

Intercultural Awareness in Foreign Language Teaching: A Chinese Perspective

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Abstract—The paper discusses the status quo of the English culture teaching and learning in Chinese colleges. In the pedagogical level, most foreign language teachers have very vague idea of what the culture should be and what should be taught in terms of English culture. Lacking in the principled methodology in promoting students' intercultural awareness, teachers either turn deaf to the new trend or frustrated by the communicative approach, somehow falling back to the more traditional but effective grammar-translation approach. The changing scenario of language teaching has constituted new challenges for the English educators in China. The paper proposes that more research should be channeled to the research of the paradigm of the English as an International Language (EIL) through intercultural awareness.

Index Terms—intercultural awareness, culture, foreign language teaching, the EIL

I. INTRODUCTION

It is well tested that cultural competence plays a critical role in successful language learning (Ellis, 1994). In terms of English language teaching and learning, the culture of the English-speaking countries, represented by the American or the British culture, has become an inseparable component in the EFL/ESL context. The fact that the target language learning “would lose substance” (Nazari, A., 2007) without proper understanding of the target culture has become unanimously agreed upon by language educators and cultural linguists. *The place for debate is what and how this culture component should be taught to the learners.* The issue has been complicated by the fast spread of the English, as the ownership of the English language has been called into the question (Widdowson, 1994), and the emergence of the diversity of Englishes worldwide, many of them derived from either the colonization or the national determination into the globalized world. The cultural issue in the EFL/ESL, in turn, has become a delicate matter with fast-evolving social changes, as many new symbols were created and old ones redefined. The sociopolitical and geopolitical power has shown increasing presence in determining the relationship between learners and the language they are learning (Byram, M., 2003). In addition, the strong trend toward the multiculturalism and the increasing respect to the minority cultures have undermined the deep-rooted superiority of some cultures and peoples; instead, the “sub-culture” has emerged into “co-culture” (Samovar, L.A. et al., 2004). Meanwhile, the increasing compartmentalization of culture in an individual society has become intense, leaving many new forms of new cultures. In all, language teaching should reflect itself upon those changes and make some moves to streamline the new needs of learners.

Unlike the EFL/ESL learners in many parts of the non-English-speaking countries/areas, Chinese learners of English have less accessibility to the authentic contact with the culture of the English-speaking countries and/or English-speaking communities¹ worldwide. Presently, English culture teaching at college is restricted within the textbook and limited extracurricular activities. Though great achievements have been attained through elevating the culture teaching in the EFL/ESL context, there remains large room for improvement especially in terms of approaches and content of the cultural component in the English language teaching and learning. With that goal, the paper gives a glimpse of the present status of culture in college English teaching and learning through summarizing some major research findings since the early 80s. The changing scenario of language teaching has constituted new challenges for the English educators in China. The paper proposes that more research should be channeled to the paradigm of the English as an International Language (EIL) or English as a Global Language (EGL).

II. CULTURE TEACHING AND LEARNING AT COLLEGE LEVEL

The voice to incorporating the cultural component in the English language teaching has started to be heard in 1980s and become louder a decade later. Up to now, English educators have fully realized the importance of the culture teaching in the process of language learning.

A. Theoretical Consideration

The full-fledged research into the cultural component in the English language teaching in China has been initiated when the communicative approach was introduced into China, followed by the discussion upon the concept of culture

¹ By saying English-speaking communities, I mean that the institutions or areas where English is not the native language but the language of communication, even lingua franca.

and the ultimate goal and content of the English culture education. In term of whose culture shall be taught and learnt for English majors, English educators and applied linguists unanimously favored the British and/or the North American culture, with the increasing profile of the Canadian and Australian cultures in recent decade. With the decline of the British presence on the world affairs and economy, American culture, with its characteristic rhotic accent, has usurped the lion's share of the English teaching market in China and sneaked into the classroom in the new millennium, leaving other types of English and the culture affiliated to it as decentered variant of American English and culture. However, teaching whose English culture utterly depends on teacher's own preference and educational background.

A central academic issue that has been actively discussed in the last decades is how to define culture in term of foreign language teaching. But the definition of "culture" itself and its relationship to language are far from being agreed upon. A somewhat authoritative definition of culture was proposed by Hu and Gao (1997), as mentioned below: "In terms of the FLT we tend to define the term as the life pattern of a target group from the perspective of cultural anthropology. This scope of this definition is rather broad, involving life routines and customs as well as the value orientation implicated in the practices of the customs." (p.8)

Cao Deming (2007)², among others, argues that *culture is the essence of language*, and language learning should be placed in the social framework of the target culture.

