On the Cultivation of College English Learners' Intercultural Competence

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Abstract

Cultural integration, an important part of college English teaching, plays a key role in enhancing students' English proficiency and overall quality. The author in this paper attempts to explore the cultivation of college English learners' intercultural competence from the three aspects of relationship between cultural integration and college English teaching, the contents and ways of cultural integration into college English teaching. The author considers that college English learners' intercultural competence involves both intercultural communicative competence and overall quality including virtues, critical thinking and extensive knowledge.

Keywords

college English teaching, cultural integration, intercultural communicative competence, overall quality

1. Introduction

With the trend of globalization and China's entry into WTO, China needs more and more talents who can communicate with people from different countries, thus the cultivation of Chinese students' intercultural competence has become a hot issue and aroused great attention among many language teachers, educators and researchers. *College English Teaching Guide* (exposure draft) published by Chinese Ministry of Education in 2015 emphasized the significance of humanistic feature of college English teaching and developing college students' intercultural competence.

This essay attempts to explore how to cultivate college English learners' intercultural competence in light of the inseparable relationship between culture and language, and ways of cultural integration into college English teaching, which aims to enhance students' English proficiency in a real sense, develop students' intercultural competence and improve their overall quality. The author considers that college

English learners' intercultural competence involves both intercultural communicative competence and overall quality including virtues, critical thinking and extensive knowledge.

2. An Analysis of Current Intercultural Competence Cultivation in College English Teaching in China

In 1980s, Hu Wenzhong and other scholars introduced intercultural communication into China and stated the importance of cultural factors in intercultural communication. College English teachers begin to introduce cultural knowledge into their language teaching with the focus on cultural difference, the relationship between language and culture. Later, the publication of *Culturally-loaded Words and English Language Teaching in Modern Chinese* (Xu, 1980) and *Conspectus of Intercultural Communicative Competence* (Hu, 1986) made many foreign language teachers become aware of the concept of intercultural communicative competence and its importance in the foreign language teaching. College English teaching has changed from an emphasis on linguistic competence to the focus on the communicative competence (Wang, 2016). Over the last decades, college English teaching has gone through repeated reforms, but the result is unsatisfying. The key reason is that students are mainly imparted with pure cultural knowledge. Many teachers just explain some cultural phenomenon in class. Some cultural phenomenon could be found in some textbooks, but they are scattered and unsystematic. The essence and in-depth part of foreign cultures go untouched. Byram (1997, p. 8) claimed learners with communicative competence as the speakers with knowledge, skills and attitudes. On the basis of the concept of intercultural communicative competence and intercultural speaker, language teachers in China are beginning to be concerned with how to cultivate students' intercultural competence rather than whether the cultural factors should be integrated into English teaching. With the advances in pragmatics, sociolinguistics and intercultural communication, college English teachers now no longer thought of the cultivation of intercultural competence as merely describing the culture of English speaking countries or communicating between non-native speakers and native speakers, but bridging the cultural gap among people from different countries all over the world. They are paying particular attention to English learners' behavior including intercultural knowledge, intercultural skills and attitudes. *The Outline of Curriculum of College English Intercultural Communication* (2007) carried out by the Ministry of Education of China stressed students' quality training of discovering misconception between different cultures in the process of intercultural communication, so the author proposes that the cultivation of learners' intercultural competence means to input cultural knowledge, raise proper cultural attitudes, develop intercultural skills and overall quality.

3. Theoretical Background

The inseparable relationship between culture, language and communication, together with the English teaching objective of developing students' intercultural communicative competence and overall quality is the theoretical basis and needs for integrating culture into college English teaching. Cultural factors

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play a very important role in English teaching and improving students' communicative competence.

