Consideration on Intensifying Cultural Awareness in English Teaching in Junior Middle Schools

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Language and culture are closely linked. If one does not understand the cultural backgrounds, he/she can not learn the target language really well because any language is an integral part of its culture. Therefore, English learning is not only to learn the language, but also to learn its culture. To improve students’ sensitivity for cultural difference between the West and the East and to raise their cultural awareness, English teachers in junior middle schools are required not only to teach language but also to impart cultural background knowledge and further to deal with the relationship between language and culture well. This article starts with the necessity of intensifying cultural awareness in English teaching in junior middle schools, and then, explores the related issues on intensifying cultural awareness.

Keywords: language, culture, English cultural teaching, cultural awareness

Introduction

With the approaching of the 21st century, China’s entry to World Trade Organization (WTO) makes the communication between China and other countries more frequent. Cross-cultural exchange becomes necessary in modern world. English, being a tool of international communication, is becoming increasingly important. Under such background, the goal of foreign language teaching has been adjusted. The preface of the experimental version in English curriculum standards has pointed out that “The key of the English curriculum reforms is to change the traditional English teaching mode which teachers pay attention to grammar and vocabulary rather than the capability of language application” (He, 2002). The process of language learning is the one in which students form a positive emotional attitude, an active thinking, and the ability of self-learning, and strengthen their cultural awareness.

The Necessibty of Intensifying Cultural Awareness

Language and Culture Are Closely Related, Culture Has a Great Influence on Language Application

“As the main carrier of culture, language is an important part of culture” (Wang, 2006). There is no language that does not reflect its culture, conversely, without culture, language can not exist and develop. Culture has a great influence on language in many aspects. It not only affects the use and the development of vocabulary, but also imposes a big impact on other areas, such as grammar, the rules of speech, chapter, and style. Language is also a form of cultural expression. If language learners do not understand culture, it is impossible for them to learn the language very well, namely, “ The more profound and detailed understanding
of language country’s history, cultural traditions, customs and habits, lifestyles and living details they know, the more they can use the language accurately” (Hu, 1988). In short, if language learners do not understand the culture of the target language and separate the language learning from the cultural studying, language proficiency is only an empty talk.

**Culture Becomes Communicative Barriers**

If people do not understand foreign culture, they will not be able to conduct an effective communication because the course of the whole human language communication is constrained by the corresponding cultural background knowledge. Only by understanding the relevant cultural knowledge fully can people make an effective communication and avoid unnecessary misunderstanding. For example, in order to express concern, the Chinese often ask foreigners a question, “How much money can you earn a year?”. They hardly realize that this is an affront behavior, which has violated the privacy of others and will arouse the pique of the other side. For another example, because of the virtue of China’s modesty, the Chinese will always deny themselves when they receive others’ praise. They often say politely “I do not deserve so much”. However, the Westerners could accept willingly and say “Thank you”. The above examples tell us that teachers should strengthen education of cultural awareness so that students can use the appropriate expression based on the context.

**The Present Situation of English Teaching in Junior Middle Schools**

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**Time-consuming vs. low-efficiency.** Teachers spend a lot of time in English teaching, but most students feel that it is very difficult for them to study English very well. They have many problems in English studying. For example, they recite many English words, but they will forget them after a few weeks. When they want to use them in writing, they cannot spell them out. Though teachers have stressed the grammar, students keep making many mistakes while writing. They also cannot find a good learning strategy in the process of learning and lose the desire to express themselves both in oral and written English.

**High scores vs. low capability.** “High scores, low capability” means that students’ English performance is very good, but they cannot communicate with foreigners effectively in real life. They sometimes commit a cultural error. “Cultural error refers to a kind of behavior of language that can not be accepted by people from English-speaking countries” (Seel, 1999). Most students from middle schools tend to pay attention to the apparent meaning of vocabularies, but ignore their contexts. As a result, they make a lot of ineffective conversations. For example, when students are required to translate the sentence “你有空吗?” (ni youkong ma?) from Chinese to English, they tend to translate the above sentence mechanically “Are you free?” or “Do you have time?”. In fact, when people from English-speaking countries see the above English version, they may understand it like this: “I am not free, but I am not too expensive”. The word “free” has the meaning “go to jail”, so they seldom use it. They often use the following expressions: “Are you busy?”, “Could you spare me a few minutes?”, “Do you have a time?”, “Are you in a hurry?”, “When is a good time?”, “When will it be convenient?”, etc..