A different opinion contends that culture can be separated from language when it comes to the foreign culture teaching. This school of thinking, taking a pragmatic and instrumental view, considers culture as the amalgam of idioms, social customs and practices, and other rituals of a target culture, that can be conveyed through language but is not necessarily the language itself (Hu, Gao, 1997). Though researchers adhering to the second idea have yet to develop a coherent definition of culture and its relationship to language, this view implies and possible alternative in foreign language culture teaching and learning. Compared with the native speakers, the foreign language learners have grown out of a totally different social environment; thus it is impossible for college students to acquire the foreign culture or second culture in a short space of time even though they would have opportunity living and studying in an English-speaking country, for cultural learning does not seem to have a positive correlation with the linguistic advancement.

Obviously, the second perspective still cannot hold water. Without knowing about foreign culture, people often encounter communication failure. The next issue is the ultimate goal for cultural teaching in foreign language teaching and learning. Hu and Gao (1997) systematically proposed the paradigm of the foreign culture teaching (mostly English culture) through the cross-cultural perspective: verbal communication, non-verbal communication, communication practices and etiquettes, social structure and interpersonal relationship, and value orientation. An associated issue is the ultimate goal of the English culture teaching. The discussion in this field focuses on the establishment of the intercultural communicative competence (Cao, 1998; Wen, 1999). Wang (2006) suggested that the scope of the intercultural communicative competence is much narrower than the intercultural competence as he claimed to include linguistic competence, social-pragmatic competence, intercultural competence, and social-cultural competence, with the latter ones progressively include the former ones in eccentric circles. Han (2002) specifically pointed out that the intercultural awareness should incorporate the native culture and the alien culture in an organic fashion.

In terms of how to teach English culture, Cao (1998) identified two approaches, culture knowledge and culture understanding approaches. The former emphasizes the teaching of the static cultural knowledge of the target countries, normally the GB and the US, which corresponds cultural rituals proposed by Hu and Gao and the researchers upholding the separation of culture and language. The latter focuses on the cultivation of the English culture through multiple perspectives and aims at the establishment of the cultural awareness. He also argues that the English culture teaching should entail not only those countries with English as the native language but also countries that use the English as a major communicating language. Finally, he argues that the appreciation and interpretation of the English culture lies in the intersection of multiple perspectives, considering the culture as a process rather than the teaching and learning of the cultural stereotypes. Zhao and Zhao (2002) put forward four pragmatic principles in English culture teaching. They argued that most English learners would not have access to or interest in the English culture learning. So learners can only know of the English culture and draw upon some useful experiences of the target culture. They also contended that the comparative principle should be given full play in process the cultural teaching, aiming at looking back the native culture and turn tolerant to the target culture when differences prop up.

B. Cultural Component in the Syllabus and Curriculum Design

The National Syllabus for English Majors, approved by the Ministry of Education in 2000, is an important document that sets the bench mark for the English major education. The curriculum of the English major falls into three modules: language skills, major-related knowledge, and kaleidoscopic knowledge. Culture-related courses, such as literature, social and cultural studies of the Western countries, are included into the second module, competing resources with the linguistics-related courses. The cultural awareness, or "the sensitivity to the cross-cultural differences" (Syllabus, p3), is to be enhanced through the knowledge based courses in senior years. However, the module is open to append courses that suit the needs for the English education. Though the culture teaching is not specifically defined in the Syllabus, it does place different requirements for the new enrollees and English majors above freshmen respectively (Table 1).

² http://www.jyb.com.cn/cm/jycm/beijing/zgjyb/7b/t20070427_80793.htm

TABLE 1
CULTURAL COMPETENCE REQUIREMENTS FOR NEW ENROLLEES AND STUDENTS ABOVE FRESHMEN

Freshmen	Students Above Freshmen
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To have a good command of the Chinese culture and language skills • To have a basic understanding of the geography, history and the national situations of the Great Britain and the U.S. • To have basic knowledge of mathematics, physics and chemistry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To familiarize the Chinese cultural heritage and has abilities to appreciate arts • To know the geography, history, country state, cultural heritage and customs of the English-speaking countries • To acquire as much knowledge of humanism and science and technology • To be competent in oral and written Chinese • To have a strong awareness of innovation

The guiding document has aroused great enthusiasm of implementing the culture teaching in all possible courses in English majors. To name just some examples: the teaching in English newspaper and media, extensive and intensive reading, and rhetoric has streamlined to associate the need of culture teaching and learning (Xiao, 2007). The culture-related courses like English literature and US & GB survey, which are traditionally core courses for English major, have boomed to include cross-cultural communication and Chinese culture into the syllabus. But for non-English major students, culture learning can only be dependent on teachers' style and sense of responsibility.

