

On Cultural Barrier Problems in English Writing

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As the cross-cultural communication activities have become increasingly frequent, teaching of writing, one of cross-cultural communication activities, sets “developing students’ cross-cultural awareness” as one of its goals. However, traditional language teaching, which focuses on linguistic knowledge rather than cultural knowledge, results in the cultural barrier problems among students. This paper analyzes the manifestation of cultural barriers from the aspect of language and puts forward some corresponding approaches and methods.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication, English writing, cultural barriers

English Writing and Cross-Cultural Communication

With the increasing development of globalization, the communication between countries is getting more frequent and closer. Among verbal and non-verbal communication, writing has long been a common means. But nowadays classroom English writing teaching, largely centering on English language expressions and structures, sheds little importance on cultivating cultural awareness.

Culture is a complex with language knowledge, beliefs, laws, morals, customs, and conventional habits of a society as its constituents. Cultural awareness is the identification of one’s own culture and the respect for other culture. People with different cultural concepts tend to understand and react to the same thing quite differently, which may lead to misunderstanding or even hostility when they communicate with each other. For better and fuller comprehension in language communication, to cultivate cultural awareness should take a crucial role in communication.

Language is a part of as well as a carrier of culture and is the outcome as well as the reflection of culture (Wu, 1990). In this sense, writing is a communicative activity between the reader and the writer. Accordingly, the writer’s task is to employ various writing skills and strategies, such as cause and effect, order, and exemplification to achieve the purpose of accurate comprehension. In this process, language and culture are inseparable and contribute jointly to smooth communication of and willing acceptance of the writer’s ideas and thoughts by the reader.

Problems Resulted From the Neglection of Cultural Awareness in English Writing Teaching

Communication can be fruitful when it promotes a sense of cultural identity with both the target language and mother tongue. One of the goals of language teaching is to enable language learners to break through the barriers brought by the inherent mode of monoculture in communication, to fully expound the views, and to fully understand the interlocutor’s thoughts (Ou, 2010). However, traditional writing classes highlight language

knowledge, such as vocabulary, sentence patterns, and grammar while neglecting cultural knowledge. Consequently, the writer (English learner) and his reader from different countries are from time to time likely to be confronted with ineffective or even misleading information convey. When information transmission does not match its reception, writing no longer functions as a tool of communication. Their different cultural backgrounds and habits take the responsibility of communication failure.

In traditional classroom English writing process, culture is not integrated into language; in fact, introduction to cultural background is not pervasively provided at all. In addition, the limited choice of English language input in writing is not sufficient to draw students' attention to culture, let alone cultural comparison between the mother and target languages. Commonly used writing textbooks are of similar organization pattern, that is, from words to sentences and then to paragraphs and whole passages, elaborating writing strategies and language accuracy. Cultural similarities and differences between languages are hardly addressed. As a result, students are able to write in English, but fail to understand why English prefers the sentence and passage patterns different from those in Chinese.

Relevant research also shows that the smoothness of written communication depends heavily on cultural background knowledge. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to provide students basic cultural background information as well as to promote students' awareness of the significance culture in language.

To cultivate students' cross-cultural awareness, teachers need to know well the manifestations of cultural barriers in language, so as to find corresponding solution.

Cultural Barrier and Its Manifestations in Language

Cultural barrier can be divided into surface cultural barrier, middle-level cultural barrier, and deep cultural barriers. The surface cultural barrier refers to the differences resulted from the different living environments and material or cultural basis between mother country and target language country. The middle-level cultural barrier is the differences in the categories of customs, etiquette, social norms, and laws. Deep cultural barrier mainly includes the differences in value and ethics, ways of thinking, religion, and aesthetic orientation (He, 2011).

As culture chooses language as its carrier, it leaves in language its traces, which abound in language levels of vocabulary, phrases, sentences, and discourse (Liao, 2001). Accordingly, cultural barrier is manifested and can be identified at these four levels of language system.

Vocabulary

Liao Daosheng (2001) argued that vocabulary, the basic unit of and the main pillar for language system, demonstrates cultural differences most prominently and extensively. Word vacancy is a common phenomenon in the comparison of two languages. Certain meaning finds its form in a word in one language but not in the other. Another common culture-related language phenomenon is the non-equivalence in meaning. That is, some words with the same meaning in both languages differ in their cultural or emotional association.

Both types of discrepancy in vocabulary can be attributed to cultural differences of languages. Word vacancy is often related with differences in history, geography, ethnicity, social customs, political elections of mother language speaking and target language speaking countries. For example, such words as "whistle-stop", "stump speech", "barnstorm", "soap box", "bandwagon", and "swing around" cannot find its counterparts in Chinese. Words with the same linguistic meaning in mother and target languages sometimes are possessed with different cultural associations. For example, "pink" symbolizes essence in English while in Chinese "pink", also called

“peach blossom color”, can symbolize women. The great poet in Tang Dynasty Bai Juyi describes the most beautiful woman in Chinese character of “pink” in his poem “Everlasting Regret Song”: “Turning her head, she smiled so sweet and full of grace. That she outshone in six palaces the fairest face”. In addition, cultural related connotation can also be endowed in words with the same meaning. For example, in English-speaking culture, number “13” has the association of bad luck and therefore is a taboo, but not in Chinese. Similarly, number “6” and “8” are considered in Chinese as good luck token, symbolizing homophony and smooth going, but not in English.

