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Research on the Relationship Between Language and Culture in College English Teaching

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Abstract: *Language and culture are closely related to each other. Language itself is a powerful and effective way to communicate with people. Meanwhile it is also an essential component of cultural system. In most cases, language could illustrate certain cultural phenomenon as well as people's thinking patterns. Culture could set a solid foundation for the formation and evolution of language. Therefore, research on the relationship between language and culture would make Chinese teachers working in universities or colleges better understand the objectives and the significance of English teaching. This would guide college English teachers to achieve the best teaching results by understanding the relationship between language and culture and make their college students benefit from it.*

Key words: *Language; Culture; Relationship; Colleges and universities; English teaching*

Introduction

Teaching Requirements for College English Courses issued by the general office of the Ministry of Education of China clearly states that college English is a teaching system that takes foreign language teaching theories as the guidance, as well as taking English language knowledge and application skills, intercultural communication and learning strategies as the main contents. Meanwhile college English teaching should integrate multiple teaching modes and approaches. These requirements not only clarify the main objectives of Chinese college English teaching, but also point out the direction for college English teachers (Cai, 2003). The goal of cross-cultural communication ability to college English teachers puts forward higher teaching requirements. To meet these requirements, English teachers should focus on how to implement the interaction and transformation of language and culture, which is the key to understand the relationship between language and culture. Thus, students' practical application of English will be improved, and their understanding of Chinese and western cultures will be deepened. This will cultivate students' intercultural communication skills in their future life, study and realm of work.

Literature Review

Research on the relationship between language and culture has been going on for a long time. With the development of eras and human cognition, people's understanding of the relationship between language and culture has changed accordingly. There is a nearly-one-hundred-year history of foreign studies on this field. The most controversial one is "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis", which emphasizes the relationship between language, culture and thinking. Whorf's hypothesis has two core theories: 1) Language determines cognition,

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that is, how we perceive the world as it is described; 2) Different languages have different cognitive systems (Yang, 2007). Whorf's hypothesis made people realize the close relationship between language, culture and thinking. It began to emphasize the social attribute of language and put forward that the study of language and culture should not be isolated and should be conducted in the context of social culture.

In the 1950s, Chinese scholar Changpei Luo further discussed the close relationship between language and culture in his book Language and Culture, from the meaning of words, dialects, loanwords, and names. The book is rooted in sociology and anthropology, discussing different fields ranging from national culture, religion, history, customs, etc. "There is something behind language," written by Luo in the introduction chapter, “And language cannot exist apart from culture. Culture is the sum of the habits and beliefs inherited from society that determines the components of our lives." (Luo, 2011) Luo's opinions mainly include two aspects: language is not only a tool of expression, but also a part of culture. Without language, there would be no culture. Language has national characteristics. It could reflect the historical and cultural background of a nation, as well as its living habits and thinking patterns. To some extent, language is the condensation of national culture and national consciousness (Luo, 2007).

Relationship Between Language and Culture

On the premise of understanding the learning theory of language and culture, this research will focus on the relationship between language and culture. Based on many years of teaching experiences and recent researches on the relevant topics, researchers believe that the relationship between language and culture can be discussed from the following aspects:

Language is an effective tool for communication

For thousands of years, the question of the origin of language has puzzled many linguists, anthropologists, philosophers and sociologists. Like the "missing link" in evolutionary biology, the true story of the origin of language is hard to corroborate, but only to speculate. After years of research and reasoning, linguists and philosophers have put forward many hypotheses about the origin of language, among which the most far-reaching are: 1) Onomatopoeia and Simulacra, which regards the origin of language as the imitations of natural sound and phenomenon (Yang, 2009). 2) Contract Theory, proposed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a French philosopher, in his Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inegalite parmi les hommes and Essai sur l'origine des langues. He believes that in order to build an equal society and facilitate communication, human beings agreed to use language as a tool of communication. But, ironically, under French rule in Britain, the ruling class required those at the top to communicate in French and those at the bottom to communicate in Anglo-Saxon. Such regulations are in no way conducive to the establishment of an egalitarian society. 3) Biological evolution theory. Biologists and archaeologists believe that because our ancestors learned to walk on feet, fully liberated limbs could have been used for more brain tasks. Similarly, being able to walk upright allowed our ancestors to see more and breathe more easily, which in turn led to the further evolution of the brain and nervous system, and created the conditions for the creation and development of language.