The new Syllabus takes into consideration of the balancing of the knowledge and the communicative capability and that of the target culture and native culture (Liu, Hu, 2002). This is more or less dialectical response to the contrasting idea of the culture. For one thing, the syllabus emphasizes the importance of communicative appropriacy through culture-related courses, placing the cultural awareness as one of the ultimate objectives. The importance of the native culture is first raised, implying that the fostering of an intercultural sensitivity can only develop with the aid of the native culture. For another, the English language is implied as a tool for further studies or professional domains, representing a utilitarian tendency for quick plunging into the workforce.

The fostering of the intercultural competence is not through knowledge-based lecturing, but a personal experience in authentic situations when conversing with people from different cultural backgrounds, not restricted in the English-speaking countries. The time allocation to the culture-related courses seems disproportionate to the ultimate goals of cultivating an intercultural awareness, which theorists always idealize. For some key universities, the culture-based courses spread out from the second to the last semester; however, for local universities, those courses are crowded from the 5th to 7th semesters and competing time resource that otherwise is given to individual interests.

III. A CRITIQUE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE EIL PARADIGM

A. *The EIL Paradigm*

With the fast spread of English as the leading language in science and communication, it has become the one of the imperatives for people who want to get informed by the latest economic, technological and cultural development. The number of people whose second language is English or who receive English education as a foreign language has far surpassed that of English native speakers. The statistics of the British Council shows that around 750 million people are believed to speak English as a foreign language. In this context, it is often very hard to determine the cultural basis in the process of English teaching (McKay, 2003).

McKay (2003) identified two important ways that culture can play in language teaching: linguistic dimension of culture and pedagogical dimension of culture, the former involving semantic, pragmatic and discursal features and the latter the option of the teaching material and methodology in teaching. The culture-conditioned meaning and textual organization is contingent upon the specific historical, social and cultural development. It is not only true to the English-speaking countries but also the countries who officially uphold English as the important language for communications between different ethnic groups. Regarding the topic and content selection in the English teaching, there are two options: either material related with the English-speaking countries that assert great influence in world economy and culture is selected for teaching; or some national characteristics should be entailed in the textbook development. An example mentioned in McKay's article is the interesting connection between ELT, patriotism and Muslim faith in some provinces of Pakistan. Some topics in English primers in Korea also reflect Korean cultural heritage by using transliteration of Korean names for places and names.

As many EIL experts and educators believe that the status of the international English should be culture-free, or it should be de-nationalized. To grasp the second language does not necessarily mean that the acquisition of the second culture, which might be totally different from the countries as in the case of China or Korea. Meanwhile, the main area for using English language in communication is in the academic and scientific worlds, leaving less space for interpersonal communication. What's more, when encountered situation that deals with content of sensitive or delicate nature, people naturally count on their native tongue, and discreetly use the English to negotiate the meaning between parties from different cultural background. Many cases in pragmatics can prove this point.

B. *Conceptual Analysis of Cultural Teaching in China*

The first problem concerning the current culture teaching in China's context is that the educators have still be obsessed with the native-speakerism and the idealized culture paragon represented by some major English-speaking

cultures. The promotion of the intercultural competence implies a basic presupposition that Chinese students should at first know the facts of those countries and then compares them with their own native culture, as explicitly identified in the National syllabus and specifically practiced by English teachers. This does not mean to say this approach is wrong. But it puts much more pressure for teachers to become first-handed bicultural or at least accumulate great knowledge of the target culture, which is nonetheless impossible. The fervor of hankering after the American culture brings about serious side effects upon the cultural identity and the role of English learners. Firstly, learners' culture will be relegated into the secondary status with the target culture being the model role to follow. This is particular the common problem in the case of developing countries when the American culture is disguised and appears to be total freedom and democracy and idealized way of life. A direct result is the deterioration of native language and cultural awareness (Lu, 1999). Many researchers believe that this is a new form of cultural imperialism and invasion by the superpower that has the intention to control the world. Halliday (2007) has downplayed the native-speakerism, as he insists that focus on the native speaker and native culture in the EFL and ESL context is not justified, or neglecting the basic characteristics of the learning environment. Secondly, learners' experience and former knowledge base will be neglected. Cook (1999) once argues that "L2 users differ from monolingual native speakers in their knowledge of the L2s and L1s and in some of their cognitive processes, they should be considered as speakers in their own right, not as approximations to monolingual native speakers." By following the model role of the idealized speaker/listener of the target culture, learners are misled to assimilate into the "virtual" cultural environment by forgetting all their past history and reshape themselves in the process of learning. As Cook (1999) indicates, the labeling of "native speaker" is itself problematic and diversified in terms of one's bio-developmental characteristics.

