The Importance of Cultural Awareness in Second Language Acquisition

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English is one of the most widely used languages in the world, nowadays, English learning has been paid more attention with the rapid development of economic globalization and science. However, not all the English learners can reach to a certain point of cross-cultural competence merely through English learning. Most Chinese English learners only lay stress on some superficial learning aspects such as the learning of pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar but ignore the essential culture of those English spoken countries. If English learners are wanting in cultural background knowledge of the target language, it will cause cultural shock in their communications. Therefore, it is obvious that cultural awareness cultivation is quite crucial and necessary in English learning. This paper firstly describes the current situation of English learning in China. Secondly, it narrates the relation between English learning and cultural awareness cultivation. Thirdly, it puts forward some relevant principals, methods, and strategies of cultivation. Finally, it probes the significance and necessity of cultural awareness cultivation.

Keywords: English learning, cultural awareness, cultivation methods

Introduction

The communication of every country is increasingly frequent with the tremendous development of economic globalization and science. Every country’s people are learning foreign languages in order to facilitate communication. People intend to pay more attention to spiritual satisfaction whereas gradually decrease their material enjoyment. During the process of such obvious role change, intercultural cooperation and communication are playing the most significant role. English, which is viewed as the most widely spoken language and acknowledged as the official language, is now getting more attention by all the countries. It is also a common language in many fields of cooperation. Therefore, the importance of the introduction of culture in English learning has been widely recognized.

Indeed, English is important both for personal success and for collective success. In a narrow sense, it is important for personal success no matter for their education or in their further careers and promotion development. In a broad sense, it will bring a company enormous benefits or even bring countless opportunities of cooperation between different countries so to make contributions to the whole world. In China, English is one of the three compulsory courses and it is playing a significant role in students’ English learning education. However, under such an English learning phenomenon, there exist some defects in
English learning. There are mainly four points. Firstly, with the deep rooted traditional educational system, Chinese students tend to put stress on some superficial learning aspects such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing, but to ignore the importance of developing their pragmatic competence and cultural awareness cultivation. In addition, too much attention is paid on the language forms while the use of language is ignored in the realistic situation. Secondly, English learners in China are usually on the passive situation, so even they have further opinions to change ways that are used in the past ages, there are still few attempts made. Thirdly, extra time is limited, no matter they are students or workers, they do not have enough time to learn English but leave works alone. Finally, because of the different cultural background information, learners often suffer difficulties to truly understand the native English meanings and it will cause their tiredness of English learning. As stated above, it is obvious that cultural awareness cultivation is indispensable since culture learning is the key issue in language learning.

The Relation Between the Second Language Acquisition and Cultivation of Cultural Awareness

As mentioned ahead, cultural awareness means being aware of another cultural group’s behavior, religion belief and other social customs and habits. It includes cultural knowledge, cultural comprehension, intercultural communication, awareness, and competence (ZHU, 1998, p. 20). In order to reveal the relation between English learning and cultivation of cultural awareness, first, this paper will expound the relationship between culture and language.

The Relation Between Culture and Language

For many years, the relation between culture and language has been one of hot topics in the field of linguistics. Larry, Richard, and Lisa (2000) defined culture as the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, actions, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notion of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of universe, and artifacts acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving (Larry et al., 2000). In short, it is an abstract spiritual heritage by a group of people. It can not be seen by naked eyes but can be sensed by various specific social activities. It is the expression of a group’s thoughts, customs, and arts by some periods. On the contrary, language is a particular form used in our daily life. Different researchers have different ways to convey their understandings about language, however, the essence is the same. In Kramsch’s (2003) view, he thought that:

Language is the principle means whereby we conduct our social lives. When it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways. Language is the prerequisite of the accumulation and transmission of other cultural traits. Such fundamental aspects of human society as organized political life, legal systems, religion and science are inconceivable without that most basic and human of tools, a linguistic system of communication. (p. 67)

He had already showed that these two parts have certain relations, namely, language is the base of cultural traits. It is obvious that culture and language are indispensable, and language is not only a simple symbol system, but also a major expressing formation that human beings rely on to demonstrate their customs, life styles, religion beliefs, and national cultural traits. “If one does not understand the social culture, no one can truly learn a language” (ZHU, 1998, p. 94). “Language and culture are affected and functioned by each other, to learn a
language one should be familiar with the culture and to totally understand the culture it is necessary to learn language" (DENG & LIU, 1989, p. 80). The relation between culture and language seemed as “two sides of a coin”, it means that they are an entirety, we should learn them at the same time. In conclusion, the relation between them can be regarded as fish and water, suppose without water, fish can never live in the world, so without language, culture can not be continued (Kramsch, 1993).

