

On the Role of Native Culture in Intercultural Communication and Foreign Language Teaching

WANG Xiaohai

School of English for International Business, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies,
Guangzhou 510420, P. R. China
Email: wangxhai@gdufs.edu.cn

Abstract: Intercultural communication is a bidirectional interaction, in which the purpose of communication is not only mutual understanding and sharing of culture, but also cultural influence and to some extent the success of the latter is more important. Consequently, the competence of intercultural communication in Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) should be bidirectional as well, that is, understanding the cultural knowledge of the target language on the one hand, and systematically understanding the native culture on the other. However, the emphasis of FLT in the Chinese context places more weight on introducing the ‘foreign’ than on teaching the ‘native’ culture, thus leading to varying degrees of ‘Chinese Culture Aphasia’ in students and scholars. This paper argues that Chinese culture is the basis of intercultural communication; it is not only conducive to improving learners’ intercultural competence, but also facilitates them to promote Chinese culture since they can speak the foreign languages.

Key words Culture, Chinese culture, foreign language teaching, Intercultural communication.

Introduction

In recent years, the Chinese government has issued an array of documents and policies, and national leaders have given speeches on various occasions, to underline the urgency to enhance China’s soft power, affirm the importance of cultural forces in overall national strength, and make effective efforts to promote China’s soft power at the national policy level. China has begun to accelerate its steps to promote its cultural influence from a strategic point of view. In an increasingly competitive international situation, though China has a long history of over 5,000 years, the presence of China’s cultural soft power in the world is far from enough, and it still remains in a relatively weaker position in intercultural communication. How to make China’s culture ‘go global’ and let the world know more about China are important aspects of enhancing China’s cultural forces. To this end, the foreign language learners in higher education institutions should be duty-bound to take up the responsibility since they can speak foreign languages. Therefore, strengthening the learners’ knowledge of Chinese culture undoubtedly should be an important component in foreign language teaching.

The interrelationship between language and culture in FLT

The interrelationship between language and culture determines the important position of culture in FLT. However, FLT in China tends to focus on introducing the social and cultural knowledge of the target language, leaving the teaching and systematic learning of native culture to be largely ignored. What is more, few people attempt to put

forward the idea that the competence in both foreign and native culture should be treated equally as the fundamental requirements of language learners from the perspective of syllabus design and curriculum adjustments and settings. The lack of native culture influences the learners' cultural identity to some degree. The phenomenon of asymmetry - more foreign and less native culture - raises the status of foreign culture unintentionally, and makes the learners' native culture marginalized, as a result learners develop a poorer sense of native culture. Lack of knowledge of the native culture also results in learners' incomplete knowledge structure, and deficiencies of learners' intercultural communication competence. Once they enter a real communication context, 'Chinese Culture Aphasia' [1] is inevitable.

With regard to the definition of culture, so far no unanimous agreement has been reached. To sum up, views on culture are generally divided into two: broad and narrow. Culture, in its broad sense, refers to 'the sum of material and spiritual wealth created in the process of social and historical development of mankind'; in its narrow sense, culture is 'the knowledge system constitutes the human cultural values'. As a system of signs, language is part of culture; as a tool of thinking and communicating, language is the carrier of culture, and culture is the base of language [2]. Language cannot exist without culture, the two are inseparable. Learning a foreign language means learning its culture. It is difficult to learn English well if we don't know the culture of Britain, the United States and other English-speaking countries. In other words, the more we know about the history, the society, the customs and traditions, the modes of production, the life, the social values and so on, the more we can correctly understand the language and use it appropriately.

Whether native culture should be included in the teaching of foreign language or not, the answer to this question is definitely 'yes'. Kirpatrick argues that, the English curriculum design for foreign language learners should reflect their life, tradition and social values in order to protect their own national identity; teaching materials subsequently need to reflect the native culture of the learners and their local characteristics [3]. Chinese scholars have long realized the importance of native culture in FLT. Professor XU Guozhang, for instance, put forward the following ideas in his paper entitled 'Culturally Loaded Words and English Language Teaching' [4] as early as 1980, 'if organized exposure to C-2 (Chinese cultural context) and C-3 (English-speaking cultural context) is agreed to be important and relevant, then we ought to think about a place for it in a programme of English language teaching.' He developed a programme with three major components:

- Teaching of English: manipulative skills; (C-1, i.e. ELT context)
- Teaching of Chinese: intellectual skills: history, literature, culture; (C-2)
- Teaching of English: intellectual skills: history, literature, culture. (C-3).

From his viewpoint, an English teaching program should be designed in a way that the students' ability of mastering the forms of English language should be practised, and the intellectual development of students in Chinese teaching (history, literature, culture) and English Language Teaching (history, literature, culture) should be included.

In intercultural communication, native culture first serves as a benchmark to compare

with the culture of the target language so that understanding of the nature of native culture could be deepened; second, through the learners' psychological adjustment to native culture, their positive attitudes towards foreign language and foreign culture could be motivated, mobilizing the students to learn them actively, and enhancing their enthusiasm and motivation to learn a foreign language [5].