**Chinglish phenomenon.** Chinglish is also called Chinese English which is made up of Chinese grammar and the English vocabulary. For example, when Chinese students translate the sentence “今天天气很闷” (jintian tianqi henmen) from Chinese to English, their English version is “Today is very muggy”. However, the right English version is “It is very muggy today”. They make such mistake because they do not know when
expressing “weather, time, and distance”, “it” should be used for “subject” in English grammar. This example tells us that most students sometimes have a good command of vocabulary, but they can not make appropriate sentences in English in different occasions. They often impose the native habits and cultural backgrounds on the target language. Consequently, the Chinese understand what they say, but the people from English-speaking countries are confused.

**The Reasons for the Above Situation**

**The influence of the traditional language teaching mode.** The traditional foreign language teaching only focuses on the form of language, but neglects culture. In traditional English teaching, teachers lack the awareness of combining the social and cultural characteristics of English-speaking countries with language. Less attention is paid to cultural teaching. They often summarize the grammar, find out synonymous words and antonymous words, and explain meaning in Chinese. Their teaching content is less involved or not involved in the cultural connotations. Therefore, students are good at doing exercises on grammar and vocabulary, but lack the communicative ability (including reading and writing). As a result, they often make communicative errors.

Under the influence of such language teaching mode, students lack necessary cultural background knowledge. This has a negative effect on cultivating and developing their communicative ability.

**The impact of cultural migration.** Language is the carrier of culture, “Under the influence of culture in the mother tongue, the customary way of thinking and expression will be unconsciously moved into the target language in cross-cultural communication, which forms cultural migration” (Stern, 1996). This phenomenon often appears in the concrete practice of English. Influenced by the diverse culture, foreign language learners do not regard foreign culture from target communities’ version but from foreign language learning perspective. They often impose their own unique cultural background knowledge on the other side. This results in the failure of communication. In communication scene, some foreign language learners are familiar with words and the rules of grammar and express their ideas with correct pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. However, they can only do literal interpretation. Foreigners fail to understand its real meaning and feel confused.

For example, the Chinese often regard age as one of the usual topics in their communication, while people from Britain and the United States consider age as a kind of privacy except for individual occasions. They seldom mention the age of the other side in their conversations. If students do not understand the cultural difference and take it for granted that the communication mode in their own way is allowed, the results will be embarrassing.

In conclusion, because of the great cultural difference, cultural migration would hinder the success of communication and result in mutual misunderstandings.

**Teachers’ weak cultural awareness.** Teachers have some false notions in cultural teaching. For example, English teaching is regarded as the transfer of pure language knowledge. Teachers only pay attention to the improvement of students’ language skills, while cultural knowledge is ignored. Actually, cultural knowledge can be used to make class atmosphere active or to attract students’ attention if necessary. They also have a very narrow understanding of cultural teaching. They only introduce few cultural background knowledge related to language, which is called the developing of cultural awareness.

**Lack of authentic language environment.** For a long time, the phenomenon of examination-oriented education and the teaching mode of the three-centered, “the teacher-centered, the classroom-centered, and the textbook-centered” (Sun, 2005) exists in China’s foreign language teaching systems. Teachers pay attention to
grammar and vocabulary, while students have few opportunities to apply their language knowledge gained from books into practice. Therefore, when they communicate with foreigners, there will still be some mistakes.

The Content and Methods of Intensifying Cultural Awareness

The Content of Cultural Awareness

The content of cultural awareness is complicated, but in fact, it can be divided into two major categories, namely, “knowledge culture and communicative culture” (Kramsch, 1993). Knowledge culture includes social organization, political and economic systems, academic thinking, national regions, literature, art, geography, history, etc.. Communicative culture refers to social customs, habits, and rules of conduct. English teachers in junior middle schools should pay more attention to the latter. Cultural teaching should be conducted by appropriate methods.

What objectives can be reached by intensifying cultural awareness in English teaching in junior middle schools? The objectives are very clear in English curriculum standards: “Teachers gradually infiltrate the content and scope of cultural knowledge according to students’ age characteristics and cognitive ability” (Song, 2001) so as to help students understand some communicative language, for example, greeting and farewell language, and then, use them appropriately. Students are also required to understand the customs of the English-speaking countries, the typical communicative language, the cultural connotations of idioms, and the history, geography, and the politics and economics of the English-speaking countries.

