Cross-cultural Communication and ELT in China

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Abstract: Culture plays a significant role in teaching and learning a language. The acquisition of cultural knowledge is an indispensable part of language learning. This paper discusses the importance and necessity of cross-cultural communication in the language teaching, and focuses on three parts: 1) analysis of cultural differences and snags in cross-cultural communication; 2) discussion of cross cultures and language teaching; 3) suggestion and method: developing cross-cultural awareness to improve ELT. Language teaching may become more effective through a close consideration of the differences between two cultures. Teachers should increase students’ cross-cultural awareness and help them overcome cultural snags, so that they can acquire a communicative competence along with an efficient knowledge of culture.

Key words: cross-cultural communication, cultural differences and snags, cross-cultural awareness, ELT

1. Introduction

According to sociolinguistics, language is regarded as a means of communication and the goal of language teaching is to equip students with communicative competence. Learning to communicate is a socialization process, so language teaching involves not only a set of grammar rules and lexical items, but also a set of social conventions governing language form and behavior within a communicative group. A language should be learnt as it is used by its people. That is to say, it should not be learnt in isolation from its social context. “Culture is the context within which we exist, think, feel and relate to others.” (Brown, 1980) In this sense, culture actually refers to a total pattern of ideas, concepts, beliefs, customs, codes, institutions, works of art, ritual ceremonies and so on. Language, influenced and shaped by culture, is the keystone of culture. A mastery of a foreign language is hardly possible without the understanding and knowledge of the cultural values and traditions of a given country. Here, culture has a role to play — a role which helps to broaden communicative and intellectual understanding. We might say that culture includes communication and communication includes language. Language is “an integral part of the culture with which it is connected.” (Hendon 1980) Learning a language is inseparable from learning about its culture.

However, in most English language teaching (ELT) courses in China, teachers do not pay much attention to the acquisition of cultural knowledge. As a result, what the learners learn is a set of correct utterances which are isolated from the real situations. They can produce grammatically correct sentences, yet their language may appear awkward to English native speakers or even cause misunderstanding.

2. Analysis of cultural differences and snags in cross-cultural communication

Problems and misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication are often described as resulting from cultural differences and snags. Since they are often conspicuous in situations of international contact, they may be taken at face value for causes of various outcomes of such situations. Furthermore, cross-cultural communication does not necessarily involve two or more persons, but does involve at least one person, and those cultural differences and snags manifest themselves in the reactions of this individual to persons, objects, or conditions representing a different culture. The author presents here a brief analysis of cultural differences and snags in cross-cultural communication so as to avoid cultural mistakes.

The usual errors in sociolinguistical inappropriateness have something to do with ways of greeting, farewell and addressing people.

For example, an ordinary greeting around meal time in China is like this, “Have you eaten?” or “Have you had your lunch?” To a Westerner, such a greeting could indicate an invitation to a meal, though it does not contain this meaning in Chinese. He may probably answer, “I haven’t either. Let’s go and get
something to eat.” When a Westerner is seen out, the Chinese host will admonish him to go slowly by saying “man zou”. It actually sounds very strange to Westerners. In China, we can hear the common forms of address like these: Zhang Laoshi, Li Kezhang or Wang Jingli. While in English, there are no such addresses as Teacher Zhang, Section Chief Li or Manager Wang. The Westerners may find them very amusing and strange.

2 There are also conflicts of different value systems, educational concepts and social practices.

For example, we Chinese like to inquire into the privacy of other people to show friendship and intimacy. Consideration of each other’s comfort and health, an interest in each other’s business and activities are often found in China, especially in the rural and small town life, and questions about a person’s age, salary, marriage or the price of an item are perfectly accepted in Chinese culture. But all these are not in the West, where people are constantly on guard and value their privacy very much, just as a proverb goes “good fences make good neighbors”.

Traditional Chinese education enjoins kindliness, hospitality and modesty. When a Chinese responds to a compliment, he usually says, “No, not at all good” or something about not being worthy of praise. The Westerners often view this as false humility. They will reply like this, “Thank you very much.” This remark strikes Chinese as a lack of modesty. As teachers have been long respected in China, it has led Chinese students to behave more deferentially towards their teachers than those in English speaking countries. The more formally the Chinese students address their teachers, the more respect they pay to them. It would be considered rude if they call their teachers by name. While in the West, the more friendly the students are with their teachers, the more likely they are to address their teachers by their given names.

Westerners often use the thanks and apologies routines. They say “thank you” and “ I’m sorry” very often. While in China, among intimate friends, “thank you” is sparingly used; in the family it is still rarer. A Chinese father seldom thanks his son or daughter for the cup of tea brought him or a Chinese husband rarely thanks his wife for the newspaper taken in. In Chinese culture, it is polite to refuse the first or second offer of refreshment. Many Chinese guests have gone hungry because Westerners, especially their U.S. hostess, never presented the third offer.

3. Discussion of cross cultures and language teaching

The analysis of the above cultural differences and snags in cross-cultural communication shows that some are errors which can be put right easily, while those that have to do with values, beliefs and concepts require a great deal of work over a long period of time. In fact, “cultural mistakes” are often worse than linguistic ones and tend to create ill feeling between native speakers and Chinese speakers of English. Wolfson (1983) points out: “In interacting with foreigners, native speakers tend to be rather tolerant of errors in pronunciation or syntax. In contrast, violation of rules of speaking are often interpreted as bad manners since the native speaker is unlikely to be aware of sociolinguistic relativity.” Thus, the above analysis further raises an important question about cross-cultural understanding. Certainly the answer to the question is not easy, but an attempt to answer it will help us study some issues in developing cross-cultural awareness.

