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Study on “Chinese Cultural Aphasia” of Non-English Majors

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Abstract

Learning language is, as a matter of fact, a process of learning its culture. However, current college English language teaching focusses on Western culture, while Chinese culture is being neglected. Therefore, many college students cannot accurately express words or sentences about Chinese culture in English. The study found that more than half of the non-English majors have difficulty in expressing some words or sentences which connect with Chinese culture in English. The author presents some of the causes of this phenomenon and puts forward some relevant strategies to solve the “Chinese Cultural Aphasia”.

Key words: “Chinese cultural aphasia”; Non-English majors; Chinese culture

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INTRODUCTION

Culture, as a soft power, is an important booster of the construction of “One Belt One Road”. For one thing, because of their strong national strength, western countries infiltrate their cultures to China. And people’s values and ways of thinking have be effected by western

cultures, so Chinese people have difficulty in establishing their cultural self-confidence. For another, with the further development of China’s reform and opening up, it is well-known that China is a cultural power, and it is necessary to transmit Chinese traditional culture to the western countries. Meanwhile, Chinese people accept new things from Western countries. At present, many people read English books and watch English movies during their spare time.

It is inseparable between language teaching and cultural teaching. Language teaching involves speaking, listening, reading, and writing while cultural teaching concerns native and target culture. They are complementary in cultural learning. Language teaching provides the most basic learning method while cultural teaching makes someone a better comprehension of the main idea. Although foreign language teaching makes emphasis on native culture teaching, the learners still attend to the target culture.

This study is to find out the current situation of non-English majors’ “Chinese Culture Aphasia” and the reasons and the relevant strategies of this phenomenon through the investigation in Shanxi Datong University. And the author also wants to arouse non-English majors’ attention of the phenomenon “Chinese Culture Aphasia”.

1. CLAIRE KRAMSCH’S PERSPECTIVE OF CULTURAL INTERACTION

Kramsch (1993) is one of the best professors at the University of California. Her major is foreign language acquisition. She has rich experience in foreign language teaching and makes great achievements in linguistics. Her view is seen as the most creative idea in foreign language teaching. And she has published some important papers and books to discuss the teaching methods of foreign language. Kramsch puts forward the issue about cultural interaction and emphasizes the importance of target

culture and native culture in her book *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*.

Kramersch's perspective of culture interaction has two features. On the one hand, compared with the original thought of cultural teaching, her idea on cultural interaction is new, which is a single direction and is limited to target culture teaching. In Kramersch's perspective of cultural interaction, she redefines the importance and the aim of culture teaching. She thinks that culture teaching should integrate the four fundamental skills. And learners should know the native culture as well as the target culture. Therefore, they can deal with some problems that are caused by cultural conflicts. On the other hand, Kramersch pointed out cultural diversity. She explains the complicity of culture and the existence of subcultures. And she also explains the distinctiveness of individuals. She thinks that the target culture is an objective thing which not really exists in the world and everyone has their own view of their own culture. Therefore, she proposes the idea about double-directional interaction. This can avoid cultural conflicts. Cultural interaction is a useful way for language learners to solve some problems and is also a method to balance the target and native culture in foreign language teaching.

2. THE RESEARCH OF "CHINESE CULTURE APHASIA" IN CHINA

Professor Cong first proposed this concept in 2000, and then some relevant studies appeared one after another. A lot of researches proved that the phenomenon of the "Chinese culture aphasia" really existed in many colleges. Now the researchers divide the researches into two types, one is theoretical research and another is empirical research. People gradually realize the close relationship between language and culture, and also realize the importance of culture teaching which is inserted into language teaching since 1980s. "Culture" here is regarded as the "target culture", but the "native culture" is not involved. And until 21st century, this phenomenon makes scholars pay more attention to culture teaching in language teaching. But because of various factors, this situation has not been improved.