The Methods of Intensifying Cultural Awareness

Make full use of materials in reading, listening, and speaking of textbooks. The objectives of the new curriculum standards require teachers to span the goals of developing learners’ pure language skills. In order to help students transcend cultural confine, look at native culture and exotic culture with an open mind, and intensify their cultural awareness in junior middle schools in actual English teaching, teachers should make full use of materials in reading, listening, and speaking of textbooks. There is a wide selection of subjects in middle schools’ English textbooks, which help students understand the outside world well. The materials which are very vivid are divided into two categories: (a) about clothing, food, housing, and transport; and (b) social communications, such as greetings, appointments, etc..

At first, teachers from junior middle schools should intensify students’ cultural awareness by listening. Listening plays an important role in English teaching. However, some students spend a lot of time and energy on it with a little progress. The main reason is that students know little cultural background knowledge of the English-speaking countries. Listening is closely linked to the conditions which are familiar with the Britain and the United States’ culture and economy. The Chinese all have such experience. When they hear some familiar materials, such as news, reports, speeches, science, or art, generally speaking, they are easy to identify and understand. Conversely, when they listen to some materials with cultural background knowledge, they can only understand a few words and some information. Even the materials are relatively simple, they can only understand the literal meaning instead of the true meaning because of cultural background knowledge. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce cultural background knowledge in teaching listening.

Besides, reading is also an important way to intensify cultural awareness. Reading is the key to English teaching. To expand students’ cultural horizons and intensify their cultural awareness, teachers in the discourse of reading not only make students grasp the article’s main idea and learn language knowledge, but also guide
them to pay attention to cultural background knowledge and give them some knowledge on the history of English-speaking countries, customs, social systems, etc..

There are many materials involved the relevant cultural background knowledge in middle schools’ textbooks. For example, the Unit Three of the English textbook involves related knowledge on Mid-Autumn Festival and Thanksgiving Day. Students are able to compare the two festivals intentionally and learn some cultural background knowledge by reading it. From reading such kind of interesting passages as “The history of Thanksgiving Day”, students’ interests in English are aroused. In doing so, the cultural knowledge is assimilated.

Moreover, teachers can introduce cultural information in speaking course. Speaking plays an essential role in English teaching in junior middle schools. The main barriers to the improvement of speaking ability are the lack of cultural knowledge of Western countries. Teacher should intensify cultural awareness in speaking from the following two aspects:

1. In speaking teaching, teachers should focus on cultural background knowledge of the speaking materials and compare the cultural difference between English and Chinese under the same context. If teachers can do like that, students notice the differences between the West and the East in cultural connotations and language expression when communicating with others;

2. Teachers should organize a lot of activities, such as pair work, group work, and role-playing, which require students to communicate with each other in English as much as possible. Taking role-playing as an example, the first step is that teachers should lay out a scene skillfully based on the content of the dialogues, then, the students are guided to practice how to use language correctly in a real context in their communication, and the last step is to require students to use language correctly according to their identities of role-playing and the environment of language communication. At the same time, teachers should point out their errors because sometimes their syntax is right but the sentence is not suitable for their roles and the scenes.

Generally speaking, in order to let students experience the cultural difference, teachers should guide students to change their roles in dialogues, taking lesson 16 of English Volume one in junior middle schools as an example (Gong, 2003):

(A: An old lady; B: A girl aged 12)
A: Hello! What is your name?
B: My name is Ma Li-li.
A: How old are you?
B: I am twelve.
B: How old are you?
A: It is a secret.

It is a real scene that not only stimulates students’ interests in learning English but also gives them a deep impression about cultural difference.

Accordingly, teachers should encourage students to communicate with each other in English by the appropriate way except for passing on the necessary cultural background knowledge and enabling them to remember relevant communicative language.

Focus on the cultural difference between the East and the West on vocabulary. It is necessary to explain the cultural connotation of English vocabulary for teachers while comparing native language with the target language in common communicative language for the following reasons:
1. “Vocabulary is the basic element of language. It is one of the most obvious cultural information carriers, prominent in vocabulary level” (Zhao, 2005);

2. Many middle school students ignore the cultural background of vocabulary when they do exercises about translation. For example, students are required to translate the phrase “少管闲事” (shaoguanxianshi) from Chinese to English. There are many English versions for that, for example, “ignore others’ business”, “do not care about others”, etc. However, the right English version is “mind one’s own business”. This example tells us that many students make many mistakes in phrase translation because they only consider the semantic meaning of vocabulary. In short, English vocabulary and Chinese vocabulary have extremely rich cultural connotation. These two kinds of vocabularies are not equal in the cultural and semantic meaning.

