Raising Intercultural Awareness in Preparation for Teaching English in China

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Abstract: The English teaching in China has its specific background as a result of different cultures, which is especially apparent to native English-speaking teachers in China. The author of this paper attempts to explore the intercultural awareness in the process of preparing for the English teaching in the Chinese context. It offers some advice by analyzing some aspects of the differences between the two cultures.

Keywords: Native English speakers teaching English; the Chinese context; intercultural awareness; English teaching in China

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to examine how native English speakers teaching English can get intercultural awareness in China. It has been argued that second language (L2) learning should be linked with cultural awareness of the target language, no matter what the learners’ goals are. That is the same to native-speaker teachers of English in other contexts. L2 learners might want to acquire language skills only such as speaking, listening, reading and writing, for communication in study, business or for their social needs. But since ‘each language has its own models of expression’ (Byram, 1997:52), to native English speakers teaching English in other contexts, learning the characteristics of the context and understanding the culture through key words and phrases that are associated with it are necessary components to language teaching.

This article will try to give simple explanations of the concepts of culture and intercultural awareness at first. And then try to identify certain basic cultural backgrounds in Chinese context. Given these backgrounds, the article highlights examples of good practice in intercultural awareness and considers possibilities for further development and improvement in getting intercultural awareness.

2. Concepts of Culture and Intercultural Awareness

2.1 Culture

There is enormous diversity in interpretation of the exact definition of the word culture. According to the anthropological and socio-linguistic points of view, it has been determined in two ways. First, Culture with a capital C. The culture of artifacts and human tradition: the fine arts, music, drama, literature, and so on. Secondly, there is culture with a small c: referring to a series of customs, traditions and ‘historically transmitted patterns of meaning’ (Wierzbicka, 1997: 21) in which one can define one’s identity according to the social norms of the group. In a community, one is expected to behave and act as a mem
ber of the group in accordance with others.

Jenks (1993) provides another four interpretations of the concept of culture:

1. Culture as a cerebral, or certainly a cognitive category: culture becomes intelligible as a general state of mind (e.g. 'the cultured woman').

2. Culture as a more embodied and collective category: culture invokes a state of intellectual and/or moral development in society. This is a position linking culture with the idea of civilization.

3. Culture as a descriptive and concrete category: culture viewed as the collective body of arts and intellectual work within any one society. It includes a firmly established notion of culture as the realm of the produced and esoteric symbolism of a society.

4. Culture as a social category: culture regarded as the whole way of life of a people: this is the pluralist and potentially democratic sense of the concept.

In the context of native-speaker teachers of English in China, "culture learning" supposes that at least some cultural norms of the type expressed in (4) are likely to be different between the teaching and learning in L1 and L2. Furthermore, the need to teach in a specific context China will physically separate them from their normal "micro-communities". A teacher's success in achieving the intercultural awareness will depend on successfully applying it in the teaching English later. That is, how can they communicate with their students and native people of the community in which he/she will be a resident. It is therefore important for them to be able to empathize with those people and to appreciate, adapt to and function within the norms of that community. Schumann (1978) documented examples of poor development of the L2 due to failed acculturation to the host community. Likewise, their lack of cultural awareness and inappropriate strategies for coping with differences may result in affective and behavioral reactions of "culture shock" (Oberg, 1960). Consequently, "educating culturally", in the sense of culture as summarized in (4), must focus on how their feelings, attitudes, actions and reactions can influence the process of adaptation to the cultural norms of the host community.

2.2 Intercultural awareness

Wallraven (1999) reminds the difficulty in reaching a consensus over the very definition of "cross-cultural capability". Parry (1999) refers to a "new interdisciplinary discipline", perhaps illustrated by the variety of jargon applied to naming it. The list includes: "cross-cultural capability", "cross-cultural skills", "cross-cultural competence", "cross-cultural awareness", "inter-cultural studies", "inter-cultural communication", "intercultural effectiveness", "inter-cultural awareness", "Intercultural Communicative Competence". Here we chose the term "Intercultural Awareness" as popular named.