3.1 Language, Culture and Communication

There is an intimate interrelation between language, culture and communication; the knowledge of cultural background of a language conduces to the improvement of the ability in the application of the language. A good command of cultural knowledge benefits students' linguistic and intercultural communicative competence. Generally speaking, language obstacles are forgivable and easy to overcome, but cultural obstacles are unforgivable and hard to remove. The culturally loaded characteristic of language brings difficulty and challenge in foreign language learning and teaching in China, but we cannot accordingly ignore the importance of cultural integration into English teaching. Otherwise, students will get unmotivated or even hostile toward foreign language learning once they are aware of the interference of cultural conflicts for their language study, which further does great harm to the spread of Chinese culture to the outside world. Therefore, great importance should be attached to language proficiency and the improvement of students' cultural quality to suit the need of social and economic development by getting deep insight into the world and assimilating to the essence of both Chinese culture and foreign cultures in college English teaching. It is a truism to say that teaching language is teaching home and foreign cultures.

Language is the production and carrier of culture, and reflects contents of culture. Meantime, culture is the core of language. The form, development, evolvement, and application of language are rooted in certain cultural background. A language takes a definite culture as the soul, and a culture relies on a certain language structure. Language is not culture-free. It is characterized by unique cultural context in a certain speech group. As an outer presentation of culture, language reflects the differences between one culture and other cultures. Meantime, culture is embedded in all aspects of language, and every change of social cultures is reflected in language. Kramsch (1993, p. 43) once declared, "native speakers of a language speak not only with their own individual voices, but through them speak also the established knowledge of their native community and society, the stock of metaphors this community lives by, and the categories they use to represent their experience". So language is a social practice, reflecting all aspects of a cultural community, such as experiences, ways of life and morality. One language of a certain community is best suited to describe and deal with the social realities of this community. Language is also the most important tool of transmitting culture. On one aspect culture is transmitted from one generation to another through language. From infancy, we begin to learn the patterns of behavior and ways of thinking from our family through language including verbal and non-verbal symbols, until most of them become internalized and habitual. On the other aspect culture is transmitted from one country to another through language. We learn the advanced technology and new concepts from foreign countries, and know about their customs, religions and educational systems in English. Lastly language enhances the development of culture. It is in virtue of English, the most universal language in the world that people from different countries are communicating with each other and doing business more and more frequently, which thus enhances the development of economy and

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society all over the world.

Samovar and Porter (1994, pp. 101-103) once defined communication as "a dynamic transactional behavior-affecting process in which people behave intentionally to induce or elicit a particular response from another person". It means knowing something when people interact, why it happens, the effects of what happens, and finally what we can do to influence and maximize the results of the event. They don't think that communication takes place in a social vacuum, while regard it an intricate matrix of interacting social acts that occur in a complex social environment that reflects the way people live and how they come to interact with and get along in the world. Communication in real situations is never out of context, and because culture is part of most contexts, communication is rarely culture-free (Kramsch, 1993, p. 197). Therefore it is now broadly accepted in most parts of the world that learning a foreign language is not simply mastering an object of academic study but is more appropriately focused on learning a means of communication.

3.2 Intercultural Competence

Deardorff (2004, p. 194) defined intercultural competence as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes. Spencer-Oatey and Kotthoft (2009) assert that intercultural communication is something concerned with communication across cultures. Intercultural communication occurs "whenever a message produced in one culture must be processed in another culture, and it entails the investigation of those elements of culture that most influence interaction when members of two different cultures come together in an interpersonal setting" (Samovar & Porter, 1994, p. 99). For successful intercultural communication, we must be aware of the cultural factors affecting communication in both the home and target cultures, knowing the language code, what to say to whom, and how to say it appropriately in a given situation. Mokhtar (2016) declared that shared culture and individually held cultural mind-sets drive behaviors which form societal differences within a global environment. In short, culture plays a key role in intercultural communication in real situations. Chen and Starosta (2000, pp. 1-15) indicated that intercultural competence comprises three interrelated components like intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness and intercultural adroitness. That is to say, a complete definition of intercultural competence in English teaching should include students' development of readiness to understand and appreciate cultural differences, to evaluate critically, and to act effectively in intercultural interactions. Namely, college English learners' intercultural competence involves both intercultural communicative competence and overall quality including virtues, critical thinking and extensive knowledge.

