Cultural Awareness and EFL Learning: Classroom Observation and Case Study

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Abstract:
Learners' cultural awareness toward the target language (English) and its cultural elements has a profound influence on the English learning practice and performance. English learning does not merely mean the memorization of the grammatical formations and accumulation of the lexical items. The inseparability of the language and cultures makes the English learning a process of acknowledging and accepting toward the English cultural features and elements. The present study analyzed the learners' language learning and cultural awareness performance in their English classroom and other occasions of language learning. We found that (1) there might exist a positive impose of the learners' awareness toward English cultural features and their English learning process; the course of the awareness might go together with the entire duration of language practice; (2) The process of awareness and acceptance of the English cultural features or elements among the undergraduate learners was parallel with that of their English learning process and analogy and contrast were employed in the practice and led to gradual assimilations of the elements with their native ones. Besides we also noticed that the personalities and learning styles of the learners also acted as a filter that affected their English learning as well as the cultural awareness and acceptance.

Key words: Cultural awareness    EFL learning    Process    Case study

Background and review of cultural awareness in EFL or ESL learning

Nunan (2001) defines the culture as norms and rules that govern the interactional and personal behavior between groups of individuals. And Levinson (2000) regards that language and the culture it represents are in coevolution and natural language are learned in and through social interaction and constitute probably the most complex cognitive task that human routinely undertake. And language acquisition and learning should fundamental involves the adoption of the cultural interaction and communications.

Cultural awareness refers to the learners' acknowledgement acceptance of the cultural contents and features that target language represents and in foreign language learning environment, it affects their EFL learning process in various ways. Traditionally we had ignored the cultural awareness of the learners and just took EFL (English as Foreign Language) teaching as merely a course of language knowledge interpretation as well as the grammatical formations explanations.

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But we have to make it clear that speaking English is not only about using proper grammar. To use English effectively, the learners need to understand the culture in which it is spoken. Language in other means is the carrier and outer formation of a culture. Littlewood (2000) analyses the causes for differences among the learners of second language, such as motivations, opportunities and abilities of the individuals in language learning process. Learners’ cultural awareness and attitudes toward the target language formed the crucial parts of all the three elements. Reid (2002) also studies the culture and the learners’ learning style in second language learning; he found that the students from cooperative cultures as Japan and China may have different learning strategies comparing with the students from others. Thus he suggested the teachers with good cultural aware should use their own teaching styles and make ultimate use of the learners’ personalities and cultural awareness features in their language teaching practice.

On the other hand, many teaching researchers study the cultural awareness in their classroom activities and put forward practical approaches for in–classroom activities. Tavares and Cavalcanti (1996) insist that “pure information” of language can not lead the learners to a critical think of the contents of the target language, and also it can not arose the learners’ interests in their language learning process; so they tried to use cultural contents in their EFL classroom in Brazil. Goddard (1995) also has states the experiment of arose the genuine awareness of cultures in business English classroom. Scollon (2001) and Rose (2001) also have their classroom experiment of using TV program and pragmatic consciousness raising (PCR) strategies to help the learners in developing cultural awareness in English language learning.

**Practical research program of cultural awareness in EFL teaching and its results**

We have made a two-year classroom teaching experiment on integrating the cultural education and English language learning for non English majors at college level. 7-year students of medicine science (Grade 2001) of our university are involved in our first two-year College English program. The purposes of our experiment are (1) to arouse the learners’ cultural awareness in the language learning process, so as to help them gain and master the target language contextually and meaningfully; (2) to observe the learners learning strategies and behaviors and study the learning strategies and procedures in various contextual learning activities.

There are 115 students in total who passed the National Matriculation English Test (NMET) with an average score 115.3 ± 25.77 in English. Among the students 85 (3 classes) are major in clinic medicine and 30 (1 class) in clinic stomatology. At the beginning of the program we had made a placement test with a combination test paper from NMET (35%) papers, College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) (40%) papers and CET-6 or TOEFL(25%) papers. And their scores are 57.48 (±24.05) of average, and 87 students passed the test with the maximum score of 89 and minimum 42. New College English (complied by Zhejiang University and published by Foreign Language teaching and Research Press) series are used as their text books in classroom teaching and learning.