2.1 The Research of "Chinese Culture Aphasia" on Theoretical Level

In recent years, researchers have focused more on the target culture and the native culture and they also have studied the relationship between "Chinese culture aphasia" and foreign language teaching. These researches can be divided into two periods. The first period is from 1980s to 1990s. In this period, people pay attention to the skills of the communication in real world and realize the significance of inserting culture teaching into language teaching. Many researches have been done at this stage, for example, the comparative researches between foreign

culture and Chinese culture, which are studied by Deng and Liu (1989). Zhang (1990) put forward the concept of communication information in 1990. He considered that the knowledge culture and communicative culture should be involved in culture teaching. This classification would help students to improve their communicative ability.

The second period is from the 1990s to the present day. In this period, many researches have been done by scholars. They notice the problems which exist in culture teaching in China. And they begin to focus on the native culture teaching and the interaction between target culture and native culture. Hu (1994) put forward that students' communicative competence of cross-cultural was not a transplantation of foreign culture in his book *Culture and Communication* in 1994. In 1997, Hu and Gao (1997) proposed that the aim of culture teaching was to help students to improve their ability and sensitivity of the culture. The ultimate goal was to promote the development of culture throughout the country (p.56).

Cong (2000) proposed that Chinese culture should be inserted into English teaching, and teaching content should be allocated reasonably. Only in this way, Chinese people could have a solid foundation when they use English. He also pointed out that though Chinese educators had noticed that it was important to study culture when somebody learned a foreign language, they paid more attention to target culture teaching rather than native culture teaching. And they also emphasized little in intercultural communication, which led to the difficulty in expressing Chinese culture accurately.

Gao (2001) promoted the "1+1>2" model in the book *1+1>2 Foreign Language Learning Model*, which mainly concerned about the human potential when they studied a foreign language. It is a bilingual teaching model means that when people learn a target language, it is equally important to study the target and native language. It shows that Chinese culture and language learning are complementary (Gao, 2001, pp.59-64). But Liu (2003) found that people have ignored the native culture in language teaching and he emphasized the importance of native culture teaching and put forward some ways to combine Chinese culture with foreign culture (p.34).

Zeng (2005) put forward that the English test should contain Chinese culture. And Cui (2009) proposed that it was significant to integrate Chinese culture in English teaching in his book *Chinese Culture infiltrating in English Teaching*. He proposed some ways to balance the proportion of Chinese culture and foreign culture, such as policy guidance, teaching research, textbook collection, etc. He also suggested that foreign language teaching would help student to cultivate their communicative competence. His opinion bore a resemblance to Peng Yunpeng's. She pointed out that foreign language teaching was a good way to develop students' awareness of intercultural communication. She also mentioned that

college English teachers should improve their ability of culture teaching in order to transmit Chinese culture.

2.2 The Research of “Chinese Culture Aphasia” on Empirical Level

There are some studies on empirical level about “Chinese Culture Aphasia” in China. These researches can be divided into two parts: The one is the study of English majors’ ability of translating words which are related to the Chinese culture, and the other is the investigation of English teachers’ ability of applying Chinese culture in their teaching.

On the one hand, the research focuses on students’ ability of translating words from Chinese culture. Beijing Foreign Language Institute tested students’ ability of expressing Chinese culture in English in 1981. Although the test questions were very easy, students could not give the correct answers. The full score of the test was 100 points, but the average score was only 62 points. In 1991, Shantou University tested students’ ability of translating Chinese culture in English. The outcome was not good and the average score was only 26 points, but the score in total was 100 points. Zhang and Zhu (2002) tested students’ expressive ability of Chinese culture of non-English majors from Tsinghua University in 2002. The result demonstrated that about 70% of the students could not express Chinese culture correctly in English. It showed that Chinese culture was ignored in language teaching. In 2003, Lan (2003) made an investigation of English majors’ expression of Chinese culture in English. He suggested that Chinese culture should be inserted in textbooks, and he also insisted on increasing the study of the Chinese culture in foreign language teaching. And Li (2012) also made an investigation in Heilongjiang University. He tested non-English majors’ ability of expressing Chinese culture in English. He put forward some suggestions on the curriculum, and provided some translation skills.

