

THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE IN TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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Abstract

Culture plays a crucial role in foreign language learning, shaping not only linguistic proficiency but also intercultural competence. This research explores the significance of integrating cultural instruction into foreign language education, emphasizing its impact on communication, comprehension, and overall language acquisition. It examines key cultural components – history, values, traditions, and social norms – and their influence on language learning. The study further highlights differences in educational approaches between Central Asia and Western countries, showcasing how cultural perspectives affect teaching methodologies and student engagement. Additionally, various strategies for incorporating culture into the language classroom, such as cultural islands, literature, non-verbal communication, and experiential learning, are discussed. The findings suggest that an effective language curriculum should integrate cultural awareness to foster a deeper understanding of both linguistic and social contexts. By embracing cultural diversity, educators can enhance students' motivation, improve cross-cultural communication, and facilitate a more immersive language learning experience.

Key words

English teaching, culture diversity, language acquisition, educational approaches.

Introduction

Culture brings out the totality of knowledge, beliefs, artistic expressions, legal frameworks, moral principles, traditions, and learned skills and behaviors that individuals acquire as members of a society (Taylor, 1871). It represents the different ways in which a group of people act and respond to different situations (Boas, 1911). Culture is significant because it illuminates the relationships that matter to us, particularly those connected to our core values (Weber, 1904).

Ultimately, it is the ongoing ability to broaden and refine how we understand and analyze the meaning (Dewey, 1916).

According to Samovar (2009) the most important characteristic of culture is that “it is learned and transmitted from generation to generation”. Culture begins shaping an individual from conception, influencing them through practices surrounding childbirth. This influence continues throughout life, guiding behavior in nearly all situations from birth to death. Samovar identifies five key elements present in every culture: history, religion, values, social organization, and language. History is passed down through generations; religion impacts cultural beliefs and practices; values dictate appropriate behavior; social structures organize people's lives; and language enables communication within the culture.

It is noteworthy that studying foreign language does not only mean learning the language itself, but that one should have enough information about the foreign culture and its background, conventions, living style and history (Changjuan Zhan, 2016). Learning foreign language does not only mean broadening our horizon but it also helps to shape the conception about the meaning of foreign tradition, culture and language as well. As anthropologist E.B. Tylor noted, culture is a complex phenomenon, including knowledge, beliefs, art, laws, customs, and acquired habits that individuals develop as members of society. Interestingly, culture defines like "what a society does and thinks." With the growth of fields like sociolinguistics, cultural linguistics, pragmatics, and cross-cultural studies, foreign language education should incorporate with cultural instruction and language teaching. As Changjuan Zhan said learning the various cultures does not mean you must accept or conduct your behavior according to the culture model. Just explore more about how other people live, learn, act or teach their children. Language is a part of the culture and its carrier. While communicating in foreign language, culture background plays an essential role. Because of the different national history, culture tradition, social system, living conditions and surroundings, the different culture backgrounds appear, and as the result the misconceptions or misunderstanding expressions come out. In order to learn not only English, but any foreign language well, the students must study the national and cultural background.

Culture variations

While both Central Asia and Western countries prioritize education, their approaches differ significantly due to cultural traditions, historical influences, and societal norms. Understanding these differences is essential for educators, students, and policymakers to create effective learning environments that embrace cultural diversity.

To start with one of the most noticeable differences between education in Central Asia and Western countries is the teaching approach. In Central Asia, education is traditionally teacher-centered, meaning the instructor is seen as the primary source of knowledge. Students should listen attentively, memorize information, and demonstrate respect for authority. This method emphasizes discipline and structured learning, with students rarely questioning the teacher's views. Lessons are often lecture-based, and group discussions are less common. In contrast, Western countries adopt a student-centered approach, encouraging active participation and critical thinking. Teachers are facilitators rather than strict authorities, and students are encouraged to express their ideas, ask questions, and engage in discussions. Group work, presentations, and interactive activities are common, promoting independent thinking and problem-solving skills.

Additionally, assessment methods in both regions reflect their respective cultural attitudes toward education. Central Asian countries often rely on standardized testing and rote memorization, where students must recall factual knowledge in exams. Academic success is closely linked to test performance, and students are expected to master large amounts of information. By contrast, Western countries adopt a more diverse assessment system that includes essays, group projects, presentations, and practical applications. While exams are still important, there is a stronger emphasis on analytical thinking, creativity, and real-world problem-solving. Students are often evaluated on their ability to apply knowledge rather than simply recall facts.