However, no matter which hypothesis is adopted, it is believed that the motivation of the use of language originates from the reality that human beings need to communicate. That is to say, linguists, anthropologists,

sociologists and others generally believe that language first emerged as a tool of communication. Then the emergence of such communication tools has greatly promoted the mutual communication and understanding between human beings, stimulated the development and communication of human thinking, and further accelerated the development of human history.

The story of the tower of Babel in the bible is a good example of the importance of verbal communication. When the people wanted to work together to build Babel, the Lord said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other. "(Bible, 2008) So the Lord changed the language of people, made them strange to each other, and eventually formed different nations. It is hard to prove if the story is true or not, but it confirms that if people do not have a common language, individuals cannot communicate freely with each other, let alone work together as a team.

Language is an integral part of a cultural phenomenon

Philosophers hold that the fundamental difference between man and animals lies in man's ability to think and judge independently. Although some scientific experiments have found that primates and other animals have certain thinking and judgment abilities, the frequency and intensity of the use of this ability are not comparable to those of humans. In addition, some animal experiments have demonstrated the existence of "language" between animals, but this "language" is more often used to warn danger, to make courtship, or to tell partners where food is available (Xu, 1986). Perhaps early human language was based on the need to survive and reproduce. Today, however, human language is more used to communicate emotions and convey ideas and cognition.

In addition, the vocabulary of human languages also carries obvious cultural information, which can reflect all aspects of human society and culture. For example, idioms and proverbs in a language are closely related to the history, society and cultural traditions of a particular nation. And the grammatical structures and expression techniques of a language can also reflect the thinking mode and personality characteristics of a particular nation to a certain extent. In contrast to Chinese, English is often referred to as a low-context language, while Chinese as a high-context language. Low-context language is relatively straightforward and expressive, just as most westerners are outgoing and straightforward, while high-context language is relatively reserved and restraining, just as most easterners are tolerant and slightly conservative.

The historical linguist Grimm believes that language is history. Language itself contains social content (Dao, 2008). Social content is a cultural phenomenon, so language is a part of a cultural phenomenon. When Confucian scholars and scholars used Confucian classics and sage sayings to criticize the current political situation, Qin Shihuang burned books and buried Confucian scholars, and adopted a high-pressure policy to unify the speech, because he knew that the power of language was terrible, especially the words of those saints and scholars could completely "confuse" people and overthrow the government. When Caesar pursued Pompey and burned Alexander's books under fire, many precious books were set on fire, which caused great loss to human civilization and the development of science and technology, and even led to the fault in the history of Egyptian civilization. From those examples, it is not difficult to see that language is an extremely important cultural factor no matter what form it takes. Language can often reflect a nation's thinking mode, values, religious trust, national cognition and other ideologies. These cultural factors, which cannot be fully

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embodied by materials, can only exist in the conscious thinking of human beings, and at the proper time, their influence can be realized with a proper language.

Languages correspond to specific cultures

As mentioned above, language is a part of cultural phenomenon, and language itself is an organic combination of word symbols and cultural factors. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to think that language corresponds to certain cultural characteristics and carries a nation's specific cultural personality to a certain extent. As Juri Lotman wrote in his works, "No language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture: And no culture can exist which does not have at its corner the structure of natural language." (Lotman, 2009) Therefore, different languages often correspond to and reflect specific cultural characteristics. At the same time, the change of language can also be useful to study the developmental stage of a society, moral requirements and ideological cognition of specific nations in different periods. English and Chinese represent western culture and eastern culture respectively. Study of English and Chinese is a comparative study of western culture and eastern culture.

Since ancient times, the Chinese people lived in feudal societies that attached great importance to etiquette and religion. As a result of that social environment, people attached importance to the family and clansmen, emphasizing the importance of Filial Piety and respect for hierarchy and order (Shen, 2000). They paid attention to the order of the old and the young, and should not call their elders by their names; otherwise they will be regarded as having no respect for the etiquette and law. Everyone paid much attention to their social and family positions and roles and their behaviors.

Relatively speaking, the United States is a new melting country, which has not experienced a long feudal period. Because the capitalist system has long held the dominant position, most Americans prefer the small units of their family, and are more accustomed to calling relatives by their first names. Often, children aspire to be independent once they reach adulthood, and parents prefer to live in their own homes even when they are old. As a result, family contact usually takes place during holidays, so there is no need to establish a huge and complicated kinship relationship like that in China. Today, although China’s social system have undergone tremendous changes, the history of language itself can still tell us what happened in the history and how Chinese culture differs from other cultures.