The Influence of Cultural Awareness on English Learning

Since the relationship between language and culture is quite clear, it is easy to summarize the influence about cultural awareness cultivation toward English learning, that is to say, cultural awareness is essential during the process of English learning. It is a significant aspect of language learning, and indeed that without cultural awareness, a language cannot be properly understood (Byram & Fleming, 2002). So language is closely related with every aspect of culture, and learning language can not be separated from learning its culture, and as is known to all that Chinese culture belongs to the oriental culture while the English-speaking countries are the occidental, so if English learners lack certain amount of cultural knowledge, embarrassment will occur at any time. Here are several examples to prove this conclusion.

For example, in QING Dynasty, LI Hong-zhang (1823-1901) was once invited to America, in order to show his great appreciation to American, he held a grand banquet. His toast speech was excellent, however, when it was translated and published on the newspaper, it brought profound misunderstanding. The following is the translation: “I am very happy to have all of you here today. Though these dishes are coarse and not delicious and good enough to show my respect for you, I hope you will enjoy them” (as cited in HU, 2006). Although there is no grammatical mistakes, it goes against the English-speaking countries’ customs. In our view, it is a kindness, because Chinese culture advocates virtue such as diligence, modest, and caution. Even the dishes are delicious, LI Hong-zhang still describes that they are coarse. But in the Western culture, they advocate individualism, openness, and creativity. If it is good, they will praise and accept other people’s compliment while Chinese do not.

Another example is about the movie Guasha, the contradiction perfectly annotated the cultural differences between China and English-speaking countries. In China, Guasha is regarded as a traditional medical treatment for common cold and it is also effective. However, after finishing this conduction, red stripes will appear on one’s skin. It is universal in China but quite rare in English speaking countries. Therefore, when Dennis’ grandfather made Guasha for him, American hospital regarded it as a symbol of maltreat. What is worse, his father was arrested by the police. What is the fundamental reason? That is because of lacking cultural awareness. On one hand, Americans have never heard of such treatment and they are not familiar with the origin, so no matter how Dennis’ father explained to the police, they could hardly believe it. On the other hand, Dennis’ grandfather did not get familiar with American’s legal system and their values, he still insisted his behavior. Therefore, the two sides still held their own standpoint and caused deep misunderstandings.

In conclusion, cultural awareness has great influence toward English learning, they have close relation. First of all, English is a part of culture, it is not only an expressing ways of culture, but also a part of the culture composition. Secondly, language is the carrier of culture. Culture has different implications that include a nation’s religion, custom, and beliefs, and language takes advantage of its unique function showing the formations of culture from abstract to specific.
Principals and Strategies of Cultivating Cultural Awareness

For the sake of learning English more effectively, it is necessary to raise some major principles and methods of how to cultivate cultural awareness.

Principles

As for the principles of cultural awareness cultivation, there are mainly three kinds, that is, to respect each other, to assimilate the essences from each other while keep its own characteristics, and to adhere to the practical performance.

To respect each other. First, it will narrate the principle that is to respect each other. Each culture is created and developed by different nations, and they have different histories, geography environments, and social customs, so there is no doubt that their culture are different. Thus, every English learner whether he/she is Chinese or not will be familiar with his/her native language instinct. Meanwhile, they are used to express their own ways regardless of the cultural differences about the language they are learning. What is worse, if the speaker still has not been aware of the cultural differences, definitely it will cause misunderstandings as the hearer does not understand the meaning. The Chinese English learner insists on his/her own understanding and the way he/she uses to express his/her thought while the hearer from English-speaking country insists on his/her own cultural customs. Step by step, the paradox will broaden. Since the development of globalization is getting faster and faster, culture communication must be more frequent than before. So we should not only learn the culture of the target language, but also learn to respect each other so to get better communication and cooperation opportunities.

To assimilate from each other. While learning another culture, it is natural to counteroffer different cultural conditions. Culture stands for a nation and it is because of different cultural peculiarity that we are able to recognize which country it is. This exactly reflects the differences among different countries. There is no doubt that every nation is becoming much more worried about its own culture than before because of other culture’s invasion, and what they are worried about is whether their native culture will vanish from their life. It is acceptable with the rapid development of globalization, but there are still ways to solve such problems. What learners should keep in mind is that they are learning a language, and the cultivation of cultural awareness is the prerequisite of learning another language. First of all, it is important to have a thorough understanding of the native culture objectively, and remember never to pursue culture of English-speaking countries blindly. Secondly, it is necessary to assimilate the essential culture but to maintain its own cultural characteristics.

To adhere to the practical performance. English is the second language to Chinese learners, so it is impossible to totally know it, as well as they did in the acquisition of their native language. In addition, they can not learn all the aspects of culture, so the only way is to make some choices to learn English more effectively. The most practical way is to learn the culture that is closely related to the current situation. What English learners firstly should learn is the culture that is the most effectively and frequently used and took the dominant status at present. Therefore, to adhere to the practical performance is indeed an effective principle since people’s communication is going on under the modern atmosphere.
Strategies

As culture and language are interwoven by each other, then during the process of English learning, it is not enough only to know the principles of cultural awareness cultivation. What is more important is to know how to learn English effectively. As HU (2006) pointed out that to cultivate learners’ awareness and competence of intercultural communication consciously, and treat and deal with the differences and similarities between China and English-speaking countries in an enlightened way to avoid culture shock that will prevent communications. This paper suggests four strategies as follows for learners’ reference.