Moreover, parental involvement and societal expectations also shape educational experiences. In Central Asia, parents play a crucial role in their children's education, often placing high expectations on academic achievement. Fields such as medicine, engineering, and law are traditionally favored, and students may feel pressure to excel in these areas. Education is seen as the primary path to social mobility, and parents are actively involved in their children's academic progress. Conversely, in Western countries, while parents value education, there is generally more emphasis on personal growth, career exploration, and extracurricular activities. Students are encouraged to pursue their interests, whether in academics, sports, arts, or technical fields. The concept of "lifelong learning" is widely accepted, meaning that success is not only determined by academic performance but also by creativity, innovation, and soft skills.

Furthermore, another key difference is the balance between tradition and innovation. In Central Asia, educational systems are deeply rooted in cultural and historical traditions. Classical literature, national heritage, and established teaching methods play a significant role in the curriculum. Changes in educational practices

often happen gradually, ensuring that traditional values are preserved. While in Western countries, education is more adaptable and innovative. Schools frequently update teaching methods, by integrating technology, modern pedagogy, and disciplinary learning. The focus is on preparing students for a rapidly changing world, encouraging adaptability and critical thinking. Digital learning, project-based education, and experiential learning are widely implemented to enhance student engagement.

How to incorporate culture into foreign language classroom

Traditional approaches to teaching culture in foreign language classrooms have primarily focused on formal culture and passive learning. Students don't necessarily need both a geographical and historical understanding to grasp contemporary behaviors, as this can be achieved through hands-on activities. Beginning language learners want to engage with the culture through sensory experiences—feeling, touching, smelling, and seeing—rather than just hearing the language. To meet this objective, cultural activities and goals should be thoughtfully integrated into lesson plans to enhance and inform the teaching content. The use of various materials and techniques to present culture in the classroom is strongly encouraged (Boukhatem Nadera, 2012)

Cultural islands

Teachers should prepare a cultural island during their lessons including posters, pictures, maps, signs and staffs like this are important to engage students learn foreign names from the first day can boost student's interest (Jamel - Gemi). Also making short and interesting presentations on a relevant topic with appropriate pictures or slides can enhance student's mental imagery. In addition to this, foods commonly consumed in the target culture serve as another example of cultural influence. Recreational activities might include tasks such as sending students out to interview shop owners, inviting bilingual students to the class to tutor their peers or discuss specific topics, or even helping to narrate a slideshow.

Celebrating festivals

One of the most favorite activities of some students is celebrating foreign festivals. Even though this kind of activities take lots of time for preparation and planning, it works well for encouraging students. Especially, while preparing delicious food, drawing colorful posters and decorating rooms with special things students would feel the vibe and attain unforgettable experience.

Body language

Culture is an integration of verbal and non-verbal communication.

At the beginning of the year, teachers can show foreign films or soap operas to their students in order to show them the gesture or body movements that natives use while communicating with each other. If our goal as foreign language teachers is to teach communication, we must not overlook the most apparent form of non-verbal communication: gestures. While gestures are learned, they are largely an unconscious cultural phenomenon. They convey the "feel" of the language to students and, when paired with verbal communication, add a layer of authenticity to the classroom, making language learning more engaging (Peck, 1988).

Literature

As Boukhatem Nadera mentioned on her research, literary works can be both effective and informative to develop the conception of foreign cultures and history. Because they can provide the readers with insights and better explanations of other cultures without paying a visit the real place. Carter (1995) points out: Literature, it seems to me, is the surest bridge to understanding. Let student read novels, plays, short stories, poems from other nation and cultures. Let them immerse themselves vicariously in the other lives. For instance, instead of reading about the Soviet Union, it is better as Glinn says "to read Tolstoy or Chekov to understand what Russians are."

Teaching Methods

I. Participants

Teaching that incorporates cultural background means understanding the significance of culture and its terms in communication mentioned Changjuan Zhan. So English teachers should integrate language knowledge with vocabulary and sentence structures to teach both the language's lexicon and its usage. Furthermore, teachers can compare vocabulary and cultural differences between both languages, emphasizing their distinctions and specific uses. Students can be encouraged to create dialogues, short plays, sketches, and cross-talks on topics such as making requests, inquiries, giving advice, apologizing, making appointments, and saying goodbye in order to develop their communicative abilities.

