

Intercultural Communication and English Reading and Writing Teaching

Hong-Ling Cheng

School of Foreign Language, Jiangnan University, Wuhan, Hubei, China

Email:

c13526443796@163.com

Abstract

Language is the carrier of culture, learning a foreign language is not just learning words and articles on the surface. Instead, it should be regarded as a cultural learning process. The ultimate purpose of learning a foreign language, therefore, is to have a real understanding of the cultural connotations and to apply them successfully in the practice of cross-culture communication. However, culture teaching is always ignored by teachers in English teaching. Reading is a skill that English learners must master and an important indicator of English proficiency. Reading barriers will have a certain impact on learners' academic performance and daily communication. Meanwhile, Writing is a kind of written form of communication to express thoughts. It involves comprehensive usages of listening, speaking, reading and other language skills. Therefore, in both theoretical and practical teaching domains, problems of writing have been the focus of language educators. However, the students' writing ability improves comparatively slowly, and the results of teaching are not satisfying owing to the fact that students are not fully aware of the cultural differences between China and the west in the way of expressing. They often fail to think in the western way when writing. Thus, teachers should pay full attention to and seriously study the cultural differences between Chinese and English and apply cross-cultural communication to English reading and writing practice. Only in this way can they help students improve their English level and avoid Chinglish.

Keywords

Intercultural communication; Cultural differences; English reading and writing teaching

Cite This Article

Cheng H L. Intercultural Communication and English Reading and Writing Teaching. Journal of History, Culture and Humanities. 2023, 2(1):1-8. <https://doi.org/10.55571/jhch.202303013>

Copyright

© 2023 by The Authors. Published by Four Dimensions Publishing Group INC. This work is open access and distributed under Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).



Received: March 17, 2023 / Accepted: March 21, 2023 / Published: March 25, 2023

Introduction

In recent years, the opportunities of our country's exchanges with other countries in the world have been rapidly increasing and the reform of foreign language teaching in China is constantly evolving. As a result, the intercultural communicative research has become a hot topic in the field of foreign language education both abroad and at home. Recently raising the intercultural communicative competence has become one of the ultimate objectives in domestic English teaching. Thus, the requirement to cultivate students' intercultural communicative competence has been clearly put forward in Chinese English curriculum standard.

Although the status of the cultivation of international communicative competence has been promoted so high in English curriculum standard, in current English teaching, especially English teaching in senior high schools, due to the impact of college entrance examination system and the examination-oriented education, the cultivation on this aspect still hasn't been attached enough importance to. In actual English teaching, many teachers focus too much on the language, grammar and the development of English basic skills, but ignore the teaching of relevant cultural knowledge, or teach culture only as a secondary target in the classroom. As a result, quite a considerable number of students still lack a deeper understanding of English culture after learning English for years. Hence in intercultural communication they often make some low-level intercultural communication error, or they naturally bring their Chinese habits into intercultural context, inevitably they get frustrated in communication. This is also due to the intercultural difference of ways of thinking between China and the west. Similarly, Chinese students will be influenced by this kind of difference and the lack of the western cultural background knowledge when they are doing English reading and writing, therefore they often make intercultural understanding mistakes in reading and writing.

Therefore, the objective of this research is to explore the relationship between intercultural communication and English reading and writing teaching, unveiling the cultural issues that can play significant roles in English reading and teaching and trying to figure out how to improve students' intercultural communicative competence through English reading and writing teaching.

Literature Review

Research at Home

Intercultural communication as an independent interdisciplinary came into being in the late 1950s in the United States and its birth can be said to be represented as the following three signs firstly, the first monumental work of the Intercultural Communication Studies: *The Silent Language* written by E.Hall was published in 1959, secondly, the International Communication Association set up the division of intercultural communication formally in 1970, thirdly, the publication of *International and Intercultural Communication Annual* was started in 1974.

The previous research content is rich, unbiased and comprehensive, probably covering the following aspects: the research of theoretical concept of intercultural communication; the research of philosophical thought of intercultural communication; the research of affecting the process of cross-cultural communication, communication behavior and the factors in the process of decoding and the research of cultural similarities and differences of the verbal and nonverbal behavior.