4. Cultivating College English Learners' Intercultural Competence

The author in this part suggests the ways of cultivating college English learners' intercultural competence by raising students' cultural awareness, developing intercultural skills and overall quality including students' virtues, critical thinking and extensive knowledge.

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4.1 Raising Cultural Awareness

Generally speaking, the cultural obstacles caused by this kind of deep structure of a culture are difficult to overcome, and they are the largest obstacles on a way to successful intercultural communication. Every culture has its own values and standards which are regarded as universally applicable. It is difficult and unnecessary for us to decide which values and standards are right or wrong. They are relative and need to be dealt with in a tolerant and flexible attitude. Our world is an interconnected one and we must be motivated to understand everyone—regardless of how much we seem separated from them by either distance or culture. We must learn to go beyond personal boundaries and try to learn about the experiences of people who are not part of our daily lives. Hence, in the cultural integration into college English teaching, English teachers are obliged to help students to build up an honest and sincere desire to communicate and to seek mutual understanding, that is, to develop students' cultural awareness. Kramsch (1993) articulated, "developing cultural awareness means being aware of members of another cultural group: their behavior, their expectations, their perspectives and values. It also means attempting to understand their reasons for their actions and beliefs". Cultural awareness involves relativism and flexibility which knowledge alone cannot furnish. The author thinks that people with cultural awareness can take the roles of other people, view the world as they see it, and experience their feelings. They sincerely try to understand helpfully without passing judgment, and they focus on the feelings of others, but not their own. Cultural awareness helps English learners to appreciate the behaviors of other people, alternate some unfavorable responses, assess the potential consequences of our acts and become more tolerant of those of others in intercultural communication.

The author proposes three methods to develop students' cultural awareness: (1) having students know themselves; (2) learning to be tolerant; (3) learning to be flexible.

4.1.1 Knowing Oneself

To develop English learners' cultural awareness and have them understand helpfully the expectations, perceptions and values of other cultures, it is crucial to enable them to know themselves firstly, which includes knowing their general values and worldviews, their perceptions and how they act on those perceptions. It enables students to detect the ways in which these attitudes influence communication to know their general values and worldviews, their own perceptions including their likes, dislikes, the observing angle of themselves and potential cultural prejudices in generalizing cultural differences or in virtue of others' generalizations. Knowing how they act in their daily communication, the manner in which they present themselves to others can enable them to gain an honest and candid insight into their own culture and greatly improve the manner in which they perceive, approach and interaction with people from different cultures.

Chinese culture has been much affected by Confucianism, Laoism and Daoism. Modesty, showing respect to the seniors and hospitality to guests have long been regarded as the criterion for judging one with virtues. Owing to the great influence of Chinese culture, we will make room for the seniors on a bus and invite guests to a restaurant for a big meal in communication with natives. These values and

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worldviews have been transmitted from one generation to another without being broken that everyone of us may take them for granted and form a misunderstanding that people from other cultures may have the same criterions with us. These misunderstandings are one of the largest obstacles in the successful intercultural communication. Therefore, in the cultural integration into college English teaching, English teachers should help students to reconsider their own criterions which they have long taken for granted. Only when students know their own criterions, can they realize the different criterions in intercommunication and develop an honest and sincere attitude to seek mutual understanding. Thus they will not dish for foreign guests with their own chopsticks to show their hospitality, which has in fact been regarded as a most unclean deed in westerners, and the ridiculous joke where "where, where" are used to refuse foreigners' compliments to show their virtue of modesty will also be avoided in the practical intercultural communication.