Additionally, Changjuan Zhan noted that, at the same time, students should be guided to observe their role identities, choose certain words, and understand communicative skills to succeed in social interactions. This requires teachers to improve their teaching methods by blending language instruction with cultural education. Through this approach, students can better understand foreign culture through television, video, and films. Of course, students are expected to gradually gain this cultural understanding by reading materials related to the program, which help them consolidate knowledge of the cultural background, social

conventions, and relationships. They can then watch the program together, and later, students can play roles or discuss its content with an emphasis on the culture.

Moreover, foreign teachers can play an important role in certain lectures to immerse students in the culture. Students can be asked to watch a particular film or attend lectures to gain a deeper understanding of the foreign culture. Another approach involves students conversing directly with foreign teachers to learn about concepts they may not fully grasp in class. From the foreign teacher's perspective, students can gain insights into cross-cultural communication, enriching both their knowledge and their ability to communicate effectively (Changjuan Zhan).

Take idioms: people from different countries speak different languages, hold different value systems, and have varying perspectives, leading to cultural differences. However, due to a lack of knowledge about cultural differences, many people fail to understand one another during actual communication. Idioms are closely tied to a nation's geographical environment, religious beliefs, historical background, and traditional customs. Consequently, there are significant differences between English and Chinese idioms. Studying the cultural differences between East and West can help reduce or avoid misunderstandings when translating idioms.

Cultural differences should be addressed with mutual respect and a focus on finding common ground.

II. To motivate students

Students have been studying English for many years, but the results are not satisfactory. One reason for this is that teachers may not be using the most effective teaching methods due to the present of the current examination system. In universities, we should find ways to improve the situation by changing past teaching methods. First and foremost, teachers should focus on cultivating students' motivation to learn – this refers to the factors that drive a person's desire to engage in an activity. In second language learning, motivation can be divided into two types: instrumental motivation, which is practical and valued because it helps students find jobs, read foreign newspapers, and pass exams, and integrative motivation, which is beneficial for students who wish to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds. Changjuan Zhan's research has shown that students with integrative motivation tend to learn the second language more effectively because this motivation is developed earlier and is less likely to change over time.

In the classroom, students can be divided into two groups: those who actively participate in activities, and those who are less engaged with English-language activities. Therefore, teachers need to find better methods that are effective for both

types of students. University students are at a stage where they are preparing to enter the job market. Many employers value strong communication skills in English as one of the most important criteria for candidates. The global economy has increased communication across cultures, but cross-cultural communication can be challenging because different groups understand symbolic meanings in different ways. It is essential to improve students' ability to communicate across cultures and to understand these cultural differences claimed Hudson.

As Changjuan Zhan said students are in a particular life stage, equipped with certain innate mental and physical abilities. Through their interactions with their natural and social-cultural surroundings, including the events they have experienced, knowledge they have acquired, and emotions they have gone through, students develop cognitive abilities that contribute to their learning. Verbal communication begins with the speaker's intention, which is influenced by their thoughts, assumptions, ideas, information, feelings, and emotions. This intention is what the speaker wants to convey to the listener. For simplicity, we use the term "communicative notion" to refer to what the speaker intends to express or share with the listener.

For many years, languages were taught using the grammar-translation method, where students were subjected to traditional grammar lessons on complex structures, like the pluperfect passive subjunctive, and were required to complete written exercises involving repetitive verb conjugations. However, when students try to express themselves, they often speak in English but think in their native language. English is now widely used as an international language, serving as a means of communication between speakers from different countries in various social contexts, such as business, scientific research, or casual conversation. Social factors such as age, gender, social class, and ethnic identity can all affect second language acquisition in different speech communities (Changjuan Zhan, 2016).

Conclusion

To sum up, second language learning is a process for the students to realize the certain national culture system by integration of listening, reading and watching. Vocabulary is the most core element in the social system of communication. Without a rich vocabulary and strategies for learning new words, learners often achieve less than their potential and may be discouraged from making use of language learning opportunities around them, noted Changjuan Zhan. The main part of studying language is communication, but our traditional teaching methods are far away from it. Hudson said that language and culture are

an entirely can not be broken up. Students only study language and culture, but they should study language in culture and culture in language. Today, because of the improvements in language, in language teaching, the teacher must pay more attention to the culture teaching in order to improve the student's communication abilities. If we would do according to such methods, we will be able to be successful in learning foreign languages. With the globalization of economy and science, the teachers and students communicate more with foreigners, which requires both teachers and students not only learn more about various cultures in different countries but also how to express the different cultures in communication.

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