Language does not correspond exactly to a particular culture

In contrast to language embodiments of specific cultural characteristics, not all languages correspond to only one culture, or only one language is used in one culture. As an international language, English has a wide geographical influence. Not only did Britain and its former colonists use English, but virtually every country in the world support its people in learning and understanding English. Due to the increasing globalization, the communication between countries has become more and more frequent. Therefore, it is particularly important for most countries to master a widely recognized language to strengthen communication and cooperation between countries. For example, although both Britain and the United States use English and have been influenced by Anglo-Saxon culture, their cultures and national beliefs are obviously different due to different geographical and historical backgrounds (Huang, 1996). For another example, in addition to

French in France, many local people in Cambodia, Haiti, South Africa and Quebec in Canada use French for daily communication. Although many Quebec residents use French, it is very different from the real French in terms of grammatical structure and words, not to mention cultural systems and thinking patterns.

On the other hand, a culture often contains two or more languages. Take China as an example. Mandarin, as the official language in China, is a dominant tool for daily communication and knowledge transmission in most provinces and regions. However, it cannot be denied that, from a macro perspective, China is a vast country with 55 ethnic minorities. Naturally, each ethnic minority has its own language. From the micro point of view, every province and city, every town and countryside, due to the differences in geography and living environment, have different dialects. The same sentence, spoken by people in different regions, could sound quite different (Huang, 1996).

For further discussion, we can still take China as an example. As a result of the education of traditional Confucianism, most of the Chinese people prefer the large-family, regular and stable life. Even if some Chinese people have emigrated to western countries, have learned to use a knife and fork, are able to speak English, and have made friends with local people, it's still difficult to integrate into the local culture. Language acquisition and application are simple. People can within just a few months speak another language fluently. Even if people can possess bilingual talents, they still could not get rid of their own national consciousness, life cognition, the outlook on life, values, local customs, etc. and still get greatly influenced by them. Once formed, culture, as a special "thing", will largely dominate people's thinking system, their choice and judgment, and will not disappear with the mastery of another language (Shen, 2000). Even some of the Chinese once said that although they speak English and live in other countries, they miss their motherland a lot, and show more understanding and respect for their own culture. They hope that their motherland will become more prosperous and powerful. As one of them said, "Only when China is prosperous can those of us who are overseas be truly respected and accepted by the local people in a foreign country, and our personal safety can be guaranteed."

At the same time, we should also realize that neither language nor culture is static. Basically, a language is determined by the level of development of the culture on which it is based. The more prosperous the culture is, the richer and more up-to-date the corresponding language system is. Correspondingly, some discourses and words can also influence the characteristics and development of a particular culture to some extent. For example, the policy discourse of a country, the speeches of some important figures, or the major reports of some scientific discoveries can have a significant influence on the future trend of their social forms and culture.

College English teachers should fully understand and analyze the complex relationship between language and culture, and comprehensively and objectively realize the importance of English teaching that could help students understand the western world, at the same time, be conscious of different cultures, and absorb western cultural essence. Thus they could focus on their teaching with a clearer objective, guidance and target, and help students to master language and culture simultaneously.

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The Significance of the Research on the Relationship Between Language and Culture in Guiding College English Teaching

Requirements of College English Teaching points out that college English teaching should meet two requirements: language knowledge and application skill; cross-cultural communication and learning strategy. In order to realize these two main teaching purposes, teachers in colleges and universities should, on the basis of mastering the relationship between language and culture, examine the disadvantages of nowadays English teaching in colleges and universities, and actively explore a more comprehensive and effective way of teaching.

English teachers in colleges and universities should constantly update their own "language banks" and cultural reserves

Confucianism emphasizes "cultivating one's morality, regulating the family, governing the country, and then conquering the world". Cultivation of one's morality is the foundation of one's life and also the premise of all "achievements". As the key factor of foreign language teaching, teachers shoulder the important responsibility of language teaching and cultural inheritance. They "cultivate themselves" and then they can "preach, impart knowledge and dispel doubts". Language, as the most important communication tool, is often taught by word of mouth. If a college English teacher has a solid knowledge of grammar and pronunciation, his students will not be too bad in listening, speaking, reading and writing. If the teacher also has rich experience in cross-cultural communication and is familiar with western history, culture and human environment, this is just like the icing on the cake and his students would benefit a lot from his teaching.