4.1.2 Learning to be Tolerant

The difference between a communication with natives and an intercultural communication lies in the latter involving two parties from different cultures with different criterions to the same act. In intercultural communication, people tend to deal with things with the group they belong to as a center, giving superiority to their own group and inferiority to other groups, which will produce negative emotion and effect between two parties. If one part judges the other under the assumption that their own criterions are normal and universally applicable, the other party's norms will be broken and their expectations violated. As a consequent, the cultural conflicts occur. Therefore, in cultural integration into college English teaching, it is very necessary for English teachers to help college students to learn to be tolerant and avoid the unsatisfying things in intercultural communication, telling them that these different and unfamiliar criterions seem strange but not wrong. It is a universal phenomenon that people regard their own values and standards as universally applicable and there are no exceptions for any party in intercultural communication. English teachers should have students accept that each culture has its own norms and standards, and they should not judge these norms and standards from their native cultural standpoints. An awareness to learn to be tolerant is a necessary aspect for a smooth intercultural communication.

4.1.3 Learning to be Flexible

Everyone has the chance to encounter all kinds of various conditions in intercultural communication, and the spirit of change is at the heart of our approach to intercultural communication, so we need to have the willingness to respond to these various conditions and a flexible awareness to analyze what role to play. Secondly, human beings have a psychological need to categorize and classify the big and complicated world in an oversimplified and over-generalized way in the transitory intercultural communication, but the oversimplified and over-generalized categorization and classification will also bring obstacles to intercultural communication by fostering unfair, biased and even intolerant attitudes towards people from other cultures, and producing anxiety and defensiveness in either party of the communication. Therefore, English teachers should help students to learn to be flexible by challenging

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these oversimplified and over-generalized categorization and classification in intercultural communication, and have them realize that the flexible awareness is a gift of human beings. People are not confined to only one way of acting or one set of truth for themselves in intercultural communication.

4.2 Developing Cultural Skills

In the contemporary world, students have much chance to encounter members of other cultural groups through popular music, the media, tourism and so on, so they are inevitably to acquire the skills to live as global villagers. Developing students' skills in intercultural communication is appropriate as a part of foreign language teaching, and it is also a worthy aim of education in general. Damen (1987) summarized that "The current dedication to the development of the communicative competence of language learners mandates the development of intercultural communicative skills and an understanding of the process of culture learning on the part of students and teachers alike". English teachers should teach students not only the cultural knowledge and cultural awareness, but also the cultural skills. A successful intercultural communicator depends, to a large extent, on the skills at establishing and maintaining desired pictures of themselves and the other person that they hold in their heads. Kramsch (1993, p. 237) made the point that "purpose of learning a language is a way of making cultural statement as well as learning a new way of making communication". Students should be taught how to get along with people from different cultures and how to make preparation for the approaching economic and cultural globalization.

4.2.1 Learning to Show Appropriate Communication Styles

Communication is an act involving two parties. When we are generating a piece of information, we are also looking forward to feedback from the other party so as to correct and adjust next message. All the positive attitudes and images we associate with smiling, head nodding, leaning forward, laughing and asking questions could show the best intentions to communicate with others, inspire others to respond to us honestly and produce positive reactions in other cultures by creating an atmosphere that tells other people we are interested in them and want to hear what they have to say. Hence, in cultural integration into college English teaching, students must learn the cultural skills to show appropriate communication styles and encourage other people to offer them feedback.

4.2.2 Learning to Use Non-Verbal Behavior

Non-verbal communication is thought of as any form of communication which is not directly dependent on the use of language. In communication, people not only send messages by their language, but also employ non-verbal behaviors. Trenholm and Jensen (1992, p. 255) says, "If your own expressive behavior promotes others to be more expressive and we pay attention to the wider range of nonverbal cues they display, we should be more accurate in reading others' emotional state". Non-verbal behavior is one aspect of culture and considered as a major factor in intercultural communication. Non-verbal behaviors may show differences because of the different cultures, and ignorance of these differences of non-verbal behavior between different cultures may form an obstacle

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in our practical cross-cultural communication. For example, when we communicate with people from different cultures, we may consider them to be strangers because our understanding of the interaction is limited by the strangers' unfamiliar non-verbal behaviors.