The second problem is that there is an observable mismatch between the academic discussion and the practices of culture teaching. This means two things: on the one hand, the academic world does not provide teachers with an operational paradigm of how to carry out culture teaching in the classroom. Thus the culture teaching has become an idiosyncratic practice characterized by the teacher's own style. On the other hand, due to lacking systematic training and principled methodology in promoting students' intercultural awareness, teachers, either turn deaf to the discussion or frustrated by the communicative approach, somehow fall back to the more traditional but effective grammar-translation approach. From students' perspective, it is apparent that current practice that no native language speaking in the classroom is worthy of being revisited. The simple reason lies in the asymmetry of information sharing, students with strong competence of English is reluctant to communicate with the student with poor one. The communication proved ineffective. Many task-based group activities is downplayed as leisure talk or silence, all depending on the students' competence and interest. Educators have attributed this lack of motivation to the insufficient target culture exposure instead of the wrong rationale, temporarily explaining the mesmerized sentiment of the teachers and students. As McKay implies, the importance of culture teaching does not lie in the fact that the target culture dominates the classroom and discourse of the teacher-student communication; instead, the input of teacher's knowledge background and students' personal cultural or life experience should find their appropriate places in the classroom, thus creating a truly communicative environment that both parties can be involved. And this is in line with the Vygotskian paradigm that asserts culture as a dynamic process, or culture learning accompanies the re-building of a new personality, including tolerance and respect to the other culture, intercultural competence. It is hard to believe that students can enjoy some culture that is thousands miles away without their own having a role in the class organization.

The last issue concerns how the culture is approached and manipulated in the English teaching. Byram and Risager (1999) identify four approaches to culture in foreign language teaching: the foreign-cultural approach, the intercultural approach, the multicultural approach, and the transcultural approach. Generally speaking, most English classes still remain in the stage of first type, with the increasing presence of the intercultural approach. However, without direct exposure to the communities other than student's own cultural community, faculty who have overseas experience, and textbook development that responds to learners' immediate needs and their active participation in classroom, the culture teaching, in whatever form, is doomed to fail. In the paradigm of the EIL, English language only serves as a tool, or lingua franca in the European context, for the fast and ease of communication between people with different native tongues. The European and some other countries' experience in teaching culture has proved that it is possible to teach English in a de-nationalized approach, meaning that language teaching can be freed from culture intervention. Then we can say the transcultural approach is more appropriate for culture teaching without undermining the fundamental goal, intercultural competence building. Therefore, the dripping method of culture teaching as exemplified in reading, vocabulary, rhetoric and some culture-related courses should be extended into a wider perspective, with a vista of different cultures, to shape learners' competence in understanding. In a word, the cultural content should be multi-faceted.

IV. CONCLUSION

The paper overviews current culture teaching at college level in China and indicates the significance of intercultural awareness in foreign language teaching. It is found that the academic thinking into the culture issue in English teaching and learning in China has actively responded to the wide spectrum of discussion in the world. But in the pedagogical level, most teachers have just very rough idea of what culture should be and what should be taught in terms of cultural component. Due to lacking systematic training and principled methodology in promoting students' intercultural

awareness, teachers, either turn deaf to the new trend or frustrated by the communicative approach, somehow fall back to the more traditional but effective grammar-translation approach. Finally, for the sake of better English culture teaching and learning in language teaching, the authors would like to suggest that the role of language teachers should change. The task of the language teacher is not to teach cultural contents word by word, but "to facilitate learners' interaction with some small part of another society and its cultures, with the purpose of relativising learners' understanding of their own cultural values and behaviors, and encouraging them to investigate for themselves..." (M. Byram, et al, 2001). The changing scenario of language teaching has constituted new challenges for the English educators in China though it will take a long time to go.

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