

The Research of Strategies on the Cultivation of Cultural Awareness in Senior High School English Reading Teaching

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Abstract: Language is a part of culture and it is also the carrier of culture. With the globalization of the world economy, more and more people are aware of the important role of cultural awareness in language learning. English Curriculum Standards of Senior High School (2017) has stressed the importance of the cultivation of students' cultural awareness, which includes cultural knowledge, cultural understanding, cross-cultural awareness and cross-cultural communication. The cultivation of cultural awareness helps students enhance their national identity, strengthen cultural self-confidence, and become civilized and socially responsible people. English reading plays an important role in English teaching and the cultural instruction should be closely connected with reading teaching, which can help students improve their cultural awareness and communicative competence. This paper firstly makes an introduction of cultural awareness in English reading teaching in senior high school, elaborates some relative concepts and then advocates some strategies on the cultivation of cultural awareness in senior high school.

Key words: cultural awareness; English reading teaching; strategies

I Introduction

With the development of globalization and the coming of information era, the world is integrating into an overall unity where people from different cultures are more and more closely connected. As one of the most important carriers of information, English is playing a more and more prominent role in promoting people's intercultural communication. International comprehension and cross-cultural communication skills are essential qualities of citizens in the 21st century. Learning foreign language, especially English, is an efficient way to realize international understanding and cultural identification.

Therefore, much higher requirements on English teaching have been put forward in recent years. *English Curriculum Standards of Senior High School (2017)* has stressed the importance of the cultivation of students' cultural awareness and regard it as a guarantee to use language appropriately in communicative situations, which includes cultural knowledge, cultural understanding, cross-cultural awareness and cross-cultural communication. It proposes that students should acquire cultural knowledge, understand cultural connotations,

compare different cultures, and have certain intercultural communication ability and the ability to spread Chinese culture. That is to say, in English language teaching, the teacher should provide enough cultural background knowledge to help students understand the differences about the cultural phenomena in different cultures, and then strengthen their national identification and cultural confidence.

Language is an indispensable carrier of culture and culture finds a better representation through language use (Hu Zhuanglin, 2011). English reading plays an important role in English teaching and the cultural instruction should be closely connected with reading teaching. Only in this way, students can broaden their international view of culture and improve their ability to use English appropriately, thus promoting the intercultural communication competence.

However, in the real English reading teaching classroom, cultural awareness has not been widely emphasized. Many senior high school English teachers pay more attention to language contents and language skills in reading teaching, ignoring the deep exploration of cultural connotations in many discourse types. In this case, students just can understand the superficial meaning of the discourse but fail in comprehending the cultural sources, which is not conducive for students' thinking quality, learning ability and cultural awareness. What's more, we all have experiences of reading something that does not contain any new words or new structures, but we fail to understand its overall meaning. Therefore, it is believed that in teaching reading the teacher should teach the background knowledge first so that students equipped with such knowledge will guess the meaning from the printed page (Wang Qiang, 2000). Based on the problems stated above, it is imperative to cultivate students' intercultural communicative awareness in order to develop their intercultural communicative competence.

II Relative concepts

A. Cultural awareness

The definition of cultural awareness has aroused many sparkling views among different linguists.

American linguist R. G. Hanvey (1979) believed that cultural awareness can be defined as the sensitivity for cultural elements in the process of intercultural communication and can be divided into four levels. The first level is to identify the distinguishing features of culture; the second level is to help students become aware of the significant and subtle cultural traits that contrast markedly with one's own culture; the third level is to engage learners in thinking about different cultures and starting to ask questions and understand the cultural differences and the fourth level is to understand the feeling of another culture from the perspective of insiders.

Professor Gao (2002) defined cultural awareness as awareness and tolerance of cultural diversity, empathy for members of different cultures, and reflection of cultural values and behavioral patterns of native culture. This requires people to have the ability to identify with cultural pluralism, abandon the tendency of ethnocentrism and respect or appreciate the cultures of other nations.

English Curriculum Standards of Senior High School (2003) stipulated three aspects of cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural understanding, intercultural communicative awareness.

Cheng and Zhao (2016) believed that the key competence of cultural character not only refers to the understanding of some cultural phenomena and emotional attitudes and values, but also includes evaluating the cultural traditions and social and cultural phenomena reflected in the discourse and explaining them, comparing and summarizing the culture reflected in the discourse, and forming one's own cultural cognition and attitude, cultural identity and the ability to choose appropriate culture.

According to *English Curriculum Standards of Senior High School (2017)*, students should acquire cultural knowledge, understand cultural connotations, compare different cultures, and have certain intercultural

communication ability and the ability to spread Chinese culture.