Both the Chinese words 'jiaoji, jiaoliu' and their English counterpart 'communication' imply that the act of communicating is a 'two-way' action. Intercultural communication cannot be constrained to mere 'understanding' and sharing of culture between communicators, but also 'cultural influence' to each other. In certain cases, the latter is more important to the success of a communication [6]. At present, the status of the content of Chinese culture in FLT is almost blank, so its negative impact on communication is obvious. There are quite a number of young Chinese scholars with very good English, but they do not show themselves coming from a big country with a long history of culture and an independent cultural identity in their exchanges with foreign scholars, showing a lack of confidence, different levels of the 'Chinese Cultural Aphasia' appear [7]. To overcome these shortcomings, we believe that Chinese culture should occupy an important place in FLT and it should be infiltrated at different levels of teaching.

Target culture vs. native culture in FLT

Intercultural communication implies a deep-seated mutual understanding. Provided that the communicator is familiar with the target culture, s/he can also influence and change the others' views and behavior patterns, then such a kind of communication is intercultural communication in its real sense. Only in this way is the communication profound and meaningful and can promote a nation's soft power.

Chinese culture lays the foundation for learning the target language culture. With regard to the Second Language Acquisition theory in the past, especially the interference of the treatment of native culture and mother tongue, negative interference cannot be avoided but the role of it has been exaggerated. In recent years, with further research done on interference, it has been revealed that mother tongue and native culture play a considerable positive role in learning a foreign language and meanwhile improve intercultural communication competence. 'Language learners with better communication competence in their mother tongue can relatively easily obtain good communication skills in a foreign language. By the same token, if the mother tongue of the learner is similar to the structure of the target language, similar to its cultural background, the probability of occurrence and scale in positive interference are greater.' [8] Only through a deeper understanding of the Chinese culture can we experience the similarities and differences from the comparison of different cultures, in this way we can find the various linguistic and non-linguistic factors impeding successful communication, hence communication competence can be increased effectively.

Attention to Chinese culture also means adapting to China's foreign language teaching objectives, which are not just to train talents who can only speak foreign languages and

who can only introduce the science and technology from abroad to China, they should also bear the heavy responsibility to promote Chinese culture to the world. To take on this task, language alone is not enough, they must be proficient in getting familiar with both the target culture and native culture. In intercultural communication, both sides are trying to adapt to each other on the one hand, while on the other hand, they are trying to assimilate one another. If we do not have a core of native culture, foreign exchange and dissemination of culture will be an empty talk, it is difficult to implement. No practical results can be achieved.

Chinese culture plays the role of a prerequisite and a bridge in intercultural communication. It is argued that the overall goal of cultural teaching is cross-cultural understanding and intercultural communication, students should first of all have the ability to understand native culture [9]. When there is a lack of understanding Chinese culture, intercultural communication is out of the question. On the contrary, only pride in native culture and self-confidence will make it possible for Chinese foreign language speakers to stand on an equal footing in intercultural communication, otherwise they can only be reduced to dependency and ‘slaves’ to foreign cultures. The self-confidence and pride derive from their deep feelings and deep understanding to Chinese culture. In intercultural communication, simply accommodating each other cannot achieve the objective of equal exchange, on the contrary, properly maintaining oneself can win others’ respect.

Including the teaching of Chinese culture means strengthening education in patriotism. It is generally believed that the emphasis on cultural education in FLT first and foremost is to ensure a better grasp of the language, but the next question is key: what is the content of the exchange? Developing students’ patriotic spirit has always been a very important part of Chinese education, especially today when Western culture penetrates into China’s national culture in various ways, if education in patriotism is not strengthened, it will only make our foreign language learners accept the foreign language, at the same time, they will gradually accept their lifestyle, values and codes of conduct, and so on. A nation’s culture and its national characteristics and qualities determine whether to accept foreign cultures or at the same time would lose themselves. Communication is not only the exchange at the absolute level of language, but a deep-seated dialogue of cultural background and national strength. There is no difference of superiority or inferiority between cultures, ‘effective communication is to know ourselves and our enemies, who long to make up for our own weaknesses.’ ‘Utter refusal to foreign culture; saying no to oneself, or overall transplant of foreign culture’ [10] are all wrong. Let the world know China so that the world is moving toward China, establishing the concept of cultural equality and linguistic equality can be achieved in the true sense of communication and exchange.

Suggestions on how to include Chinese culture in FLT

Nowadays English is still the lingua franca of the world. The higher education institutions in China should attach great importance to the impact of Western cultural hegemony. Since its reform and opening up to the outside world, China has invested a

lot of energy and financial resources in introducing foreign culture in FLT, but the stress and investment on Chinese culture is comparatively weak. It broadens the horizons of the Chinese people and cultivates their sense of the world view, but it brings about a negative impact on Chinese culture as well. The younger generation begins to learn foreign languages and come into contact with foreign culture from an early age. Because the whole society attaches great importance to foreign language and foreign culture, Chinese culture is only acquired in a natural context, which might result in ignorance of national culture, and a blind worship of foreign culture. Therefore, we must ensure effective provision of teaching materials with Chinese cultural contents at the micro-level of classroom teaching and create a good atmosphere at the macro-level of education policies, curriculum design and teaching programs.