Firstly, let us compare it with another common term in the field of Second Language Acquisition: 'Interlanguage'. At its simplest level, Seltink (1992) describes interlanguage as a "between language", a learner language which exhibits an increasing proximity to L2. The approximation of interlanguage to L2 is a dynamic, often fluctuating process, influenced by changes in knowledge about and how to use L2, as well as transfer of and hypotheses based on L1 structure applied to L2. The learner's current state of interlanguage manifests itself in an ability to communicate in and understand the L2.

"Intercultural awareness" shares some similarity with interlanguage in that the resident abroad, like the interlanguage speaker, is influenced by both knowledge and experience of his/her host culture and of his/her native culture. The current state of intercultural awareness of native-speaker teachers in China manifests itself in feelings, attitudes and behaviors which display how well they have adapted to life in another context.

3. The relationship between culture and language

Language is a very special component of culture. Language is a part of the conventional culture. Most of the languages are contained within their cultures, and a society's language is an aspect of its culture. There is a dialectical relationship between language and culture. Every language is part of a culture, and every culture is part of a language. As such, language cannot but serve and reflect cultural needs.
The two are intricately involved in each other such that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. Thus, the relation of language to culture is that of part to whole. Culture is really an integral part of the interaction between language and thought. Cultural patterns, customs, and ways of life are expressed in language.

For example, Eskimo tribes commonly have as many seven different words for snow to distinguish among different types of snow. In African cultures of the equatorial forests. There is no word for snow at all. Examples like these suggest a simple principle, that different cultural features produce different linguistic features (Ren, 2004). There are plenty of examples to show the culture difference between English and Chinese. Chinese has a complex system of kinship terms, which will be explained later in 5.1. It distinguishes the different addressing in Chinese, while in English there are no counterparts. This is because the Chinese are more particular about these relation distinctions, while the English people do not need to make these distinctions.

On the other hand, language is the carrier of culture. Language can reinforce and preserve a culture, its beliefs and customs, and sometimes, conditions in its future course of development. As long as a language is in use, the culture it represents will survive. Even if a culture is wiped out, it can still be studied by looking at it.

4. Culture and language teaching and learning in China

Teaching English for native-speaker teachers of English in countries like China where the target language English is not spoken is a type of quasi-international experience in which they would encounter new lifestyles, ways of thinking, behavior, and types of interaction represented by the language. These are two quite different cultures. It is too hard to master the whole Chinese culture. It is hard and impossible. Here I can only chose those basic points.

4.1. Teacher's role

Teachers are highly respected in Chinese culture, and are typically regarded as being knowledgeable and authoritative. There is a proverb in China said "To be a teacher for one day, is to be a father for ever", which means if someone teaches you even only for a single day, you have to respect him as your father for your whole life. Respecting teachers in China can be learned from it. Out of respect, Chinese students are usually not as ready to argue or to voice opinions in class as British students.

4.2. Learning style

Traditional Chinese culture places a very high value on learning. An English language teacher can expect to find his or her pupils admirably industrious and often is in need of dissuasion from working too hard.

A related view in many Chinese students' minds is that learning needs serious and painstaking effort. Activities that are "pleasurable" and "fun" are rather suspecting as not being conducive to proper learning. Teachers who have adopted an approach involving "learning while having fun" should be prepared to show its validity.

Regarding methods of learning, a salient feature of Chinese education is rote memorization. One reason for this is that all the basic written units of Chinese, the characters, have to be learned by heart individually. This method plays a significant part in the way English is learned in China, and any predispose some Chinese students to spend considerable time on memorization at the expense of practice.

5. A pedagogical approach to Chinese cultural phrases

To live in an oriential country such as China, it should be pointed out that there are some specific expressions in Chinese which indicate social virtues, for example:

5.1. Addressing

There is different addressing to different people. Specifically, there is different addressing to different family members. In English-speaking countries, father's or mother's brothers are all called UNCLE whereas in China the elder counterparts are called DAYE (meaning ELDER UNCLE) and younger
counterparts called SHUSHU (meaning YOUNGER UNCLE). There are different addressing according to blood, gender and age. To address colleagues, for example, in a school, you can address every teacher like "Teacher Zhang" or "Teacher Wang" no matter their age and gender. It is quite different in English-speaking countries where everyone can call the other's first name. It is not accepted in China, especially when you call like that to address an older one. Comparatively, Teacher ...(like Mr. in English) is the most neutral style in addressing teachers.