However, many college English teachers in China still like to "bury their heads in old papers" and "ignore things outside the window". In other words, they do not have a solid knowledge of English grammar, nor do they pay attention to learning new language knowledge, let alone being familiar with Chinese and western culture and conducting comparative research and learning on cultural issue. If these English teachers in colleges and universities cannot realize their deficiencies in time and make up for the disadvantage in their knowledge in a short time, in the long run, the goal of cultivating students' communication skills, especially intercultural communication skills in college will become empty talk.

College English teachers should teach cultural knowledge step by step in the process of teaching language

Currently, English teaching in colleges and universities focuses on helping students pass the English proficiency tests. Therefore, teachers pay much attention to cultivating students' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Although they have dabbled in Chinese-English translation practice, they still find that students' actual translation skills and abilities are insufficient. Different levels of Chinese-English translation abilities can reflect students' understanding of their own culture and western culture to some extent. People have the experience: when one sentence is translated from Chinese into English, different people will have different ways of translating. So will the western people. This is how misunderstanding occurs.

In order to avoid misunderstanding in the actual process of cultural communication, English teachers

in colleges and universities should consciously combine students' cognitive ability with their thinking developmental mode when arranging different cultural content teaching. Culture, like many other disciplines, is self-contained and layered. English teachers should follow the principles of cultural teaching, analyze and interpret “Superstructures”—historical factors, social environment and thinking patterns—that dominate western daily behavior and cause the huge cultural differences between the east and the west (Cheng & Kang, 2010). Only in this way can students truly realize the relationship between various cultures and push their understanding of western culture from mere perceptual cognition to a deeper and comprehensive rational generalization, so that they can know themselves better in future cross-cultural communication activities.

College English teachers should emphasize on the contrast between Chinese and western cultures and highlight their own cultures

We can consider cross-cultural communication as a scale, with eastern culture at one end and western culture at the other. With the increasing communication between China and western countries in recent years, many students have the opportunity to be exposed to a completely different and fascinating western culture. Compared with eastern culture, which is relatively reserved and introverted, emphasizing collectivism, western culture is unrestrained and enthusiastic, highlighting individualism. When advocating the western lifestyle, many Chinese, especially the young generation, begin to be deeply influenced by the western culture and values, which gradually leads to confusion of their own beliefs and values. In addition to the impacts of western ideology, the "Korean wave", which is very popular in recent years, has also a great influence on Chinese youth. Many young people like to buy Korean clothes and hats, wear Korean makeup, advocate Korean plastic surgery, watch Korean dramas and learn Korean. While contributing to the GDP of South Korea, they are constantly questioning and despising Chinese culture.

As the leading factor of English teaching, English teachers in colleges and universities should correct that bad phenomenon and let students feel proud of Chinese culture again. English teachers should realize that the essence of English teaching is to enhance students’ intercultural communication skills, to deepen their understanding and respect for their own culture, and to carry out cultural peer to peer communication with a positive and objective attitude. Therefore, English teachers should consciously compare the similarities and differences between eastern and western cultures in the process of teaching, and highlight the characteristics and essence of their own culture. At the same time, combining personal life experiences with the familiar culture will be helpful when it comes to English learning (Wu & Du, 2014).

Moreover, college English teachers themselves can help students understand the similarities and differences between Chinese and English culture in terms of their grammatical structures and words. For example, the differences between Chinese and English contexts mentioned above are actually caused by the differences between Chinese and western historical factors and social systems. For another example, although the languages are different, Chinese and English have specific phrases or sentences to express similar contexts. This reflects although there are different historical backgrounds and social systems, many similarities exist in Chinese and western cultures—"Shared traits" by all human beings. Learning western culture can effectively stimulate students' curiosity and enthusiasm for learning, so as to help students better understand the learning content and flexibly use the knowledge to carry out daily and future cross-cultural communication.

Conclusion

In order to enhance ability to identify and understand the Chinese and western language and culture, enhance the perception of words and culture, college English teachers should adjust to their teaching focus from the language itself to cultural differences. This will help college students learn how to appreciate the essence of Chinese and western culture, set up the correct world outlook of life and values, and ultimately to promote Chinese core values effectively in intercultural communication.

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