Phrases and Expressions

Phrases and expressions are rich in allusions and anecdotes, which often originate from the cultural, political, religious, and social lives of its language speaking country and can only be understood accurately with the aid of cultural background information. For example, the English term “between Scylla and Charybdis” refers to the situation in which a person escaping from one danger falls into another. “Scylla” is a legendary monster that lives in Italian rocky area, and “Charybdis” is another monster that lives by the strait, often making vortex dangerous for sailors. The readers equipped with the related cultural information may find the meaning of the phrase clear and vivid but those without the background information may feel at loss.

Sentences

Cultural barriers at the sentence level in English are often associated with proverbs and slang. These sentences are likely to contain very simple vocabulary, but the meaning of the combination of these simple words is far more than adding the meaning of each words together. For example, the phrase “It’s Greek to me” may be literally but wrongly understood as “For me this is Greek” by readers with no related cultural background information. In fact, as most British do not understand Greek, Greek for them represents anything hard to learn or they do not understand. Therefore, “It’s Greek to me” means “I don’t know”.

Passages

Cultural differences in passages are mainly manifested in way of thinking, modes of discourse, language styles and rhetoric. In terms of discourse mode, English is often “deductive” while Chinese prefers “spiral” pattern. The way of thinking in English is liner sequence while Chinese prefers more circuitous one. In terms of linguistic form, English pays much attention to syntactic and lexical forms and their agreement while in Chinese semantic connection is not necessarily achieved in syntactic structures and patterns. There is a consensus that one of the major differences between Chinese and English is the choice of hypotaxis or parataxis. In terms of genre and rhetoric, the two languages differ a lot in reports, poems, legal documents, business letters, advertisements, tourism introductions, etc. To compare poems in English and Chinese can reveal their respective.

Solution to Cultural Barriers in Writing Communication

Cultural introduction, cultural experience, and cultural evaluation are helpful for English learners to cultivate correct cross-cultural awareness in the communication and interaction among various cultures. In classroom English teaching, to integrate culture-related knowledge, such as cultural background information to English-speaking countries and comparison between Chinese and western cultures, in language teaching helps learners to overcome cultural identity crisis and to broaden their horizon when making judgment in culture communication (Ren, 2011). English writing is generally offered for language learners of about or above intermediate level. They are ready to use English to express ideas and viewpoints grammatically correctly; what is left to make up is their

ability of making what is written semantically correctly understood without ambiguity or offence. Therefore, teachers of English writing, besides regular introduction to culture information, need to inspire learners' reflections of cultural similarities and differences, to guide them to probe into the potential causes for these similarities and differences, to stimulate them to evaluate different ways of thinking dialectically, and in this way to gradually develop their cultural awareness in writing process. In fact, the higher English language proficiency level is, the greater possibility of culture is communication barriers rather than vocabulary and grammar, and the bigger impact culture knowledge has on information conveyance in communication.

For classroom language learners who may not have the chance to have field experience in English speaking countries, to set scenarios can be a mimic immersion practice. Online resources and written language materials about cultural customs and life characteristics available for learners are another choice. The initiative of learners should be encouraged; such activities help to attract learners' attention to culture as presentation and debate on hot culture phenomena, passage or paper writing on culture theories and knowledge, and social practice on culture shocks.

Cultural comparison helps to enhance learners' cultural recognition and reduce the interference of native culture in English writing. In teaching writing, teachers can provoke learners to explore cultural phenomena and the related connotations at the levels of vocabulary, phrase, sentence, and passage. Cultural barrier in vocabulary comes mainly from word vacancy and discrepancy in connotation between words of two languages. Cultural difficulties in phrases lie largely in images and allusions of different cultures. At sentence level, proverbs and slangs can be a hard task; understanding the meaning of each word does not lead to full comprehension of the combination. Cultural differences in passages are mainly manifested in different ways of thinking, modes of discourse, types of writing styles and rhetoric in English and Chinese.

Rich variety of culture-related teaching materials helps to contribute to arousing learners' interest, drawing their attention, and preparing them with culture knowledge and awareness in written communication. Combined employment of diverse means of teaching instruction contribute to reinforcing the power of culture in language learning and communication, such as multimedia, slides presentation, English movies and speech evaluation, online information channel, extracurricular activities with cultural themes, etc.

Conclusion

To meet the needs of increasingly frequent cross-cultural communication nowadays, English writing teaching should adjust its teaching objectives, integrating culture information with language knowledge into its syllabus to cultivate language learners' cross-cultural communication awareness, taking both language and culture as main lines in writing, providing learners with language materials about cultural and social phenomena in English-speaking countries through multimedia teaching equipment and rich network resources, so that learners are able to take writing practice as means of communication from the perspective of cross-culture, and consequently better help them actively and effectively participate in cross-cultural communication.

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