5.2. Replying to negative questions

It is quite interesting in different replying to negative questions in English and Chinese. In English, if someone says:

Today isn't very hot, is it?

If another one wants to agree, he or she would reply:

No, it isn't.

Or disagree, replies:

Yes, it is.

But in Chinese, it is just the opposite. If you agree, you reply:

Yes, it isn't.

If you disagree, you reply:

No, it is.

To native-speaker teachers of English go to China for the first time, it is a puzzle.

5.3. Modals

Certain meanings of English modals have direct equivalents in Chinese modals and can be readily understood. But other meanings that have no Chinese counterparts are problematic. For instance, should as in I think you should take up writing is easy as it corresponds to a Chinese modal, yienggai. But should is more difficult in the utterances below since it has no straightforward Chinese translations:

It's strange that you should say this.

We should be grateful if you could do it.

On the whole, English modals indicate a wider range of meaning and feeling that their Chinese counterparts. Chinese learners therefore tend not to use them as frequently as they should, and may fail to express the nuances that English modals convey.

They would for example be likely to say as "This is definitely not true" in preference to "This cannot be true", or "I'm probably coming rather than I might come".

One point needs particular mention. Communication in English requires appropriate polite forms of instructions, invitations, requests and suggestions, in which modals play a central role. Not being able to use modals (and associated patterns) adequately, Chinese students often fail to comply with the English conventions, and may appear abrupt (Chang, 2001). For example, they may say such things as:

1. Please read this article.
2. You come and sit here, please.
3. Can you do me a favor?

When it would normally be more polite to say:

1. You may like to read this article.
2. Would you come and sit here, please?
3. Could you do me a favor?

6. Methodology

How should native-speaker teachers of English get the intercultural awareness by learning these complicated styles of interaction? It is not linguistically difficult to learn the practice the sentences, but it may take a little time to make learners understand the socio-cultural system and the significance of keywords. Here are some possible procedures:

6.1. Presentation of visual information

To show them some (possibly authentic) visual material such as (1) a commercial video, (2) TV program, (3) interview, or (4) home-made video in a fictional setting, (5) skit by native speakers, and so on would be a effective method in presenting visual information. Given such non-verbal information as facial expressions, gestures, the timing of utterances and/or phonological information (tone of voice), etc. It is expected that learners will understand how to identify each other using these cultural expressions.

6.2. Consolidation through quasi -visual aids (charts, etc.)

After viewing an actual interaction and before going to the practice, learners should be given some clear visual images which give cultural information.
The different addressing style of colleagues in schools is a good example. Put them in a chart with different colors. Thus it can help to illustrate clearly how to address different colleagues in this community.

6.3 Learners' practice/role-play/skit

Having confirmed the meaning of the interaction and the relation between A and B in a given skit, learners can go on to the stage of discussing the context and creating a situation where they can use the expressions. The teacher might need to provide extra information of what kind of settings are possible. Having acquired a new concept of the culture (as appropriated through their L1), it is expected that they may even create some artificial situations.

6.4 Feedback in class discussion

This final stage is optional depending on time. As a whole group, they discuss whether the presentations have adequately reflected their understanding of the concepts involved.

By going through all processes described above, they will develop competence not only at understanding the culturally-specific expressions and types of interaction but also at performing properly in the right time and in the right place in the context (China). Having once acquired this basic pattern of communication, they can apply the concept to more advanced levels. Thus, the goal and attainment of teaching English and living in China can be not only linguistic competence but cultural as well.

7. Further implications and conclusion

In their effort to learn those basic culture backgrounds and expressions in interaction, the native-speaker teachers of English may come to perceive their approach to equivalent situations in their daily life, which has not been thought about critically but taken for granted, and start describing themselves in the way in which other people identify them. Learning Chinese culture can lead them to assess their own culture and contribute to teaching their culture in more objective and insightful ways. Furthermore, by analyzing and comparing more than two cultures, they will be able to develop a wider viewpoint toward the teaching. If the teachers are successful in enhancing the intercultural awareness of Chinese culture to that extent, to the level of not only understanding it but also using it in their daily teaching and living in the Chinese culture, the intercultural awareness can be said to have made a good start.

References: