The Influence of Teacher Talk on Raising Students' Intercultural Awareness^{*}

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In English classroom, teacher talk is an important source of students' input in English language and plays a pivotal role in the development of language skills. At present, the intercultural awareness in the teaching process in China's universities is weak. With the increasing demands of the society on the cultivation of students' intercultural communicative competence, the importance of intercultural communicative competence is becoming more and more obvious. This paper discusses how to use teacher talk effectively to raise students' intercultural awareness from the aspects of textbook development, teaching concepts, teaching methods, and after-class activities, aiming at enhancing the intercultural awareness of college students and raising intercultural communicative competence.

Keywords: teacher talk, intercultural awareness, college English teaching

Introduction

Today, with intensification of the globalization, cultural exchange is becoming more and more frequent, and the demand of different ethnic cultures is more intense. As for modern education, it is more urgent and important to train international talents to master and flexibly use the international language—English. But in English teaching practice, many college teachers in English teaching still have the questions in mind: Is it necessary to carry out intercultural teaching? How important is cultural awareness? In the practical activities of college English teaching, it is often seen that students have a large vocabulary, their test results are excellent and the basic language skills are solid, but when it comes to intercultural communication, their performances appear powerless, or even make some common sense jokes, such as the phrases “dead president (greenback)” which is translated into Chinese “死了的总统 (President who is dead)”, “Sporting House” (brothel, casino) into “健身房 (gym)”, “service house (gas station)” into “service station (服务站)”, and so on. Therefore, it is necessary and practical to raise students' intercultural awareness in college English teaching.

Teacher Talk

Teacher talk is a kind of discourse which differs from the teachers' daily language and the professional language in other professions. Linguist Nunan (1991) argues that teacher talk plays a vital role in the organization of classroom teaching and the language acquisition of students. On the one hand, the teaching content can achieve

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the ideal teaching effect only through the organization and use of the teacher talk; on the other hand, it is also used as target language and one of the most important ways for students to get language input. Therefore, teacher talk in the English classroom mainly involves two aspects: First, it is the tool of organizing and controls the classroom teaching; second, it is the target language content in the English class.

Students' Intercultural Awareness and Teacher Talk in Class

Language is used to express thought of human beings. A person's thinking activities can be directly seen through his language activities. Therefore, language is the external manifestation of thought. But people's thinking activities can not be separated from the specific environment of their own life, especially the cultural environment, which influences and constraints the former. So it can be said that language is the symbol of culture and used to describe different ethnic cultures in the oral or written form, and culture in turn restricts the manifestation of language. For example, we often say that the oriental are accustomed to a typical comprehensive thinking or spiral thinking, while westerners tend to use typical analytical thinking or linear thinking. This kind of thinking difference boils down to cultural differences.

In general, inter-culture or cross-culture refers to the cultural phenomenon, customs, habits, and so on, which have differences from or conflicts with the national culture, and are accepted and adapted on the basis of an inclusive attitude (Robertson, 1981). The so-called "intercultural awareness" is generally referred to as the specific thinking, or national culture thinking of people with different cultural backgrounds in the communication process, which can ensure the communicator to accurately communicate with each other. At the same time, intercultural awareness and intercultural knowledge are different. Intercultural knowledge refers to the understanding and mastery of the specific content of different language and culture, while intercultural awareness focuses on the foreign language learners' sensitivity to different cultures, which is an intrinsic thinking ability. English teaching should be based on intercultural awareness. Only in a certain system and in a very broad context will we understand the true meaning of the words used in that foreign language (Brooks, 1968). Culture teaching, plays a very important role in the construction of efficient and practical college English class. In foreign countries, many higher education institutions pay more attention to cultivating learners' cross-cultural ability than their professional quality (Stier, 2003).

The study of language acquisition shows that learners who study the first language and second language need the ideal language input. According to the Input Hypothesis proposed by the famous American linguist Krashen (1985), if learners want to subconsciously and naturally acquire and use language, they must be placed in the appropriate language environment and offered appropriate input. The "comprehensible input" is the necessary and sufficient condition for the acquisition of language. The language input material should be slightly more difficult than what the learner's have currently learned. Krashen uses "i+1" to describe the theory of language input, which should not be too difficult, such as "i+2", or should not be too easy, such as "i+0". Thus, the language input should be acceptable by learners, so that it will produce the desirable effect.

The intercultural awareness of English learners is directly related to students' communicative competence in English, and its importance is self-evident. And the output of language is inseparable from the input of language (Cummins, 1979). For the majority of Chinese students, the cultivation of intercultural awareness of English language mainly derives from the teacher's English classroom teaching, that is, teacher talk.

The Present Cultivation of College English Students' Intercultural Awareness in China

The current reform of college English education in China has constantly progressed and college English teaching involves the cultivation of students' intercultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence, but there are still many problems, mainly as follows:

(1) The present college English curriculum has not paid enough attention to the culture teaching and not set up the cross-culture course.