To help students understand the cultural difference in vocabulary, how should teachers do? Generally, there are three ways:

1. To guide students to distinguish the words with the same indicative meaning but different cultural connotations in English teaching. For example, the word “dog” has different cultural connotations in different ethnicity. In the West, dogs are loyal to owners. People regard them as reliable friends. Dogs also enjoy a higher treatment, such as dogs’ accounts and dogs’ doctors. Under such cultural background, the British like to say “love me, love my dog” (Miao, 2003), which means that anyone who gets along well with “me” must love “my” favorite things. There are many phrases about dogs. For example, “a lucky dog” refers to a lucky person; “a jolly dog” means a happy person; “a top dog” means a winner; “a big dog” refers to a tycoon, etc. However, the Chinese discriminate dogs. The word “dog” often used to describe a bad thing. For example, the Chinese often say “狗腿子” (goutuizi);

2. To guide students to distinguish the vocabulary with the same significance and cultural connotation. There are many words with the same indicative meaning and cultural connotations between Chinese and English, such as “心情沉重” (xinqingchenzhong)—with a heavy heart, “全心全意” (quanxinquanyi)—heart and soul, “心心相印” (xinxinxiangyin)—heart to heart, “君子协定” (junzixieding)—a gentlemen’ agreement, and “趁热打铁” (chenredatie)—strike while iron is hot;

3. To guide students to distinguish the words with different indicative meaning but the same or similar connotation. For example, in China, people usually say “as stubborn as a cow”. However, in English-speaking countries, people say “as stubborn as a mule”. These two different kinds of language are very different in indicative meaning. The Chinese use “cow” while the English use “mule”. However, their cultural connotation is similar. It is used to describe a kind of person who does not easily change his/her idea once he/she decides to do something.

In addition to comparing vocabulary with cultural connotation, the comparison of communicative language is an effective approach to improve students’ cultural awareness.

In “regard” aspect, to show concern for others, people often greet each other in daily life when meeting each other. The “regard” language is used differently in different cultural backgrounds. For example, in China, people who are familiar with each other often ask “Have you eaten” or “Where are you going?”. There is nothing wrong with the above two questions for the Chinese. There may be two misunderstandings of the two questions for the foreigners: “Do you want to treat me” or “Do you want to know my personal business?”. However, generally speaking, people from English-speaking countries often talk about the weather, travel, and sports when meeting each other and never ask other’ age, salary, and other personal problems.

In “appellation” aspect, appellation is not just a linguistic phenomenon. It also reflects the cultural
difference between the West and the East. It has been divided into two sides: “the title of relatives and the sub-title of the community” (Deng & Liu, 1989). The appellation from China is not the same as the appellation from Western countries.

The title of relatives is different in Eastern and Western countries. There is a tradition in China: “respect for the elders and love the youngster”. Therefore, the title of relatives tends to show a person’s status in China. For example, the men whose age is similar to their forefathers are called “grandpa” while the women are called “grandma”. Under such circumstance, the men whose age is similar to their parents are called “uncle”, while the women are called “aunt”; the men whose age is similar to them are called “brother”, while the women are called “sister”. The title of relatives is more general and vague in the West. There are only two appellations in the relatives of last generation, namely, “uncle” and “aunt”. There is only one appellation in peers, that is, “cousin”. In practical application, Westerners often omit the above appellations, even call their parents’ name directly. People from China can not call their parents’ name, otherwise, they are regarded as impolite children.

Moreover, the title of social occasion is different in daily communication. People from China like to use the title of profession, such as Leader Li, Accountant Zhang, etc., while in English, this kind of title is generally used in the members of royal family and the superstructure of government, such as President Bush, which implies the respect for others. The title on the profession “teacher” is also different between the West and the East. The people from West call their teacher “Mr./Mrs./Miss + surname” or call their name directly, while people from East often call their teacher “surname + teacher”.