On the other hand, there are some investigations of college English teachers. The researches are mainly about English teacher’s competence of the application of Chinese Culture in English Teaching. In 2005, Deng and Ao (2005) analyzed the questionnaires from English teachers in some universities of Sichuan. They wrote the thesis of *Analysis of English Majors’ Chinese Culture Aphasia*. Their research tested if the English teachers had realized the existence of the phenomenon of “Chinese Culture Aphasia”. And Xiao and Song (2009) took the *An Introduction to Chinese Culture* as their reference. They investigated English teachers’ knowledge of Chinese culture and the ability of expressing Chinese culture in English. The study showed that English teachers also had problems in expressing Chinese culture correctly. However, English teachers were confident to change this situation.

In short, the ultimate aim of emphasizing the significance of culture teaching is to improve students’

communicative competence. It is equal to native and target culture in language teaching. But people neglect the significance of native culture. Many scholars put forward some suggestions and ideas of mixing native culture with target culture. Although many studies focus on non-English major’s “Chinese culture aphasia”, English majors also do not pay attention to more on this phenomenon. Therefore, it is worth investigating this phenomenon from English majors’ perspective.

3. METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

Although the non-English majors have realized the importance of their native culture, they still care little about their own culture. This thesis aims to find out the present condition of “Chinese Culture Aphasia” among non-English majors and to discover the causes that lead to this phenomenon.

3.1 Research Questions

The research aims to solve the following problems:

- a) What are the factors leading to “Chinese Culture Aphasia”?
- b) What are the suggestions to this problem?

3.2 Research Subject

In this study, 150 non-English majors are chosen in total to take part in the questionnaire. The reason for choosing these students is that they have studied English at least ten years and they have competence to understand the course and content. Their expression of Chinese culture represents whether there exists the phenomenon of the “Chinese Culture Aphasia”. This research is so random that all individuals have the equal opportunity to be chosen as the sample.

3.3 Instruments

The questionnaire is designed to find the reasons of the phenomenon “Chinese Culture Aphasia” and students’ attitude and expectation about inserting Chinese culture in college English teaching. There are 10 multiple choice questions in this questionnaire. Each issue has 5 stages: 1= very disagree, 2=disagree, 3=indifferent, 4=agree, and 5=very agree. And each stage corresponds to the corresponding score of 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.

The questions which are involved in the questionnaire are written in Chinese. The reason is that the students are familiar with their native language and they will not make mistakes in understanding the meaning of those questions. The questionnaire was finished online by students after class. And 132 valid questionnaires are collected.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the author will make a detailed analysis about questionnaire.

Students' attitude to Chinese culture plays an important role in foreign language teaching, because it is helpful for non-English majors to improve their communicative competence consciously. The questionnaire is about the answers of students to the questions of Chinese culture.

According to the questionnaire, 34 students very agree that it is significant for non-English majors to study Chinese culture, and Chinese culture should be inserted in English teaching. The number of students who very agree with the importance of Chinese culture in English teaching accounts for about 25%. Only 8 students very disagree with this proposal, which accounts for around 6%. And there are 67 students who agree with the statement of the importance of Chinese culture, which accounts for about 50%. And 15 students do not agree, which accounts for around 11%. At the same time, there are 10 students who do not care about it, which accounts for about 8%.

32 students very agree that their teachers often supplement some knowledge of Chinese culture in their teaching, which accounts for about 24%. 68 students agree that their teachers sometime supplement the teaching of Chinese cultural knowledge, which accounts for about 51%. And 23 students disagree that their teachers have talked about it, which accounts for around 17%. Moreover, 11 students very disagree with this statement, which accounts for 8%. The next figure aims to find whether or not the Non-English majors study Chinese culture through reading books or watching movies.

