

Study of Native Culture Aphasia and Compensation Strategies in English Education

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English teaching in China has attached too much importance to the input of the target language culture, while neglecting our native culture. As a result, students cannot express Chinese culture in English, completely separating Chinese culture from English learning, leading to the serious native culture aphasia. This paper not only analyzes the reasons for this phenomenon from the aspects of curriculum setting, learning motivation, and teachers' quality, but also explains the necessity of integrating Chinese native culture in English teaching. On this basis, effective solutions are put forward from the perspective of classroom teaching, textbook compilation, curriculum arrangement, and so on.

Keywords: mother tongue aphasia, native culture, compensation strategies, communicative approaches

Introduction

Since the popularization of English learning in China, English teaching has undergone rapid changes, the most prominent feature of which is the continuous improvement of teaching methods. Translation teaching method, in the early stage of English education, focused on the acquisition and training of pronunciation, grammar, and sentence patterns. In recent years, the communicative teaching method has been widely employed. English teaching is no longer limited to the form of language, but takes the cultivation of students' communicative ability as the key element in teaching. It emphasizes the function of inputting foreign language cultures—to provide background knowledge for language learning and stimulate students' interest in learning.

In addition to affirming the achievements of English teaching, there arises a cause for concern—English teaching has a serious problem in terms of cultural input. All the input in teaching is British and American cultures, while there is no trace of any Chinese culture. Some students' English pronunciation and intonation are extremely standard, while the content of their talk seems empty. In the process of communication, they seldom take the initiative to express content related to Chinese culture, because their stock of Chinese culture is poor. Such “mother tongue cultural aphasia” has attracted much attention in academic field in recent years.

Professor Cong Cong (2000) pointed out that English teaching in our country has only strengthened the introduction of the material culture, institutional custom culture, and spiritual culture from the English-speaking

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world, while the cultural background of communication—How to express Chinese culture in English—is absolutely ignored. Therefore, how to enable students to master the foreign language and understand British and American cultures while improving their abilities to express their native culture in English has become an important issue to be solved in China.

Reasons for Mother Tongue Cultural Aphasia

The input of target language culture cannot be ignored in English teaching, because language and culture are inseparable. Language is the carrier of culture, and it is impossible to truly learn this language without understanding its culture. However, the input of target language culture in English teaching is not to make learners more and more “westernized”, but to provide them with background knowledge of cross-cultural communication so that they can achieve effective interaction between Chinese and foreign cultures. As far as college English teaching is concerned, the main reasons for this problem are as follows.

Ignoring Chinese Culture in Curriculum Arrangement

Some educators believe that mother tongue will inevitably encumber foreign language acquisition, so foreign language teaching should deviate from the mother tongue as far as possible. This opinion has its theoretical basis, but inputting target language culture does not mean completely rejecting learners’ native language culture.

English Departments in some universities apply the above teaching theory when setting courses, and offer courses with overlapping content centering on British and American culture. In the list of elective courses, there are only a handful courses related to Chinese culture. Such curriculum arrangement deprives students of the opportunity to learn Chinese culture in depth and comprehensively.

Utilitarian Practice in English Tests

Many students learn English just to deal with various exams. From elementary school to university, students have taken dozens of English tests: Cambridge Children’s English, PETS, IELTS, TOEFL, GRE, and participated in various English competitions. The purpose of taking these exams is obvious, that is, for further education, graduation, employment, and going abroad. And these exams basically do not involve Chinese culture. Thus, students naturally lose the motivation to learn Chinese culture.

The Necessity of Emphasizing Mother Tongue Culture in English Teaching

Larry A. Samovar, Richard E. Porter, Edwin R. McDaniel, and Carolyn Sexton Roy (2000, p. 253) point out that “Learners should know themselves and their own culture”, which is very important for successful cultural communication. Native language culture is an indispensable part of English education, and it plays an important role in improving students’ cognitive level and spreading Chinese culture. Therefore, Chinese culture cannot be ignored in English education in China.

Increasing China’s Influence and Voice on the World Stage

In the international community, the role of cultural soft power is becoming more and more significant. Zhu Lijia (2013) pointed out that strengthening China’s cultural soft power is of great importance to enhance China’s right to voice its opinion, and maintain and enhance national interests.