First, a special external cultural communication program should be set up in foreign language institutions. Globalization, brought about by English and Westernization, has made the local language and local culture marginalized. The curriculum can determine the general direction regarding what to teach and how to teach, 'the scientific and practical value of cultural teaching syllabus should not be built on the basis of a single culture, but on the basis of a comparative study of different cultures. The reason is quite simple, the cultural programmes and syllabuses should reflect cultural differences, which can be found and identified through comparative study.' [11] The design of foreign language courses should reflect the integration of foreign culture and native culture. The learners' mother tongue and cultural factors should be taken into account in the foreign language teaching materials.

Native culture can be divided into two levels in the curriculum design: people's social and cultural daily lives, and traditional classical culture, such as ancient Chinese civilization in education, religion, customs, social systems and so on [12]. Students trained in this program are required to lay a solid foundation for foreign languages in the first two years, proficient in mastering the foreign language and the culture of target language. In the next two years, they should be fostered to build up their Chinese culture, understanding both the essence of traditional Chinese culture and contemporary Chinese society. Not only can the students speak the foreign languages well, they can also promote the Chinese culture well in foreign languages. In addition, they are required to be proficient in mastering one or more traditional Chinese cultural skills, such as playing traditional Chinese musical instruments, playing Chinese chess, writing Chinese calligraphy, drawing traditional Chinese paintings, even playing Chinese martial arts, gongfu, paper cutting, shadow play, and other non-traditional cultural techniques. As soon as they go out of the country to teach foreigners the Chinese language, they are able to demonstrate their skills vividly in front of them. We believe this kind of teaching is more vivid and attractive and can reach the effects of disseminating and promoting Chinese culture.

Second, strengthening the research into China's culture expressed in foreign languages is necessary. It is an effective way to learn Chinese culture by setting up a plan to express China's culture in foreign languages. China will improve foreign language and

cultural expression as one of the major objectives in foreign language training, teach the students to introduce Chinese culture in foreign languages. The two-way intercultural communication and culture determines that the 'import' of foreign culture is as important as the 'output' of native culture. The lack of culture 'output' makes the so-called intercultural communication turn into 'cultural intrusion' [13]. With a lack of appropriate foreign language expressions to promote Chinese culture, we obviously stand in the dissemination of culture at a disadvantageous position, limiting the output capacity of the excellent Chinese culture to the outside world. When western fellows want to explore the true meaning of Confucianism / Taoism, our scholars appear to be very difficult in interacting with them [14].

Third, the development of scientific and systematic training programs are needed. At present, China's foreign language teaching in primary schools starts from the second and third year, sometimes even earlier. This is a good thing, because children's foreign language skills and awareness of intercultural communication can be fostered from an early age. But if the emphasis is on cultural education, culture and education may be contrary to the original intention. If schools, teachers, parents and students all show little interest in Chinese culture, then it is not surprising that foreign language learners will ignore the native culture. It is necessary to increase Chinese cultural courses in all types of teaching programs at all levels, so that the Chinese culture and education are not only integrated into classroom teaching or in individual courses, but also reflected in the various disciplines of teaching and education. That is to say, Chinese culture should be deeply rooted in the minds of students.

For the content of teaching materials, it is suggested that in basic and advanced English teaching level a certain percentage of Chinese language and cultural background should be included. 'Xu Guozhang English' (Book 1 and 2) is a good example which includes a large portion of Chinese culture and is welcomed by Chinese learners in practice.

Finally, the majority of foreign language teachers are supposed to guide students to look at western culture from a Chinese cultural perspective, and to raise students' competence in intercultural communication in this way.

Conclusion

One of the hallmarks of a mature culture means an equal and peaceful state of mind towards the other cultures. Equality in intercultural communication is built up on the basis of both respect for Western culture and recognition of China's cultural identity. Without the latter, there will be no self-confidence and pride in one's own culture, and intercultural communication will often be placed in a subservient position [15].

The role of Chinese culture in foreign language learning as well as the ability to express Chinese culture in foreign languages should be specified very clearly in the foreign language curriculum. In addition, students should be trained in such a way. Whenever and wherever our students use the language to communicate with foreigners, they will bear a strong sense of Chinese culture, and will take on the responsibility to share China's cultural heritage with people from all over the world. At different levels

of foreign language teaching in China, it is necessary to carry out a systematic dissemination of native culture, especially from the point of view of enhancing China's soft power. To let Chinese culture 'go out' and establish a positive image of China in an international community, a due status of Chinese culture should be given in foreign language teaching. If learners 'learn a foreign language at the expense of losing their mother-tongue, learn a foreign culture at the expense of abandoning their own culture, then they will remain 'monolingual' forever, and the world will continue to be isolated. If so, what is the point of learning foreign languages?' [16] To cultivate high-quality talents to promote China's soft power, the teaching of Chinese culture must be included in Foreign Language Teaching.

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**Сп. „Реторика и комуникации“, брой 37, ноември 2018 г.
Rhetoric and Communications Journal, Issue 37, November 2018**