Research at Abroad

In China the research on intercultural communication began in the 1980s. In the academic circles it has generally been believed that the article entitled Culturally-loaded words and English Language Teaching was published by Xu Guozhang in Modern Foreign Language on the fourth period in 1950, marked the birth of cross-cultural communication in China. From 1981 to 2004, Chinese scholars have showed more and more interests in intercultural communication research. And they have published

hundreds of research papers and more than 30 monographs, which not only promote the development of our cross-cultural communication, but also have a significant impact on other humanities.

In terms of the research content, the research point at home is put on the relationship between the cross-cultural differences in foreign language teaching and language and culture. One of the most concerns is the level related to communication and language, such as, vocabulary, pragmatics, communication and customs, etc. (Hu Wenzhong et al.,1997,) which covers the important issues related to cross-cultural communication research.

The Relationship Between Intercultural Communication and English Reading and Writing Teaching

The relationship between intercultural communication and English reading teaching

In traditional English teaching, both teachers and students believe that with a rich vocabulary and excellent Grammar knowledge, they can improve their English level. However, we can find that sometimes even though they look up all the new words in dictionaries and study Grammar rules, they still feel puzzled when reading English articles and writing English compositions. That is because readers have linguistic knowledge but lack cross-cultural knowledge that can be the bridge between authors and readers. Linguistic knowledge can be learned through referring to dictionaries and books. However, lacking the cross- cultural knowledge such as the social customs, historical stories, living habits and so on will directly affect the effectiveness of English reading teaching. Besides, with the continuous reform of English teaching, reading is not only to obtain the required information, but also to master the background knowledge of the information. And cultural diversity will inevitably lead to misunderstanding of information, which requires English learners cultivate their awareness of intercultural communication.

The relationship between intercultural communication and English writing teaching

The ability of intercultural communication is the students' comprehensive ability of the combination of language and thinking, and English writing is an important form of their thinking and expression. The English writing level can directly reflect whether a student have the comprehensive language using ability, whereas many students cannot write English compositions well. That is, to a large extent, because of the misuse of the Chinese linguistic mode. The misuse of the Chinese linguistic mode is a serious problem in English writing by Chinese students, and that is closely related to the negative effects of their mother tongue, as well as their lack of the knowledge of intercultural communication.

Therefore, in order to help students improve their English writing and avoid Chinglish, it is very important to help students build up a good sense of intercultural communication in their English writing.

The Intercultural Issues in English Reading and Writing Teaching

The intercultural issues in English reading teaching

There are many factors can affect the effectiveness of reading, except for linguistic elements, non-linguistic elements play a more important role in English reading, especially the difference of cultures, including thought pattern, values, religious belief, etc.

With the continuous growth of students, such as middle school students, they already have had a rich vocabulary and high English level, and at this time, the main difficulty they are faced with is culture. Because of the lack of intercultural communication knowledge, students always can't understand or can't correctly understand the article, then they may feel depressed and will lose the confidence of learning English.

Consequently, studying the cultural factors that will influence English reading and take effective steps to cope with them is extremely important.

The cultural difference of words in English reading

The first step in English reading is word. And as one kind of linguistic elements, words have the closest connection with culture. Some words contain not only their own denotation meanings, but connotation meanings, which is related to the rich and profound cultural background.

English words always have complex connotation and variable meanings, and students should rely on the context to understand them. On the contrary, Chinese words tend to have the precise connotation and invariable meanings, even in different context they have the same meaning. For example, “peacock” is an auspicious word in Chinese, and it’s the symbol of lucky, and we Chinese usually use “孔雀开屏” to describe something auspicious and happy, but in western culture, “peacock” is a negative word that is equal to “flaunt”, so we can see the phrase “as proud as a peacock” in English. Besides ordinary words, some proper nouns may be confusing to students, because they usually imply sociocultural meaning for they are influenced by the western literature, history and policy. For example, the proper noun “Uncle Sam” means American government rather than a man whose name is uncle Sam, the proper noun “Watergate” means political scandals, “waterloo” means crushing defeat and “Romeo and Juliet” means someone who has the unswervingly loyal to love [1].