The “taboo” aspect explains the cultural differences between the West and the East by using the example “death and old”. There are many taboos for death in China or in English-speaking countries. People always avoid using it. There are many euphemisms of death in China, such as “pass away”, “leave us forever”, etc.. There are also many expressions about death in English-speaking countries, for example, “the last call”. The word “old” has also different cultural connotations in different culture. In China, the word “old” with a sense of respect is often talked by people. Therefore, the title is added to the word “old” for elders, such as the old grandpa, the old grandma, and the old professor, etc., while in English-speaking countries, the condition is contrary, people seldom talk about the topic about “old” and are afraid of becoming old, they often call the elders “senior citizen” rather than “old people”.

In “courtesy” aspect, there is an obvious difference between the East and the West. Taking “Thank you” and “Please” as an example, these two phrases are often used in formal occasions or in distant relationships in China while they are rarely used between friends and relatives. They are not used among family members because the Chinese believe that the above two phrases make people’s relationships distant. However, the Westerners hold that they have to say “Please” when they request others to do something or they should say “Thank you” when others spend their time and efforts in helping them. Therefore, the above two words are used more widely in the West, not only between people who are not familiar with each other, but also in friends, relatives, and family members.

There is also a difference between the West and the East in expression “Thank you”. The Chinese often say “give you so much trouble” or “let you suffer” when they express their “thanks”, while Westerners often say simply “Thank you” or “Thanks a lot”. When thanked by others, the Chinese often say “You are welcome” or “It is my duty”. The English meaning of this sentence is that I had to do something because of responsibility. The British and American people may be unhappy after listening. The Westerns say directly “You are welcome, I am glad to help you”. 
In short, teachers not only teach students language knowledge, but also teach them cultural background knowledge, which can train their sensitivity for cultural differences and help them avoid misunderstandings in communication.

**Use a variety of extra-activities to help students absorb and experience foreign culture.** To give students access to British and American countries’ cultural background knowledge in English teaching, teachers should allow students to participate in a variety of extra-activities, such as an English speech contest and an English song contest. Taking English songs as an example, songs tend to reflect the aspiration of a nation and represent cultural styles in different regions. Therefore, teachers should select some songs carefully for students and encourage them to sing. Such extra-curricular activities not only enable students to understand the cultural knowledge, but also allow them to enjoy the fun of learning English.

In daily life, teachers should guide students to read some books on Anglo-American culture, especially literary works and magazines. It is because literature is one of the most comprehensive and vivid materials that help students understand a country’s culture and customs. Directing them record some knowledge about Anglo-American culture consciously, teachers must supervise them by checking their reading notes. If students insist on reading, they can accumulate more knowledge about Anglo-American culture and integrate into another culture quickly.

Teachers should also encourage students to watch more British and American original films and videos. Films, as a medium, show people a variety of life. They help students experience and learn another kind of culture unconsciously and increase their interests in learning English.

In addition, it is useful to hold lectures about the Anglo-American culture for students because it connects the fragmented cultural information together and contributes to students’ understanding for the Western culture. For example, when teaching idioms, such as “carry coals to Newcastle” (Chen, 1999), teachers should enable students to understand that Newcastle is an industrial city and its mining is relatively developed. If students do not understand its cultural connotation, there is a superficial understanding “carry coals to Newcastle”.

The above activities can enhance students’ interests in learning English, improve their sensitivity for cultural difference, and strengthen their cultural awareness.

**Conclusions**

Language and the application of language can not be separated from culture. If one wants to learn language well, he/she must understand culture. The special relationship between language and culture requires learners to realize the importance of culture fully while they gain language. Therefore, teachers teaching English in junior middle schools should not only develop students’ four basic English skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, by imparting language knowledge, but also intensify their cultural awareness by a variety of effective ways. They should try their best to intensify students’ cultural awareness while developing their language ability. Cultural knowledge should be introduced throughout the whole language teaching. In doing so, students can avoid making mistakes in cross-cultural communication and improve the quality of English learning. From the cultural point of view, that kind of teaching method compensates the traditional foreign language teaching’s shortage. During the process of imparting cultural background knowledge, teachers who play an important role should teach cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries according to students’ learning needs. In order to make students know about cultural values of English-speaking countries and the way of their life, teachers should use effective teaching methods to intensify
their cultural awareness, such as by making good use of teaching materials, helping students compare the cultural difference on vocabulary, and encouraging students to take part in extra-curricular activities. As long as teachers from junior middle schools insist on teaching cultural background knowledge as the above discussed, the present situation of English teaching in junior middle schools and the cultural awareness of students can be improved gradually and effectively.

References