believe we’ll see the traditions of the past. Therefore, Literature texts are suitable for developing intercultural communicative competence

3.4 Making Chinese students seek every opportunity to speak with foreigners

Needless to say, foreign teachers who are authentic culture carriers of their native countries are ideal narrators of their own culture. Most of us are sure that we can learn more about cultural background knowledge of the English-speaking countries from our foreign teachers. We can hear our foreigners’ personal and oral explanation about their own culture from daily contact with them face to face, and observe and sense the shades of differences between Western and Chinese cultures through their actions and responses to the existing culture.

3.5 Making Chinese students learn from English teachers actively

In English study, our English teacher plays the role as a bridge and an explainer. He is very familiar with our Chinese culture and Western culture and can help us avoid using our cultural standards to judge Western culture, and then helps us build up intercultural consciousness as soon as possible. For example, he will explain to us words having cultural meanings, such as fireplace, pudding, sandwich, etc. These things belong to Western culture and can hardly be seen in China, but with the teacher’s help we can get their meanings fast and understand them better.
4. Conclusion
To sum up, the relation between language and culture determines the importance of culture teaching. Especially in ELT, it is necessary and urgent to teach not only cultural knowledge information but cultural communication information as well. Briefly, Culture is an indispensable ingredient of communication and cultural competence. Only when students master the effective communicative skills and apply them to real communication can they succeed in cross-cultural communication.

Reference