Some words related to color have different connotations. The preference for color is different from nation to nation, causing a phenomenon that different kinds of color bear different meanings, especially emotional meanings, in different cultural background. For example, the English sentence “that’s a blue day for her”, blue here means that someone feels frustrated and sad. The English phrase “a white day”, white here means something pure. The English sentence “He is beaten black and blue”, black and blue here means someone who is badly battered around the head and face. The English sentence “she is going to marry into purple”, purple here means power and wealth.

These cultural words related to western histories, customs, values, living habits and so on, thus only to master them, can students understand articles clearly and correctly, and then improve their reading ability.

The cultural difference of proverbs in English reading

Proverbs are created by people according to their own regional culture characteristics or historical stories, widely spread in the folk. They can be often seen in idiomatic English articles, so without the cultural knowledge behind them, hardly can students correctly understand the true meaning.

For example, the proverb “说曹操，曹操就到” in Chinese means that someone happens to appear. The same expression in English is another proverb: speak of devil and devil doth appear. The former is influenced by Chinese historical culture, and the latter is related to western religious culture. Another example is the Chinese proverb “自助者天助”, the same meaning in English is described as “God helps those who help themselves”, due to the fact that “天” is omnipotent for easterners, just like “god” for westerners.

The cultural difference of discourse in English reading

When learning English, students should learn not only the cultural knowledge of words, but the whole discourse and cultural background behind it. First is the sentence structure, which is caused by different thought pattern.

The thought pattern of western is vertical. When writing an essay, westerners tend to use deduction method: They clearly make a conclusion at the beginning of the article, then in the following part, they just prove it one by one. On the contrary, the thought pattern of Chinese is spiral. When writing an essay, Chinese usually use induction method: They state the facts first, approach the subject

step by step, and then make a conclusion at the end of the essay. The different discourse structures caused by different thinking modes will make Chinese students feel puzzled when reading English articles, cannot catching the emphasis revealed by authors.

Besides, lacking the cultural background knowledge related to the passage will confuse readers. For example, when it talks to western wedding, there will be some “strange” expression to Chinese readers, like “something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue.” In fact, it means that the bride needs to prepare four kinds of clothing that have their own denotations respectively.

The cultural difference of values in English reading

The difference in Chinese and western values exists in every aspect of life, if we lack the knowledge about this, there will be cultural barriers in English reading and writing.

Western values emphasize individualism. So, the word formation in English words always contains self-analysis, self-center and self-endeavor. On the contrary, Chinese values emphasize collectivism, which reflects in Chinese reading is that there will be many collective nouns in articles. For example, we can often see the sentences whose subjects are “我们” in Chinese articles.

The cultural difference of religious belief in English reading

The religious belief and historical differences between China and the West penetrate into their language expression. If students lack knowledge about this, it will be difficult for them to precisely understand the cultural connotation of English vocabulary, let alone the discourse, resulting in misunderstanding.

most people are devout Christians, and they believed that Jesus created all things and was the master of the universe. So we can see bible, church, baptism and so on in English. But religious words in Chinese are 玉帝, 阎王, 观音, 龙王. For example, the following English sentence must be confusing to students, most students consider the meaning is “老师是创造的见证人, 目睹生命呼吸成长”, which is illogical and meaningless [2]. The key to understand this sentence is the two words: creation and clay. In English, “creation” implies “god”, and “dust” or “clay” means “human being”, the correct understanding of this sentence is “上帝创造了人, 而人来自尘土最终又回归尘土”。

The intercultural issues in English writing teaching

The cultural difference of words in English writing

The first situation is that learners will meet some words with not completely equivalent meanings between different languages, in other words, these words have the same rational conceptions but the different associative meanings because of different cultures. For example, the English word “relation” is not completely equivalent with the Chinese word “关系”. When writing sentences, some Chinese students used to translate the sentence “吸烟有害健康” into “Smoking will harm your body”, which is not correct enough, for “body” in English just means “躯体”, but in Chinese, “身体” can indicate the health condition. So in English, it should be written as “Smoking will harm your health”. Another example is that the Chinese sentence “这个病人很危险” is translated as “this sick man is dangerous” by some Chinese students, while the correct version is “this sick man is in critical condition” for the meaning of “danger” in English is “able or likely to cause danger”.