To read extensively. To read extensively can not only enlarge learners’ reading capacity, but also develop their abilities to analyze properly. Meanwhile, it can improve their competence of communication. Books contain a great number of a nation’s culture such as their customs, religion beliefs, values, and their life styles. For example, while reading *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), learners can feel the difference of hierarchies; while reading *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* (1893), learners can feel people’s attitude toward low professions at that age. To read step by step, learners will be possible to have a better understanding about their culture through what the books describe. To read extensively will enable English learners to come into contact with target language and gradually build their cultural awareness.

To communicate with native speakers. Nowadays, almost every university has foreign teachers in China. In some areas that have strong economic strength, even in senior middle school, there are also foreign teachers. Besides, there are more foreign friends coming to China to do business or travel or learn our Chinese culture. So it offers English learners great opportunities to communicate with them face to face. It is true that learning the contents in class is far insufficient, practice is more important. While communicating with them in our daily life, it is possible to get great improvement. Since they are more familiar with their native culture, from the communication with them can they realize their mistakes at once and have a deep impression about their culture. What is more, to communicate with foreign people frequently can build their confidence. Thus, it is more favorable for English learning.

To carry out relevant courses or lectures. Culture is the abstract formation, sometimes it is difficult to understand a passage because of lacking such cultural background information. In China, to carry out relevant courses is not frequent currently, so it is a good idea to invite some famous experts to expound some mainstream culture. Through this way, it can make English learners percept culture of English-speaking countries and make tremendous progress.

To take part in extra curriculum activities. “There is nothing as effective as direct exposure. The acquiring of cross-cultural awareness is often a complicated process of psychological adaption, which does not occur unless one is brought face to face with alien culture” (HU, 1988, p. 105). It is often seen that English learners have a less possibility to obtain a satisfactory ability to understand English than the native speakers if only listen to others but never take part in the activities in person. So it is necessary to attend extra curriculum activities to express their own ideas in real environment. During the process of practice, they will accordingly develop their cultural awareness and then use English properly. In short, extra curriculum can not only enrich learners’ experience but also can enhance their communication competence.
The Importance of Cultural Awareness Cultivation in English Learning

Learning English well does not simply mean to grasp its grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary, it also means to learn the culture that reflect ideas, customs, life styles, and beliefs. Therefore, learning English is inseparable from learning its culture. Culture reflects a nation’s characteristic, it does not only include its history and culture background, but also contain its outlook of life, their life styles and ways of thought (DENG & LIU, 1989). HU (1989) also pointed out that culture learning and language learning should be conducted simultaneously. Otherwise, culture will come apart with language. And the problem of culture is more serious than language itself. So it is obvious that cultural awareness cultivation is quite important in English learning since they cannot be separated by each other. If learners learn the letter itself but ignore the meanings remained it under cover, it will be with great difficulties to learn a language well. It is known that grammar failure can be easily found by the hearer and still can be accepted by the hearer. However, pragmatic failure is treated differently. If the speaker uses the phrases improperly, the hearer will think that he/she is not polite. Culture can also broaden learners’ horizon, and the aims at English learning are to develop their ability to use English they are learning properly.

Language is the carrier of culture and cultural awareness can improve learners’ understanding of the culture of English-speaking countries. In order to truly understand a language, English learners should have a deep comprehension of the culture background information about the target language. The enhancement of cultural awareness may promote the English speaking competence and understanding.

However, most young guys are very bashful in expressing their emotion to their lovers. People will not say “I love you” directly. They will find another way to express this feeling. Young girls will pray god for a very happy family. Young girls will not express their wishes directly. The reason why people are introverted and indirect is that people are influenced by the Confucianism and the feudal ideology. Confucianism advocates that “the enjoyment is expressed without being licentious and the grief is expressed without hurtfully excessive” (ZHU, 2007, p. 163). The feudal ideology is conservative. Both of them affect people’s character.

Conclusions

To sum up, culture awareness of foreign language can help learners to understand the values, ways of thinking, and behavior of the target language better. In order to improve their communicative competence, language learners should not only emphasize on the learning of vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar, but also cultural awareness of the target language. As ZHU (1998) said, language is the carrier of culture and it is also a major part of culture, it reflects a nation’s characteristic, besides, it includes a nation’s history and culture background information and its life style and ways of thinking. In turn, culture can promote language’s emergence, application, and development. So it is clear that English is closely related to cultural awareness. In real world, culture awareness cultivation is undoubtedly playing a significant role and meets the demand of cross-cultural communication. Learners should be conscious that it can never replace the function of language itself, but should be regarded as a supplement of English learning to enhance their language communication competence.
References