(2) Students do not pay enough attention to cultural learning. Students focus on English test grades. Once they pass the exam, they will lose enthusiasm for learning. They think it unnecessary to learn inter-culture.

(3) The content of college English teaching is unitary. Most teachers continue to teach in the way used in secondary schools, and what is taught in English class is almost about the English language itself and the level of knowledge in the exam. Even if cultural knowledge is mentioned, it is used in the introduction part for a shot while and lack of scrutiny.

(4) Some college English class atmosphere and teaching effect is not desirable. Without pressure from the college entrance examination, some students do not want to learn English with weariness, and the whole classroom is lack of vitality, even lifeless.

(5) Most college English textbooks are unattractive to contemporary college students. Some are boring, lack of intercultural information infiltration, because students are interested in cultural customs rather than the language knowledge of textbooks.

Feasible Measures of Raising Students' Intercultural Awareness

Developing Textbooks

Textbooks are the main resources of teacher talk. After the contents of college English textbooks are constantly reformed, many current teaching materials or guidance materials involve cultural background knowledge. At college stage, there are a wide range of learning materials for students which contain cultural information and students have the ability to grasp the cultural knowledge. If teachers can consciously carry out excavation and guidance, they will find that cultural knowledge exists in all aspects of English teaching. In the classroom, when teachers introduce the intercultural knowledge related to the subject, it can not only broaden the students' vision and raise the students' intercultural communicative competence, but also arouse the students' interest in learning English and enliven the classroom atmosphere.

Upgrading Teachers' Own Intercultural Awareness

At present, college students learn English mainly through the English class, and due to their limitations of experience and knowledge, teacher talk in the process of raising intercultural awareness plays a key role in instruction. If teachers themselves do not have a wealth of intercultural knowledge, then it is impossible to raising students' intercultural awareness of guiding. Therefore, teachers should continue to enrich their intercultural knowledge and make considerable research to upgrade their knowledge. In addition, it is advisable for teachers to participate in various training courses, seminars, and so on.

Therefore, as "guides", English teachers should strengthen learning and improve their comprehensive cultural quality, mainly through the infiltration and guidance in the classroom, so as to enable students to appreciate the unlimited cultural "scenery".

Employing Diverse Teaching Approaches

As for the same content, if teachers talk is used different ways, the class effect will be different. In order to enable students to more effectively raise intercultural awareness in the classroom, it is better to adopt a variety of approaches in teacher talk. First, the “comparison and contrast” approach. That is, when students encounter similar or identical language phenomenon, encourage them to compare two cultures and find out the difference, and guide them to identify what causes the difference. These are also the background knowledge that students want to know, so this approach is easy for students to find a sense of cultural identity and to arouse their interests. For example, ask students to find out the differences in the greeting styles between Chinese and Westerners, or the different reactions when receiving compliments. Second, the “cooperative learning” approach. Teachers may assign tasks related to intercultural knowledge before or after class, divide students into groups, allow students to actively consult the data, find out the differences and their causes, and then discuss them in class. This approach can arouse the enthusiasm of each student and meanwhile exert the collective power, which can excavate the intercultural knowledge from different angles. Third, the “integration” approach, that is, schools or teachers classify cultural topics and integrate fragmented cultural information systematically in the form of lectures. This approach can make full use of the appeal of the lecture, as well as highlight the systematization and rationality of intercultural communication, so as to give students a complete grasp of intercultural knowledge.

Applying In-class Cultural Knowledge into After-class Activities

If the practice of teaching in the classroom is not rich enough, the form and activities of the second class can be fully utilized. The foreign language culture festival is a popular second class form, which includes formal learning of English cultural knowledge and other auxiliary forms of learning such as multimedia and games and so on. Teachers should join in these activities together with their students and guide them how to put what they have learned in class into practice through teacher talk. Students are happy to participate in them with desirable feedback. The activities of the foreign language culture festival take on various forms, such as English speech, English film dubbing contest, English drama, English singing contest, English corner, and so on. By taking part in such activities, students can experience the differences between cultures in a multidimensional way, and truly feel cross-culture in practical applications. For example, since the opportunities of face-to-face communication in English are rare, students may nervously “blurted out” in the exchange of English corner: “How old are You?”, “Have you had supper?”, or “Have you married?”. However, in English-speaking countries, people try to avoid these topics because of totally different cultures.

Conclusion

The basic aim of college English education is to raise practical talents with a rich knowledge of English and abilities of intercultural communication. Students' intercultural awareness has an important influence on students' practical English skills, and even determines their communicative competence. The practice proves that intercultural knowledge can be taught through teacher talk, and it is also feasible and can be diversified through various ways, such as developing teaching materials, upgrading teachers' own intercultural qualities, and employing various methods and after-class activities so as to improve students' English skills and truly achieve the goal of college English teaching.

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