Another situation is the zero of equivalent word. It means a phenomenon that there is an English word that you cannot find a Chinese word whose meaning is equivalent with it and vice versa, which is contributed by the different national cultures, such as sofa, hamburger, hot dog, etc. For example, in Chinese, we have “堂兄”, “堂弟”, “表姐”, “表弟”等等, but in English, all these relatives can be called “cousin”. Another pair of words “uncle” and “aunt” has the same condition. Besides, many honorific titles and humble words in Chinese cannot be equivalent with any English words.

The cultural difference of thought pattern in English writing

Generally speaking, in terms of semantic expression, English tends to use deductive method while Chinese tend to use inductive method. Thus, when writing a compound sentence, westerners used to put the main clause, the emphasis they want to highlight, at the beginning of the sentence and the subordinate clause at the end of it. For Chinese sentence-making, the opposite is true, as Chinese used to write compositions based on logical and time sequence [3].

Besides, when making comments on something, English native speakers tend to state attitude or opinion first and then state what has happened. On the contrary, Chinese describe the situation first. A pair of vivid examples will be showed in the following:

e.g., We had been dismayed at home while reading of the natural calamities that followed one another for three years after we left China in 1959.

自从我们在一九五九年离开后，中国连续三年遭受自然灾害。当我们在国外读到这方面的消息时，心情颇为低沉。

It can be clearly to be concluded that westerners tend to write the subjective situation firstly, then write the objective circumstance directly related to the subjective situation, and write other situations at last. For Chinese, the opposite is true, they used to point the emphasis at the end of it.

As for discourse layout, the thought pattern of westerners is vertical, thus they tend to come straight to the point when writing, not leaving any imagination to readers. However, Chinese thought pattern is spiral, they used to start a composition with something else, getting down to the business after introducing a lot of other details.

The cultural difference of expression pattern in English writing

The first situation is tautology in Chinese but concise expression in English. Chinese tend to use two or more words with repetitive meanings to describe the same thing, to emphasize or avoid leading to ambiguity, while English writing pays attention to clear and concise expression. For example, Chinese tend to write “观点和意见”, “煽动和怂恿”, “谨慎小心” when writing Chinese compositions, so in English writing, they also write “views and opinions”, “stir and incite”, “prudent and cautions”. But in English, the phrases mentioned above are written as “views” or “opinions”, “stir” or “incite”, “prudent” or “cautions”, one of the two synonyms is enough. Another example is that Chinese also write “每个人都一致认为.....” in Chinese, then translate it into “Everyone thinks unanimously.....” in English. But in English, it will be written as “Everyone thinks.....”

Another cultural difference of expression pattern in English writing is the verb using. In Chinese compositions, verbs usually play the roles as predicates, appearing continuously. On the contrary, if there are more than one verb in English compositions, just one verb is considered as predicate, and others serve as the non-predicates, such as present participles, past participles and infinitives [4]. For example, the sentence “He had spent all his money. He decided to go home and ask his father for a job” must be written by a Chinese student, because there are two predicate verbs in one sentence. In English, the sentence will be written as “Having spent all his money, he decided to go home and ask his father for a job.” Another example is the sentence “He was exhausted by his work. He threw himself on his bed”, in English writing, it will be written as “Exhausted by his work, He threw himself to his bed.”

Besides, Chinese is a kind of topic-prominent language, thus the subjects of the sentences are often omitted, such as some expressions like “今天很开心”, “下课后进行了一场讨论”, etc. On the contrary, English is a kind of language emphasizing rigorous form. In English, every statement should has its subject to disclose the body of making movements, even under the situation that the subject is unknow, the formal subject “it” should be added before the predicate, such as “it's raining (下雨了) .” [5] Thus, in English writing, the sentence “After the class had a discussion” is wrong, and it should be added a subject “we”. Similarly, the sentence “his English is well” should be written as “He speaks English well.”, emphasizing the subject “he”.