From the above definitions, we can see that cultural awareness is the students' competence to distinguish and evaluate different cultural phenomena in an all-round perspective.

B. Schema theory in English reading teaching

As an important reading theory, schema theory does not only reflect the process of reading but also reveal its inherent essence. It is necessary to improve the learners' comprehension abilities and reading efficiency by using their existing schema appropriately.

According to Carrell (1984), the schematic structure consists of content schemata and formal schemata. On one hand, content schemata are directed to be responsible for guiding the readers to understand the textual contents with one's own background knowledge. It should be emphasized that readers should be familiarized with the topic of reading materials that is the basis of the readers' understanding of information and on this basis of it, the readers can make predictions and inferences of the reading contents. In the process of reading, it is relatively easy to stimulate the reader with rich content schemata to recall their background knowledge in order to make a quick and correct response towards new information.

On the other hand, formal schemata aim to guide the readers to understand the rhetorical forms. That is to say, readers need to have some knowledge of the genres and the structure of the text. The reading materials with different genres also have their own characteristics in the layout (Liu Xiangping, 2016). In addition, the most primary schemata—linguistic schemata which is about the basic knowledge of language including spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary, word formation, grammatical structures, sentence structures and semantics play a very important role in reading comprehension. Without the linguistic schemata, the readers can't understand anything even though they are rich in contents and formal schemata. In short, these schemata interrelate with each other and they are jointly involved in the whole reading process.

Therefore, teachers need to make great efforts to help the students improve the schemata in their mind especially the content schemata and formal schemata through providing cultural background knowledge to match with their linguistic schemata. By this way, their ability to use the schemata in reading can be cultivated step by step, which is conducive for their comprehensive ability for using the language.

Reading is a process that not only requires readers to skillfully use language knowledge (e.g. words, phrases, sentences, grammatical structures, etc.), but also to utilize cultural knowledge and reading strategies to achieve deep understanding. The reading effect will certainly vary from person to person. Readers' different cultural background, knowledge structure, reading ability, life experiences and many other factors may cause different understanding of the same text.

Reading is an interactive process of cognition and language, in other words, it is a nervous activity which is responsible for initiative thinking, comprehension and acceptance of the information. In the process of language learning, it will be easier for students to acquire the language skills if they know more about the target language culture. Reading teaching is an important part of English teaching in senior high school, but also an essential way to promote students' cultural awareness.

C. The integration of schemata and cultural awareness in English reading teaching

According to the research studied by many linguists and many teaching practices applied by some English teachers, the schema theory is considered as meaningful for guiding the reading teaching. During the whole process of language learning, the students always encounter with the cross-cultural knowledge which has a great effect on their understanding. The schemata in the students' mind can provide students sufficient background knowledge and help them remove the obstacles which are caused by cultural differences.

Cui Junxue (2016) holds that the schema theory shows how the previous knowledge structure affects

people's competency to accept the new knowledge. Therefore, teachers should help their students form useful schemata in their mind by introducing certain culture frequently.

As an English teacher, we can easily find that reading teaching classroom is a suitable place for students to cultivate students' cultural awareness and cultural awareness is a good platform to employ an efficient reading. From the investigation, we also can find that a student's ability of reading often reveals his/her language competence and communicative competence. Therefore, in the real English reading teaching, we need give equal emphasis on students' cultural awareness while developing students' language ability.

III Strategies for cultivating students' cultural awareness in English reading teaching in senior high school

A. Strategies for providing enough cultural background knowledge

Cultural background knowledge is an essential part of English culture. Integrating the cultural background knowledge into English reading teaching is considered as a good means to improve students' cultural awareness and enhance their communicative competence. Based on the schemata theory, teachers need to provide students sufficient cultural background knowledge so that they can overcome the cultural obstacles that they may encounter in the reading materials. Generally speaking, the presentation of cultural background knowledge includes the introduction of characters, locations, festivals, customs, science, historic and political knowledge.

The introduction of the cultural background knowledge should be designed in warming-up stage and pre-reading stage, which can integrate the emotional values and cultural awareness with language use conducive for students' comprehensive competence. The researcher takes an example of *Unit 5 Chinese Writing System: Connecting the Past and the Present* as an analysis.

i. Warming-up stage

In the warming-up stage, the aim is to arouse students' interest towards the topic and activate their prior knowledge, further supplement some compulsory and new background knowledge to inspire students' thinking towards certain topics. Teachers can design various tasks related to the topic, such as dialogues, discussions, quotes, quizzes and video to provide students' sufficient cultural knowledge.

