

## CULTURAL INFLUENCE ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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**Abstract:** In this article, it was discussed influence of culture on foreign language teaching as culture offers several benefits to language classes. It can be useful in developing linguistic knowledge, and, if duly motivated, extend students' language proficiency. Culture teaching is an essential supplement for language teaching, which enables students to experience pleasure from language learning.

**Key words:** culture, demonstrate, background knowledge, influence, implication, comprehensive, ability, intellectual range, context.

To understand the importance of culture we need to know to what extent cultural background knowledge influences language learning and teaching, and how can we take advantage of that influence. To account for the roles culture plays in language learning and teaching, it is necessary to demonstrate the functions it may perform in the components of language learning and teaching, such as listening, speaking, reading, and translating.

Cultural influence on vocabulary. Language is the carrier of culture and vocabulary is the basic ingredient of language. The cultural difference will inevitably exhibited on the vocabulary, and the explanation of vocabulary will also reflect the national or cultural difference. Take colour as an example. In Chinese, white, denoting a colour, often associates with "pure, noble and moral goodness", and the bride is dressed in white during the wedding in most western countries. In China the bride must wear red in the traditional wedding, definitely not white. Because Red means "happiness, good luck, flourishing and prosperous" in the future and people only wear white in funerals when one's family member or relative is dead. White in China, is associated with "pale, weak and without vitality". Thus, learning a language implies not only the knowledge of its grammar rules and the denotative meanings of words but it involves much more, such as the culture phenomena, way of life, habits and customs, history and everything that is contained of culture. In a word, culture is a comprehensive composite with abundant implication, and each factor in it may be exhibited on

words. Learning vocabulary, while paying attention to cultural factors, is vital and crucial.

Cultural influence on listening. In foreign language learning particularly in training their listening ability to understand better, learners often complain that although they spend lots of time in learning and practicing their ability of listening comprehension, their progress is not satisfactory. To achieve this end, they do everything what they can. Some, for example, buy tape recorders to facilitate their learning process in an attempt to improve their listening ability, and spend several hours in it every day. But when they meet new listening materials, they still can't understand them. The reason for this may be various, but some of them have been identified. Among them are their small vocabulary, weak grammar, and vague pronunciation. But a relatively more important reason is that they lack the necessary cultural background knowledge of the language they have learned. Listening is closely related to the culture, politics and economy of the target language. In judging one's listening ability, we are in fact considering his comprehensive ability, including the English level, intellectual range, analytical and imaginative ability, etc. We may have this kind of experience: when we are listening to something where the events involved are familiar to us, no matter what they are, e.g., news, reports, stories, lectures; or art, science, sports or economy, it is relatively easier for us to understand. Even if there are some new words in it, we can guess the meaning in the light of the context. On the contrary, it will be difficult for us to understand, if the materials we are listening to are closely related to the cultural background knowledge we are not familiar with. Sometimes the materials may be easy and we can get the pronunciation of each word from the tape, but the lack of necessary cultural background knowledge may hinder our thorough understanding.

Cultural influence on speaking. Just like listening, the ability of speaking is not a matter only concerned with pronunciation or intonation. People need to read a lot to understand the cultural background knowledge of the target language;



only in this way they can communicate successfully with the others. So in the training of oral English, teachers should emphasize the practical use of the language, and try to use the materials which come from the daily life. This can help people use proper sentences in proper context. Otherwise, even if one may have been well trained in the linguistic aspect of the language, he may make mistakes or have misunderstanding for the sake of lacking related cultural background knowledge. For this, the experience of a young interpreter is a case in point: There is a young interpreter whose pronunciation is standardized and natural. The first time he was appointed to accompany a foreign guest, he tried to do everything he could to show that he was enthusiastic, kind, considerate, and competent. He tried to be attentive as possible by saying "You come this way." "You sit here." "Don't go too fast." "Follow me." "Don't be late." But the next day, he was shocked to know that the foreigner didn't want to go with him, because the foreigner thought that the young interpreter was not polite. In the foreigner's eyes, the interpreter is not helping him, but scolding him as scolding a child. There is no problem in the interpreter's English, but the lack of the cultural background knowledge makes him incompetent for this job. The story is simple, yet it says something important. In the course of oral communication, speakers should pay much attention to the context, i.e. what you are saying, to whom you are saying it, when and where you are saying it, etc.

Cultural influence on reading. The reading process is not simply the repetition and reappearance of the language knowledge which the students already have, but it is a complicated process under the stimulations of outside information to decode, recognize, analyze, judge, and infer the material through the cognitive system (Larsen-Freeman, & Long, 2000, pp.193-196). So, it is critical for us to catch the non-verbal information, such as: the background information about humanism, history, geography, and the traditional local customs, etc. Linguistic knowledge can affect one's reading, but cultural factors plays a more important role in the reading process, most of the true and serious

reading barriers are not only from the language knowledge itself, but also caused by the cultural differences between the target language and our mother tongue. Cultural differences exist in background information, words, sentences, and text structures, all of which are going to become potential barriers in reading matters. Sometimes we find that the students may recognize and understand the meaning of each word in the text, but they are still not so clear about the meaning of the whole sentences or paragraphs.

Cultural influence on translating. It is widely believed that translating is greatly influenced by culture. In translating, we should have enough knowledge about both the target and the source language. The difficulty in translation mainly lies in the understanding of cultural background knowledge. The cultural background knowledge includes many aspects, such as art, history, geography, philosophy, science, etc. For example: I was not Pygmalion, I was Frankenstein. There are two points that may puzzle us: one is "Pygmalion", and the other is "Frankenstein". We can see that they are the names of two persons, but who are they? In fact, Pygmalion is the King of Cyprus in Greek fairy tales. Once he carved a statue of a very beautiful young lady, and he fell in love with "her". Because of his pious love, Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love gave the statue life, and at last, Pygmalion got married with her. Frankenstein was a character in M. W. Shelley's "Frankenstein", who was a young medical college student. Once he invented a monster, but that monster ate him. From the above background knowledge, we can see that "Pygmalion" means, "to enjoy one's own creation", while "Frankenstein" means "to suffer from one's own actions". So the success in translating this sentence does not solely depend on understanding its structure but is determined by the knowledge of the cultural load the two terms carry respectively.

In summary, culture offers several benefits to language classes. It can be useful in developing linguistic knowledge, and, if duly motivated, extend students' language proficiency. Needless to say culture teaching is an essential

supplement for language teaching, which enables students to experience pleasure from language learning. The learning of target-language culture can improve students' understanding of the target language, enrich their ability of understanding. Obviously learning target-language culture can reinforce students' understanding of the world and cultivate the cultural awareness.

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