In Chinese sentences, subjects are usually living objects such as human beings and the active voice is often adopted while in English native speakers tend to choose lifeless objects as subjects and passive voice to express something, which is regarded as the personal sentence in Chinese to impersonal sentence in English. For example, Chinese tend to write “我永远不会忘记这个教训” in Chinese, then translate it into “I will never forget this lesson.” But in English, it will be written as “this lesson will never be forgotten/ take root in my mind”. Similarly, Chinese tend to write “不同的人对退休持不同的态度”, then translate it into English as “Different people have different attitudes towards retirement”. But in English, it will be written “Attitudes towards retirement vary from person to person.”

The methods to improve students’ intercultural capability in English reading and writing teaching

Solving the cross-cultural barriers in English teaching requires the joint efforts of both teachers and students. Teachers should pay attention to cultivating students' cross-cultural awareness in teaching, and students should establish correct attitudes towards cross-cultural knowledge and enhance their independent learning ability.

Teacher level

English teaching class often can be divided into three parts: pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading. So in pre-reading part, teachers should provide cultural background knowledge related to the passage, including social etiquettes, social system, holidays, custom and so on for students. In while-reading part, teachers provide words, proverbs and discourse related to this passage for students. And in post-reading part, teacher can ask students to do some practical training to consolidate the cross-cultural knowledge. Both oral and written form can be adopted.

As for English writing, teacher can compare the differences between Chinese and Western cultures from the aspects of vocabulary, customs and discourse based on the teaching materials, so as to broaden students' writing horizon and enrich their writing material. Organizing colorful classroom activities and creating communicative situations with English cultural characteristics can help students improve their cross-cultural awareness unconsciously.

Student level

As English learners, students should first learn the intercultural factors occurring in English learning correctly, establishing the awareness of cross-cultural communication, learning the intercultural knowledge with an inclusive attitude, and only in this way can they improve their English level. To achieve the goal, students are supposed to do as the following suggestions: to obtain the substantial linguistic knowledge, to establish the awareness of cross-culture communication and to enhance their ability of independence learning.

Conclusion

English reading and writing play an important role in English learning and the ultimate goal of English learning is to achieve cross-cultural communication. Therefore, for learners, the improvement of English reading and writing ability also means the improvement of intercultural communication ability. In the teaching of English reading and writing, English teachers should pay attention to the cultivation of learners' cross-cultural awareness, help learners establish a correct intercultural attitude, improve their English reading and writing ability, and then improve their intercultural communication ability. Specifically, in the process of English reading and writing teaching, teachers should add western cultural knowledge teaching content, combine cultural teaching with language teaching and produce

opportunities to put their intercultural knowledge into practice. Only in this way can they help learners effectively improve their English reading and writing ability.

Acknowledgement

After a long period of preparation and repeated revisions, this paper is finally completed. I cannot suppress my inner gratitude to many people who have carefully cultivated and guided me and provided me with selfless help. I would like to sincerely thank my supervisor, for her profound academic knowledge and rigorous research style, which gave me great spiritual motivation and inspiration. At the same time, I also want to thank all the scholars mentioned in this paper. It is under the inspiration of their research results that I can open up my writing ideas, conduct in-depth research and complete this paper. Finally, I want to thank my family and friends for their support and care, their love and warmth are the biggest driving force for me to strive forward.

Everyone I've mentioned has helped me improve, grow and become a better person.

References

- [1] Canale M and Swain M. Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistic*. 1980, (1):1-47.
- [2] Goodenough H. *Cultural anthropology and linguistics*. Washington: University of Michigan Press, 1935, 25-30.
- [3] Kaplan R. Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education. *Language learning*. 1966, (16):1-20.
- [4] Nuttal C. *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2003, 23-35.
- [5] Kelleman E. Towards a Characterization of the strategy of transfer in second language learning. *Inter-language Studies Bullentin*. 1997, 2(1):58-145.