Taking an example of reading lesson *Unit 5 Chinese Writing System: Connecting the Past and the Present*, the teacher first presents a video about the Chinese character and asks students two questions. The first is "What is the topic of this video?" while the second is "How do you feel about this topic after watching the video?". The aim of the first question is to arouse students' interest and make students pay attention to the topic get some basic knowledge about the Chinese characters.

ii. Pre-reading stage

In the pre-reading stage, the teacher can ask some questions related to the topic and reading materials, which can inspire students to predict reading contents and discuss what they may predict. During the process, students can be encouraged to think independently and critically and use cultural background knowledge and language knowledge to express their own unique ideas.

Taking an example of reading lesson *Unit 5 Chinese Writing System: Connecting the Past and the Present*, the teacher first plays a guessing game to get to know how much knowledge do students know about the Chinese characters. And then the teacher asks students two questions to inspire students' thinking. The first is "Where can we find them?". The second is "Do you think how old are they?" Then the teacher presents the picture and the title of this text to make students guess what will be discussed in this text and requires students to share their different ideas in class.

Therefore, in order to cultivate students' cultural awareness, English language teachers should have

sufficient such cultural background knowledge and then they can select it from many channels to choose the suitable materials for students to learn according to student' cognitive level and the relevance of the topic of reading for the purpose of arousing their interest of English culture and activating their prior knowledge.

B. Strategies for making full use of cultural connotations of vocabulary

Vocabulary is the basis of one's English language learning. Knowing a word or lexical items not only include its denotative meaning but also its connotative meaning. According to the Semantics written by Geoffrey Leech, the cultural meaning of a word or lexical items includes 7 aspects. They are conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, stylistic meaning, emotional meaning, associable meaning, collocational meaning and thematic meaning. Therefore, in reading teaching, teachers need to identify those words that can express different meanings and teach them in a cultural context. There are a quantity of culture-loaded words in English learning and if Chinese learners do not pay enough attention to those culture-loaded words, Chinese learners tend to guess it from its superficial meaning, which often leads to "culture shock".

For example, when we refer to the meaning of "senior citizens", many students would say it refers to the citizens with a social position. But actually, the word "senior" has no direct relation towards "social position". The truth is that western people are less likely to say they are seniors, because seniors mean loneliness, which is what they cannot accept. If we pay more attention to the superficial meaning rather than its connotative meaning and social meaning, we often fail to understand its actual meaning, let alone to use it appropriately.

Therefore, in English reading teaching, we need to pay special attention to those words which are similar in conceptual meaning but are different in connotative meaning. Taking an example of *Unit 12 Destinations*, the topic of this discourse is about travelling destinations. The text is mainly about the city Rio De Janeiro and then introduces its located festival—carnivals. Firstly, the teacher needs to explain the meaning of cultural word "carnival", that is a public festival, usually one that happens at a regular time each year, that involves music and dancing in the streets, in which people wear brightly colored clothes. Then the teacher can introduce different carnivals in different countries to make them become aware of the different cultures. In addition, the teachers can also provide some excellent sentences for appreciation purposes, which can be served as a writing material.

C. Strategies for analyzing the overall discourse

Discourse analysis is firstly promoted and highly emphasized in the *English Curriculum Standards of Senior High School (2017)*, which includes not only the cultivation of the identification of different genres, such as description, exposition, argumentation, and practical writing, but also the mastering the different features and certain structures of those genres. English reading class is the place that discourse analysis can be best manifested. Discourse analysis can be designed in the while-reading stage to realize the overall comprehension of the discourse as the contextual clues and achieve the integration of input and output.

For example, in the discourse of *Unit 5 Chinese Writing System: Connecting the Past and the Present*, the teacher first asks students to find the main idea of each paragraph by paying attention to key words and phrases, and topic sentences. The main idea of the first paragraph should be analyzed by the guidance of the teacher and then the students should conclude the main idea from Para.2 to Para.6. Then students are required to read Para.2-4 and try to find how many periods of time are mentioned and explore what happened at certain period of time. According to the analysis, this discourse is a type of an exposition. Then students are required to read Para.5-6 and find out how many *importance* are mentioned and what do they refer to in each *importance*. Students can make a clear structure like this. *This text is about the development and the importance of the Chinese writing system. As for its development, it may include five stages. At the beginning, the written Chinese was a picture-based language. By Shang Dynasty, the writing system became a well-developed system. Over the*

years, there are many varieties of dialects and characters. By Qin Dynasty, the Chinese writing system became unified. And even today, we still can communicate in writing. As for importance, firstly, it connects the Chinese people and culture; Secondly, it connects China's present and its past; Thirdly, it connects Chinese characters and art; Lastly, it connects China with the world.