From the above examples and analysis, we can sum up three points as follows:
1) Culture plays an important role in teaching and learning a language. The acquisition of cultural knowledge is an indispensable part of language learning. Studying a language without learning the culture is like learning how to drive a car by studying a driver’s manual and never getting behind a steering wheel. We study a foreign language in order to communicate with people who have learned their native language not in a classroom, but in natural everyday interaction with people and situation in their culture. They have learned the intentions behind words and phrases mostly without consciously thinking about them. It has been part of their culture and they have taken it for granted. We, however, as adults learning a foreign language, must make a conscious effort to examine the cultural context of the language we want to learn.

2) Teaching or learning a foreign language involves the overcoming of snags presented by the differences between the culture of the native language and that of the target language. In a sociological sense, culture can be defined as a set of norms, according to which things are run in a particular society or country, and to which most members of the society adhere in value, attitudes interpretations and
behaviors. We learn a foreign language for communication, and we must understand it is the culture that gives that language meaning. In other words, language learning, communication and culture are inseparably linked, and we can’t have one without another.

3) Furthermore, the cultural snags can be defined as a bicultural and monodirectional reactional phenomenon, reflecting individual reactions in situations of cross-cultural communication where cultural differences negatively affect an individual’s ability or willingness to understand, accept or adopt the norms of a foreign culture. That is to say, the reactions represent negative evaluations rather than positive evaluations, dislike rather than like, avoidance rather than approach and so on. “This should be so because aspects of the new culture deviate from the norms of evaluative standards to which the individual is acculturated.” (Ehrenhaus, 1983) Culture should be included in our foreign language program. This is especially relevant to the foreign language learning context in China, where the learner learns a non-native language (e.g. English) in his own culture with few immediate and widespread opportunities to use the language within the environment of his own culture.

4. Suggestion and method: developing cross-cultural awareness to improve ELT

In general, learning a foreign language usually goes along with being exposed to a new culture and developing cross-cultural awareness. Such an awareness is the ability to understand cultures — your own and others — by means of objective, non-judgmental comparisons. It is an appreciation for, an understanding of, cultural pluralism — the ability to get rid of our ethnocentric tendencies and to accept another culture on its own terms. Many cross-cultural interactions go sour due to a lack of such an awareness. For practical teaching purposes, the teacher must know that cross-cultural awareness should be made one of the goals in language teaching. That is to say, as an interpreter and transmitter of culture, the teacher should increase students’ awareness in cross-cultural communication and help them overcome snags arising from cultural differences. We recommend the following:

1) Include more information in English teaching materials on cross-cultural communication, offer more courses in art, literature, history, philosophy and sociology, and ask students to see more western films and read extensively, such as English stories, novels, dramas, plays, writings of science and technology, newspapers and magazines. In doing so, they can understand another culture at a deeper level and learn to respect cultural differences, i.e. to help them to reduce their cultural bias and to grasp the values and beliefs of other peoples.

2) Have seminars or discussions among teachers and students on the cultural traits of different countries, so that students can increase their general awareness, foster greater sensitivity to cultural details, and understand that cultural differences are but a natural phenomenon.

3) Send more students to study abroad, or exchange more students with foreign universities, so as to let Chinese students study in a real English language environment, i.e. to have the chance of mixing with native speakers of foreign languages and “living the culture”.

4) Design new syllabus and curricula which combine language teaching with the knowledge of cross-cultural communication, so that students can not only learn a foreign language but also master knowledge and skills needed in cross cultures. Language is viewed as a means of communication. What the student should do is to learn to use the language for communication. The teacher must adjust or clarify the goals of language skills courses, aiming at developing in the student the competence of cross-cultural communication needed in various future work environments.

5) Help learners develop an investigative nonjudgmental attitude and a high tolerance for ambiguity — which means lowered defenses. Margaret Mead suggests sensitizing persons to the kinds of things that need to be taken into account instead of developing behavior and attitude stereotypes, mainly because of the individual differences in each encounter and the rapid changes that occur in a culture pattern.

5. Conclusion

The author has written this paper with the intention to explore the importance and necessity of cross-cultural communication in the language teaching. Students of foreign languages should attach importance to the learning and understanding of cultural traits and cultural differences.
Cultural understanding is an indispensable part of foreign language acquisitions. Knowledge about the foreign culture is very important for language teachers. This is because no language, whether spoken or written, can be avoid of cultural influences. It should be made clear, however, that studying another culture doesn’t mean embracing it or following its socio-cultural customs, nor does it mean losing one’s own culture. In fact, understanding another culture not only helps one study a foreign language but also helps one appreciate one’s own culture better.

In foreign language teaching and learning, both teachers and students need to understand that the people of other cultures react to the realities of life in many different ways, ie different customs, goals, thought patterns, values, attitudes and feelings. The culture of one’s native language is not the absolute norm. The Chinese way is neither the only way nor the best way. It is simply the way that works best for us Chinese because we have been brought up that way. Similarly, other ways work best for other people. Thus we can “learn to perceive those differences, appreciate them, and above all to respect, value and prize the personhood of every human being.”(Brown, 1980) Therefore, cultural study, especially the study of cultures of English speaking countries, is the subject that Chinese students want and need to cover. All the above suggestions and methods, when put into practice systematically, will contribute to the Chinese students’ understanding of the cultural difference between English and Chinese, help them have a good command of English language, and develop their competence of cross-cultural communication.

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