During the two-year college English program, besides the text book teaching in classroom activities we also utilized various means such as literature( 1st and 2nd semesters), movies(3rd and 4th semesters), English drama(1st semester) and others as supplemental activities in the course of English teaching and learning. Some (such as poems and movies) were introduced by the teacher in classroom teaching as additional materials for the appreciation or understanding the main text materials. Some (such as novels and dramas) were assigned to the learners as out-classroom
autonomic learning activities.

Drama is a useful form and activity to arouse the learners’ awareness toward the real culture of the target language. Though many people debates that it represent the real language in use or not, (Ainy, 2000) many people insisted its effectiveness and practice in EFL language learning in various environments (Wilkinson, 2001). In our experiment, the learners were assigned to dramatize the text that they learned in class or they could adopt some available short dramas from other resources. The interesting phenomenon merged as their performances on stage, the adapted plays from the text book (A Merry Christmas—Unit 4 of Book One), because it was lack of playable spots or dialogues in text, was acted as a merely short play of Chinese Spring Festival celebration in English forms and Christmas titles. The learners had tried their means to show the Christmas Eve in an English family but we found a lot similarities to that of a Chinese gathering and dining at the Spring Eve time. While the other adopted materials since they had done a lot imitations to the video disc and show (Cinderella, as an example) had a better result in both performance and language practice. Thus the performance results told us that imitation of the existing materials can arouse the learners’ active awareness to the cultural feature that the language present and have a better access for the learners to understand the real language.

In our experiments we also notice that, our learners showed great enthusiastic passions in participations of the language classroom and after class activities. They practiced their oral communication skills in Drama Contest and Literature Reading Competitions Their reading skills and abilities of the appreciation of English literature grew together in their simplified masterpiece enjoyment and lectures given by literature teachers. Their language communication abilities and performance both in class room activities and various tests and contests have changed greatly. Their reading skills have improved greatly via reading the literature works. In the first semester, the average score of reading comprehension of the experimental classes in the terminal test was 16.12/40 and in the second semester, as we conducted the reading practice, increased dramatically to 21.57/40 and later remained the constant increases in the third (20.76/40) and fourth(20.17/40) semesters.

The learners, in their language learning process, show divergent attitudes toward the language and the cultures it represented. Samovar et al. (2000) studied the process of adaptation of the American-English culture of the Chinese immigrants and visiting –students in the USA and found that, open and flexibility were the most effective means in assimilating to the culture that they exposed and the language. Lily-Rong (1987) also noticed that immigrants from Asia countries when learning the language in an English host environment have the positive procedures of cultural briefs conflict and adaptation and then assimilation. They both refer to the learners behaviors in an English host environment. Our learners, however, in a Chinese-host environment and their cultural awareness can be aroused only by the stimulation of their enthusiasm and motivation via various activities that fit their cognitive features and personal interests. In our experiment, we used both carrots (soft means) and sticks (hard drives) in the learners’ formation of cultural awareness and make and effective access to the language itself. The soft means as drama show and language contests were used to stir up the cultural awareness of those eager to learn the language well and extrovertly learners in their language learning and they were also changed as the learners matured and developed in their psychological features and cognitive styles; the hard drives such as test score requirements and place credits to the activities of cultural awareness both in and out classroom motivated and encouraged those had difficulties in English learning and
introvert learners.