Only 10 students very agree that they read books or watching movies that are related to Chinese culture, which accounts for about 7%. And 45 students agree and they sometimes read Chinese culture books, which account for around 34%. And 62 students disagree and they do this rarely, which accounts for about 46%. But 17 students very disagree and they never read a book or see a movie that contains the Chinese culture, which accounts for around 13%.

From this, the author concludes that students know the importance of Chinese culture and their teachers also stress this, but they neglect it and do not make effort to improve their ability. The phenomenon of the "Chinese Culture Aphasia" actually exists among non-English majors in Shanxi Datong University.

From these discussions, the author finds some reasons that cause the "Chinese Culture Aphasia": First, the textbook does not have enough Chinese culture to meet students' needs. Second, teachers do not supplement related knowledge which can stimulate students' interest in learning. Third, there is no course to introduce Chinese culture, so students do not realize the importance of Chinese culture.

CONCLUSION

Mandela once said, "Communicate in the language of understanding, and write it into my mind; communicate

with the language of the earth, engraved in the heart". Therefore, culture teaching cannot be neglected in language teaching. The culture here not only refers to the foreign culture, but also the native culture. If college students know little about Chinese culture, they will have difficulty in translating Chinese culture correctly to foreigners which is called "Chinese Culture Aphasia". Through the study of the phenomenon "Chinese Culture Aphasia" among non-English majors in Shanxi Datong University, the author found that main causes of this phenomenon are: the attitude of students to Chinese culture; the proportion of Chinese culture in textbooks; little involvement of Chinese culture in the examination and incorrect cultural empathy. In order to solve this problem, the author puts forward specific suggestions, such as adjusting our syllabus and curriculum; adding Chinese culture test in final exams, revising the textbook; adopting effective ways of teaching, and helping students to erect correct value of culture. In addition, as for students themselves, they should take part in some activities that are relevant to Chinese culture.

SUGGESTIONS

The author designs this research aiming to know the level of students' knowledge of Chinese culture and find some related factors that lead to "Chinese Culture Aphasia". There are some suggestions to improve the current situation of "Chinese Culture Aphasia".

First of all, it is necessary to modify the syllabus or curriculum in foreign language teaching. The syllabus covers the teaching purpose, teaching materials, and teaching tasks which are very important in the teaching process. However, the main idea of this modification is to improve students' communicative competence and make them easy and confident when they talk to foreigners or introduce ancient Chinese culture to foreigners. And the syllabus should contain common expressions and words which appear frequently.

Furthermore, it is necessary to add the test of Chinese culture in the final exam. The aim of exams is to examine the students' mastery of knowledge that they have learned. From the test, both the teacher and students know their inadequacies. Thus, the teachers will reflect on their own teaching methods and add Chinese culture teaching in their class while the students may do some remedial measures, such as reading Chinese books or Chinese-English translation books.

What's more, it is helpful to choose suitable teaching materials that Chinese culture is included. Good teaching materials will increase students' interest in learning. Teachers can design various teaching materials according to different activities. For example, students can read some traditional Chinese stories before their English writing or make a contrast to Chinese culture and western culture before the class. Then the teachers use PPT or videos to

introduce the background of the thesis that they are going to teach. It is also a good way to improve students' critical thinking skills.

In addition, it is beneficial to add reading homework which is related to Chinese culture after class. All people know the importance of acquiring the related knowledge while they study the new literary works, such as the author, schools he belongs to and the background. People check out some information about Chinese culture after class so that they make a better understanding of the subject of the article by comparing two different cultures in the same age, and it is beneficial to remember the whole article.

Last but not least, it is essential to help students to establish correct value of culture. Students are the subjects of learning. They should pay more attention to their native culture learning and cultivate their cultural consciousness and self-confidence of Chinese culture. They should establish the correct value of culture and try to make a fair treatment of every culture. Only in this way can they better convey the Chinese culture to other countries.

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