4.2.3 Learning to Manage Cultural Conflicts Effectively

Conflict is inevitable in all social and personal relationships. Intercultural miscommunication often leads to misinterpretations and conflicts because of the cultural differences. If the misinterpretation goes unmanaged or unclarified, it can become actual interpersonal conflict. So it is very necessary to discuss the cultural skills to avoid and manage intercultural conflicts effectively. To deal with conflicts effectively in intercultural communication with people from different countries all over the world, Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2010) proposed that Chinese college students need to be mindful of the problem-solving assumptions, learn to openly express opinions or point of view, open a conflict dialogue with an upfront thesis statement, verbally explain a situation more fully, provide verbal feedback and engage in active listening skills, use direct, integrative verbal messages, and commit to working out the conflict situation with the conflict party by using task-oriented integrative strategies and try to work out a collaborative, mutual goal dialogue with the conflict party. English teachers should try their best to use intuitional teaching methods to have students experience other cultural atmosphere, providing students with opportunities and materials for intercultural communication. For example, English teachers could collect and show some films, videos and pictures related to western culture according to the teaching contents in the cultural integration into college English teaching, so as to familiarize students with westerners' communication styles, non-verbal behaviors and the way to manage conflicts in an intuitional way. If possible, students could be required to do role-play in class so as to impress students with cultural skills in communication. Of course, it should be pointed out that developing students' cultural skills does not mean cultivating students to behave like some else in the intercultural communication. Kramsch (1993, p. 181) considered that the ability to "behave like someone else" is no guarantee that one will be more easily accepted by the group who speaks the language, nor that mutual understanding will emerge.

4.3 Developing Overall Quality

At the first two stages, cultural integration into college English teaching focuses on the cultivation of students' intercultural communicative competence by raising cultural awareness and developing cultural skills. At this stage, cultural integration should rise up to develop students' overall quality by studying cultural differences. Kramsch (1993) pointed out that its main goal (of cultural study in foreign language education) can no longer be the one-sided response to national and economic interests and the pursuit of communicative happiness. It must include the search for an understanding of cultural boundaries and an attempt to come to terms with these boundaries. Higher education pedagogy in China has been increasingly aware of the need to develop students' overall quality with the rapid development of economy and technology, such as Fudan University and Tsinghua University. The mottoes of these two famous universities have been chosen as the most popular ones among all colleges

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and universities in China for its emphasis on the training of college English learners' overall quality. Foreign language learning should be comprised of linguistic competence and intercultural communicative competence, as well as a change in attitudes towards one's own or other cultures. English teachers must face the challenge of not only transmitting knowledge, but also initiating students' creativity and critical thinking in college English teaching. Cultural integration into college English classroom is a good resource to qualify students with virtues, critical thinking and extensive knowledge. Cultures are evolved in the long history of human society by accepting their respective advantages and eliminating disadvantages, and transmitted from one generation to the next. Every culture has its own essence which deserves to be learned from. Students' overall quality could be developed through the give-and-take between the home and target cultures in the cultural integration into college English teaching.

4.3.1 Developing Virtues and Critical Thinking

Students' virtues and critical thinking can be developed in the process of analyzing cultural differences in a critical mind and accepting the essence of foreign cultures.

Firstly, there are many famous figures in foreign cultures which deserve to be learned from forever. Integrating these elitists of foreign cultures into college English teaching can provide students with learning materials of good examples in foreign countries for developing their virtues. For example, students can learn Winston Churchill's strength of will, warm spirit and love of life from Mother Teresa and Diana when they are exposed to the following three texts: Winston Churchill—his other life; Little Sister of the Poor and Diana, Princess of Wales: 1961-1997 in the 21st century college English. Students can also learn about the great ideas of Thomas Jefferson including "go and see", "you can learn from everyone", "trust the future" and so on when they study the text Lessons From Jefferson in college English. These good examples set up by famous figures of different countries have no national boundaries, and people all over the world should share the great ideas.