From the feedbacks from the learners we can see that they got something fun in learning English when its cultural messages were accompanied. The learners from villages and remote areas felt the drama show performances were fun and fresh to them: “I have never thought that I can play on the stage when I was a high school student, what I told in school is study and memorization of texts or new words and do a lot more of assignments and tests. Though in the first semester I dropped a little in my English test, I still feel that my English has improved a lot as I can speak and listen to the language.” (Student A, female, from a village high school of Hunan) While on the other hand a student from a key high school found it hard and encouraging in reading an entire novel in a given period of time. “I like reading and I think I got to know much about English culture as I saw a lot of films and TV programs on English culture and the literature. So when teacher urged us to read a classic novel such as ‘Wuthering Height’ I was at first reluctant and felt hard to finish the book, but after I finished it I had a vivid picture of English farmland in the 19th century and after the teacher showed us the movie in class I think I can memorize some of the terms or dialogues in the story, I feel it interesting and helpful for my language study” (Student B, male, from a Key high school of Changsha)

In our follow-up questionnaire survey just after their CET test, 63.48% (73/115) of the learners made strong agreement with the idea that language learning should go together with cultural education, 21.23% (26/115) though they should know something about the English culture while learning English. While the 8.70 % (10/115) others failed in responding to our survey and the negative answers were about 5.21% (6/115) regarded the activities useless and wasting of time. In the same survey we also found that female learners showed more interests in drama show and literature reading. Male learners showed great fun at watching English movies and TV programs, they preferred some do-it-out activities such as debates and wall newspaper editing activities. They liked to be the onlooker of the drama show if they could, especially the learners from countryside schools.

In practical teaching, we have gained significant achievement in learners’ language performances in various tests and competitions. In the second semester our students participated in the national college English contest, they got four prized and the class average score remained at the top of the entire grade. In the next semester, they took CET-4 with an initiate passage of 84% among the four classes. And in the fourth semester, 38 of the students (33%) passed CET-6. Now they are engaged in the Medical English study and also did well both in class and outclass activities.

Besides, as we had expected, our students also showed better qualities in their personalities social activities. The cultural awareness not only made them to a better access to the language learning but also helped them to purify their soul and polished their behavior and manners. First after all, we have established a new and friendly relationship between the learners and teacher. Both teacher and learners can be more cooperative in class and friendly after class. The classes stand at the top of class behavior in dorms and among the students.

**Case study and classroom observation**

On the other hand, we have observed 20 students of their behaviors in the language. In two year follow-up observation, we have found that among the 20 individuals that we have studied personalities that affect the learners’ awareness to the target cultures. Here are three examples.

Student A is a female student from a countryside high school of Hunan. She majors at Clinic
Student B is male student from a key high school at Changsha. He majors at clinic medicine. He was only 17 when he entered the university. He likes sports and computer as the other boys in city. In his introduction he said “I was a cute and naughty boy, I could manage my course in a few hours while others in my class took several days hardworking, when I was at junior and senior middle schools.” He likes watch and imitation. His English is just at the top score (117) but next to math’s (127) in the College entrance examination.

Student C is another boy who comes from another town in a north province of China. He also majors at clinic medicine. He is pretty quiet when we first meet in class. But he also had a quick mind when he answered my questions in classroom, his favorites were reading. His English score in the entrance test was about 109 and he said his English is just so so, and when he stood up he would feel shy and usually hesitated in answering the questions.

Students A, B, C, are in different classes of clinic medicine. Together with other 17 students in the four class, they were observed and reported in their language learning process. Their behaviors in cultural program activities were also recorded and they were asked to make summary to their English course behaviors in each semester. Personal interviews and chatting were also recorded by the teacher afterwards.

In the first semester, all the learners felt fresh to their new environment of English learning and they were very cooperative with the teacher in what ever the cultural awareness activities that we undertook both in and out of classroom. But the difference among them were (1) Student A showed strong desire in participation in language activities. Her pronunciation and intonation when read and spoke English were not so good, she tried to listen to the tapes and watch movies and chatted with other students in her class. She played an active role in class drama show program. In her summary she explained that “I have learned a lot from the play both in language and cultural learning. I used to read English novels in Chinese and now when I play the role I feel that I am a character in it, though I am not the heroin of the play. I like it very much.” (Original in Chinese) In this semester she ranked 6 in her class for the terminal examinations and her exercises and teacher’s assessment was A plus. (2) Student B also showed a great enthusiasm in various activities and he played the hero in the drama that the class played, he acted a positive role in the cooperation with the teacher in various activities such as wall newspaper design and various English contests that carried out in school. He also got an A plus in the assessment and exercises. In the terminal test, he also topped at his class. (3) Student C very often failed in cooperation with the teacher in activities. He explained that “I like studying, I want to be a good student and I tried my best to memorize the new term and phrases that I need for my English study, I don’t think the drama show can help me so much in English study, what I like the most is how I can prepare for CET and reading and writing English items.” He also worked hard on homework and classroom activities but when preparing oral after class activities he would try to avoid that. He got an A in assessment and placed in 14 in his class for the terminal test.

