

A Study of Cultural Introduction to Classes for English Majors

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Abstract: Language, as a main carrier of culture, is an important component of culture. To some extent, language learning is inseparable from the understanding of its culture. Therefore, language teaching must include culture introduction, which is an important constituent of English teaching content. This paper aims to introduce the necessity, content, methods, and principles of culture introduction in English teaching for students of English.

1. Introduction

With the deepening of English teaching reform in China, great changes have taken place in people's understanding of English teaching, including its objectives, content, methods and evaluation modes. It is generally believed that English learning is not only a process of mastering its pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, but also a process of learning and understanding the English culture.

Cultural factors are unavoidable in the process of English learning; social customs, values, lifestyles and thinking habits of English-speaking countries are all reflected in their language. To grasp a language, students also need to understand its cultural connotation. However, many students have a very strong sense of awareness of improving language skills, paying scant attention to cultural factors. A learner's ability to communicate and his understanding of the world can be limited by the lack of related cultural background. Therefore, English teaching should not be confined to explanation and practice of vocabulary and grammar; it should be cross-cultural. Introducing related English culture in teaching can help students to observe and understand the world from different perspectives. English teachers should consciously introduce to students the culture of English-speaking countries, focus on the cultivation of cultural awareness in teaching and enhance their sensitivity to the differences between Chinese and English cultures so as to improve the effect of language teaching and ultimately help students successfully carry on language communication.

2. Content of Cultural Introduction

In foreign language teaching in our country, there is no specific requirement for cultural teaching content. It is generally accepted that the teaching content of culture should include the cultural

background of the English-speaking countries-their political, economic, and historical development, geographical environment, customs and other background knowledge, lifestyle and social values. It should be noted that English and Chinese belong to different language systems, and the cultural backgrounds reflected in the two languages are also different. In the process of English teaching, both the cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries and China should be introduced to students. Only in this way, can students have an open mindset when dealing with the differences among different cultures, correctly understand the history, politics, customs, habits, social values, lifestyles, etc. of various countries and not blindly believe that one culture is better than others.

3. Methods of Cultural Introduction

3.1 Introduction of Cultural Background

In order for English majors to have a better understanding, teachers should introduce to them some background information related to the text that they are reading. For instance, there is an article entitled “Mandela's Garden” in the first volume of *Modern College English Intensive Reading* textbook published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press and edited by Yang Limin. In explaining this article, in order to make students better understand the content of the text, the teacher should introduce the term “apartheid” in addition to Mandela's life. “Apartheid”, a former policy of segregation and economic discrimination against non-European groups in the Republic of South Africa, was the official name of the government policy introduced by South Africa's National Party in 1948. During the years, black African groups in South Africa held demonstrations and strikes against apartheid. The African National Congress, led by Nelson Mandela, was one such opposition group. Mandela was put into prison in 1946 for his activities. Under great pressure from both home and abroad, in 1990, the apartheid was ended and Nelson Mandela was released from prison. Only when students understand the background information can they have a better understanding of the meaning of the article.

3.2 Literary Appreciation

Literary appreciation means that in order for students to further understand the emotions of characters in literary works and the exchanges and cultural conflicts between characters with different cultural backgrounds, teachers should make an in-depth analysis of cultural phenomena in literary works.

In the third volume of *Modern College English Intensive Reading* textbook published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press and edited by Yang Limin, there is an article entitled “Diogenes and Alexander”, in which there are two sentences: “Like Diogenes, he admired the heroic figure of Hercules, who laboured to help mankind while all others toiled and sweated only for themselves” and “the young prince slept with the Iliad under his pillow and long to emulate Achilles, who brought the mighty power of Asia to ruin”. Here, it is necessary for the teacher to introduce some knowledge about Greek and Roman mythology to students to help them understand the article well.

Hercules is the greatest hero in ancient Greek mythology. He was the son of the Lord God Zeus and Alcmene and was hated by Zeus' wife Hera because of his birth. He was extremely brave and powerful. He completed twelve most difficult and dangerous tasks demanded by Hera to gain immortality. He punished evil and promoted good and dared to fight. In today's Western world, the word “Hercules” has become synonymous with a man of extraordinary size and strength.

The Iliad is said to be an epic by Homer (800-600 BC), a blind poet of ancient Greece. The whole poem is divided into 24 volumes, the main content of which tells the story of the Greek

expedition to Troy. Through the description of the Trojan War, it praises the heroes who are brave and good at fighting, safeguard the collective interests and make meritorious deeds for the collective.

Homer's Epic (Iliad) is a model of western narrative poetry and has made great achievements in art. The language of the epic also has its own characteristics of oral literature. As the highest achievement of ancient Greek literature, Homer's Epic has had a profound impact on European literature. Many writers of later generations, such as Virgil, Dante and Goethe, have drawn rich nourishment from it.

Only after understanding the above cultural knowledge can students have a good understanding of what kind of person Alexander is and his dramatic encounter with the other hero, Diogenes.

3.3 Cultural Introduction by Means of Multimedia

This method can help students to understand a variety of different cultural background knowledge and different cultural customs of the English-speaking countries through the use of television, movies, the Internet and other different media, which show vividly the life of ordinary people, being a great help for students to understand their social life, customs, daily expressions, the language characteristics of different regions and different classes, and their non-verbal communication means such as body language, facial expressions and so on.

4. Principles of Cultural Introduction

4.1 Principle of Practicality

The content of a country's culture is all-encompassing, but in the English teaching, due to various factors, teachers cannot introduce all aspects of the English culture to students in detail. Therefore, in the English culture teaching, teachers should make their choice; they should see to it that cultural introduction should focus on the content closely related to teaching, to what students are learning and to cross-cultural communication based on the principle of practicality.

The principle of practicality requires that the relevant cultural content taught by teachers should be widely representative of the mainstream culture of the English-speaking countries. This can effectively prevent students from thinking that the relationship between language and culture is too empty and abstract and thus making them consciously combine language learning and communication with the English culture. Besides, it can also stimulate students' interest in language and culture learning and promote students to transform the knowledge they have learned into skills and apply them to specific language practicing. Only in this way can they successfully communicate with people from different cultures and better understand the learning materials.

4.2 Principle of Contrast

In the process of cultural introduction in English teaching, teachers should help students to compare the cultures of English-speaking countries with their own cultures to find the differences between the two cultures so as to cultivate their sensitivity to cultural differences. Through the comparison of different cultures, students can deepen their understanding of the cultures of English-speaking countries, understand the differences in thinking modes, values, living habits and other aspects among different countries, and further improve their cultural understanding ability, so as to avoid prejudice. Meanwhile, through comparison students can further understand their own culture, thus increasing their confidence in their own culture and avoiding worshipping foreign things and fawning on foreign countries.

4.3 Principle of Gradual and Orderly Progress

The content of English teaching is normally carried out in a reasonable order in which the comparatively less difficult teaching content is taught before the difficult one. As an essential part of teaching, the introduction of cultural content should also follow this principle. Only in this way can students understand the content of cultural introduction very well. On the contrary, if cultural introduction does not follow this principle, students will feel that the content of cultural introduction is difficult and disorderly, thus losing interest in cultural acquisition, which will eventually affect the effect of cultural introduction and thus affect the effect of English teaching.

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