With a long history, Chinese civilization has played an important role in the process of human development, and made indelible contributions to the advancement of world civilization. Chinese people have the responsibility to express their distinctive mother tongue culture and expand their influence in the world. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to strengthen the input and understanding of mother tongue culture.

The Positive Transferring Effect of Mother Tongue on English Learning

The “distinction between basic interpersonal skills and language cognitive ability” and the “interdependence hypothesis between mother tongue and target language” proposed by linguistics professor Jim Cummins (1981) state that at a deep level, mother tongue and foreign language abilities are interdependent, and the relationship between language capacity sharing can be achieved. Therefore, on the whole, the positive impact of the mother tongue far exceeds the negative impact on foreign languages, and the improvement of the mother tongue level can help improve the foreign language learning effect. Cummins’ research shows that English learners’ cognition of their mother tongue can become the cognitive basis for their English acquisition and will play a positive role in the construction of the English language system (Wu & Wen, 2005).

Professor Butzkamm (1993, p. 22), who studies English teaching methods in Germany, once discussed the role of the mother tongue in foreign language teaching, and made such an analogy: Mother tongue is not a coat that learners can take off and discard before they step into the foreign language classroom. It is impossible for learners to completely get rid of the influence of their mother tongue in the whole process of learning a foreign language, but they behave in different ways at each stage. The input hypothesis proposed by Krashen overemphasizes the importance of foreign language input, and believes that more input of foreign language can eliminate the negative transfer of native language. However, Guo Minghua (2002, pp. 24-27) has different opinion: “Especially in the environment where the native language is acquired, I am afraid that this is not just wishful thinking. It is very likely that the bath water was not thrown away, but the child was thrown out!”

Native Language Culture Promoting Understanding of Foreign Language Culture

In terms of the relationship between culture and foreign language learning, Gao Yihong (1994) summarized three theories and expressed them with simple formulas: subtractive learning ($1 - 1 = 0$), additive learning ($1 + 1 = 1$), and productive learning ($1 + 1 > 2$). Subtractive learning means that learners should abandon their mother tongue culture while accepting foreign language culture in the process of learning a foreign language. Additive learning means that students separate the culture of the target language from the culture of their mother tongue when acquiring a foreign language. Productive learning is a complementary process, which means learners will combine the two languages and their cultural value systems in a reasonable way.

Compensation Strategies for Mother Tongue Culture Aphasia in English Teaching

Adding Chinese Culture Courses to the Curriculum

Chinese students learn their own culture systematically mainly in elementary and middle schools, and it basically comes to an end when they graduate from high school. At universities, most students no longer study courses related to Chinese culture, and these courses are severely marginalized. Insufficient investment of

students in this area and lack of mother tongue knowledge ultimately affect the advancement of quality education. In order to change this situation, it is necessary to reform the structural arrangement of the curriculum at university to make it more rational and to give the Chinese culture curriculum its due status.

Enhancing English Teachers' Mother Tongue Cultural Awareness

The cultural literacy of English teachers' mother tongue will have a direct impact on students. Therefore, in addition to having a solid language foundation, English teachers also need to have dual cultural accomplishments, understand foreign cultures and be proficient in Chinese culture, and take on the important task of spreading Chinese culture. Apart from teaching students the language skills to express Chinese culture in the target language, English teachers should also provide students with materials related to Chinese culture as much as possible.

Supplementing Teaching Materials With Mother Tongue Culture

Supplementary materials related to Chinese culture should be appropriately added to English textbooks, for example, articles reflecting Chinese excellent culture, introduction about Chinese ethics and distinctive ideological traditions, and so on. In audio-visual teaching materials, English programs broadcast by CCTV that introduce Chinese culture can be applied as examples for Chinese students to express their own culture in English. Chinese students are more familiar with the content and relevant background knowledge in these programs, and they will be more willing to enjoy them.

Conclusion

Mother tongue is not only a communication tool of a nation, but also a carrier of a nation's traditional culture, moral concepts, and thinking patterns. Chinese students' understanding of English vocabulary and culture cannot be completely separated from their mother tongue culture. It cannot make students fully assimilate to foreign cultures, nor can it make students simply pile up foreign culture and Chinese culture in cultural cognition. Identity, national self-esteem, and self-confidence, all these integrate the essence of mother tongue culture and foreign culture, and gradually cultivate cultural creativity.

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