In the second semester, as we shifted our cultural awareness activities from oral and listening practice toward reading. The student changed their attitudes toward our experiment. Student A remained an opening mind to the assignments of reading simplified novels and other materials,
took active part in reading aloud contest and other activities. During this semester she got a third class prize in college English contest, a first prize in reading aloud competition. And also zoom to the top of her class in English learning; Student B, on the other hand thought in his comments “something seemed become dull for me because they are the old tricks that we had done in my high school, but I think I have to work hard to be the leader in may class,” so he worked in some of the activities but did not like reading the novels. His assessment from the teacher still remained an A plus, and his test score still remain a high level, but some students of his class had overtaken him and placed him at the 5th position. Student C changed his attitude toward the activities, he read novels but took them as textbook and tried to consult every word in the novel and analyzed all the possible sentences that he found difficult to know. He tried to finish an entire novel but failed and say to the teacher, “it is too hard for me, I am poor in vocabulary and grammar because I can not go on my reading without them. He worked hard as his classroom commented and teacher observed, but his English learning kept downward as the other student got higher scores I the tests and teacher’s assessment.

In the third and fourth semester, the cultural awareness activities became more analytical and thoughtful, CET tests and selective courses such as Movie and English Learning; Appreciation of English Music and so on had become their major learning performance. Both Student A and B took those courses but C still worked hard alone for the CET. And the CET test result showed that Student A got 91 in CET-4 (3rd semester) and 84 in CET -6 (4th semester) Student B got 75 in CET-4 and 62 in CET-6 and Student C got 63 in CET-4 but failed in CET-6.

From the case follow-up survey and we kept close observation of the entire 4 classes in their langue learning we can see that 1) Open-minded and explicit learners usually show higher awareness and readiness toward the target cultures and the language learning process. In most cases, this does not always necessarily bear significant correlations to the grades that they get both in class and in tests, but the have better performance in classroom communications and writings. Some of the most active participants in all cultural awareness activities failed in obtaining high score in tests but their, abilities of communication in English are much better than other that worked hard on homework and test papers. They have better oral and writing ability and performance in later ESP learning. 2) Some implicit or ego-centered learners show reluctant to the cultural awareness activities, though they sometimes can have higher scores than in the tests than the learners of the other side, which in turn reinforced their reluctance to the cultural awareness activities thus their language performances and test score become decreased. 3) Men and women may have various interests in the cultural awareness activities, but they may have similar performance in language performance and tests. 4) Generally, the learners with better awareness and readiness to the English cultures can have significantly better performance in the program and they also show their talents in learning other subjects during the two years.

**Conclusion and perspective of the research**

In our experiment and study we found that (1) there might exist a positive impose of the learners’ awareness toward English cultural features and their English learning process; the course of the awareness might go together with the entire duration of language practice; (2) The process of awareness and acceptance of the English cultural features or elements among the undergraduate learners was parallel with that of their English learning process and analogy and contrast were employed in the practice and led to gradual assimilations of the elements with their native ones.
Besides we also noticed that the personalities and learning styles of the learners also acted as a filter that affected their English learning as well as the cultural awareness and acceptance.

From our experiment and observations we come to believe that language teaching is not a pure linguistic code input process, other considerations such as cultural awareness and learning strategy guidance and introduction should be involved. The teacher as an educator should take his or her position as tutor and friend to the learners both in and out classroom. The learners’ progress and achievement on target language are certainly going together with their cultural enrichment and development of personalities and moral qualities.

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