Secondly, there are many problematic issues with no definite answer in the foreign cultures that deserve to be dealt with critically and creatively, which are the good resources for students' cultivation of critical thinking and creativity. There are many things often left unclear in the deep structure of cultural differences, and it is difficult for us to find a definite answer to these cultural differences and decide what is good or bad. If students are encouraged to a close analysis of the deep structure of a culture, they have to search both backwards and forwards, in and across and outside the text for clues; they have to recreate the reality in their mind by using evidence from their own knowledge of the world, which leaves college English learners a lot of room for thinking and imaging.

Many virtues in foreign cultures deserve to be learned, and many issues with no definite answers in the deep structure of a culture deserve to be discussed and explored in a critical and creative mind. Then how do English teachers integrate culture into college English teaching to develop students' virtues and critical thinking? The author considers that currently it is very convenient and easy for college English learners to search the purely cultural knowledge, such as the introduction of writer's experiences and

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other achievements on Internet, broadcast or TV with the development of information technology. What the English teachers need to do is to make college English class interactive rather than ordered. They should not be in the classroom to confirm the prejudice of their students' attitudes to foreign cultures, nor to attack their deeply held convictions, but to help students to establish the foreign language classroom "not so much as a place where the language is taught, but as one where opportunities for learning of various kinds are provided though the interactions that take place between the participants" (Ellis, 1996).

In cultural integration into college English teaching, English teachers should provide students with enough room for reading and thinking critically and creatively, and encourage students to learn to read individually and think independently. It is up to the students to integrate the target culture with the native culture according to their own values, and interpret the problematic issues in the target culture. Just as Martin (1997, pp. 7-25) says that we should have students realize all issues are open and believe significance and values are not in some definite place. We should not look for different kinds of authorized or right explanations for some issues. What the English teachers should do is to encourage students to discuss a topic and provide facts, reasons, examples, etc. to support the answer, with the grade depending mainly on how well the answer is supported not just on the students' opinion.

4.3.2 Developing Extensive Knowledge

From the evolution of English we can see that the development of English has always been influenced by other cultures around the world besides English and American cultures. Especially when English is used as a universal language under the trend of globalization, English will undergo much more influences from other cultures than ever. We can say that teaching English is teaching not only the English and American cultures, but also other cultures around the world. Secondly, a close analysis of cultural differences in English learning can enable college students to gain an honest and candid insight into their own culture, because English learning is inevitably involved in the introduction of Chinese culture for a comparison between English and Chinese in respect of thinking patterns, values, perceptions and so on. Therefore, in the cultural integration into college English teaching, the author thinks that English teachers should introduce other cultures around the world besides English and American cultures, especially the Chinese culture. For instance, "jiu-jitsu" and "kowtow" are the English loanwords from Japanese and Chinese. If English teachers can introduce the related cultural information in Japan and China when teaching the two words, students will have the chance to encounter Japanese and Chinese culture, and their extensive knowledge has accordingly been developed in the cultural integration into vocabulary teaching.

5. Conclusion

Based on the theories of culture and language and communication, together with the purpose of current foreign language teaching in China, some suggestions in this paper are put forward on how to cultivate students' intercultural competence. The author suggests raising students' cultural awareness, developing

students' intercultural skills, and students' depth and width of thought by helping them to deal with foreign cultures critically and read extensively.

One of the main purposes of college English teaching is to develop students' intercultural competence under the trend of globalization, but it is insufficient to have cultural knowledge for successful intercultural communication, and cultural awareness and skills are also the necessary aspects of successful intercultural competence. However, it should be pointed out that currently many concepts about cultural competence are still vague, so the author's discussion may not be complete and is only a try, and its effect is open to be discussed.

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