D. Strategies for comparing the cultural differences

It is well acknowledged that to be bilingual, one must be bicultural, which means when we learn a language, we must learn the cultures embodied by the language as language is an essential carrier of the culture. It is proved that the main obstacle of communication for senior high school students is not the language itself but the knowledge of cultures in English countries and the appropriateness of using them. Therefore, it's imperative to learn the cultures and customs in different countries and know about the differences about them in order to make clear about the cultural roots or reasons, which is crucial for their critical thinking and communicative competence.

Generally speaking, the cultural differences can be reflected in the following aspects: ethnic culture, regional culture, custom culture, religious culture and thinking differences. By comparing and contrasting between different cultures, students can learn about the similarities and differences between two cultures and increase their sensitivity of different cultures, thus improving cultural identification and cultural confidence. Cultural differences can be designed in the post-reading stage to make students have deep learning towards different cultures.

For example, in the discourse of *Unit 5 Chinese Writing System: Connecting the Past and the Present* post-reading stage, the teacher assigns a task that students need to work in groups to discuss the question that "Do you think the Chinese language will become a global language like English in the future? Why?". This task aims to inspire students' thinking and contrast the differences of the two cultures and give the evidence to support their ideas. Then the teacher elicits a representative of each group to share their opinions.

E. Strategies for learning cultures in different channels

Teachers can do a lot to increase students' cultural awareness in English reading teaching. There are some strategies for learning cultures in different channels as follows.

i. Making full use of modern information technology to make students experience exotic cultural atmosphere

As modern information technology develops, teachers are required to use modern information technology to serve as the teaching aids to support the teaching process. Pictures, videos and PowerPoint can be regarded as an efficient means to learn about the different cultures vividly and conveniently. For example, in the discourse of *Unit 5 Chinese Writing System: Connecting the Past and the Present* warming-up stage, the teacher provides a video about the Chinese writing system, which mainly talks about the development situations at different periods of time, such as at the beginning, by Shang Dynasty, over the years, by Qin Dynasty and even today. Students can retell what happened at certain period of time with reference to the knowledge of history. The purpose is to help students increase the knowledge about the development of the Chinese writing system and promote cultural confidence.

ii. Attaching importance to the extra-curricular reading practices

Students should be encouraged to engage in different extra-curricular reading practices to accumulate and extend the cultural background knowledge. There are many resources to obtain cultural knowledge, such as books, newspapers and the Internet resources and so on. Students can learn about different cultures and experience the differences between different cultures by means of different resources to make the knowledge more impressive. In this way, students can increase the curiosity of cultures and broaden their horizons.

iii. Providing different channels to experience cultures by themselves

Teachers are creative in providing different channels to make students experience different cultures by themselves. Language is the soul of drama. Playing a drama is a good way to make students not only know the literal meaning but also the deep meaning.

Therefore, teachers can do a lot to provide different ways to increase students' cultural knowledge to promote their cultural awareness and enhance their communicative competence.

IV Conclusion

Cultural awareness is of great significance in English Reading Teaching and it is very conducive for students to cultivate their language ability, thinking quality and learning ability in order to meet the requirements of core competence. Therefore, in the real English reading teaching classroom, teachers need to cultivate students' cultural awareness from the aspect of cultural background knowledge, cultural connotations of vocabulary, discourse analysis, the differences of different cultures and cultural knowledge in different channels in a more conscious and responsible way in order to promote the improvement for students' communicative competence and cultural confidence. Of course, this paper also has some limitations. In the future, more and more researches of cultural awareness should be explored and a more comprehensive understanding of cultural awareness and application to the other types of English teaching class should be needed.

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Appendix of the video transcription

In the process of globalization, there are more and more Chinese written characters appearing outside China. Even if you don't understand what these characters mean, you still can be fascinated by Chinese culture within the symbols. No wonder people say: each Chinese written character makes a world. These pictographic characters show Han people's spirit, keep their memories and hope. Not only the Chinese written characters record the history of the nation, they present the way of their thinking. Chinese written characters are the symbol of the national image as are seen in “京”for 2008 Beijing Olympics and “冬”for 2022 Olympics Winter Games.

The team from Chinese Central Academy of Fine Arts involved in the designing project work for Beijing Olympics is exploring for more possibilities and broader use of Chinese characters in art. Named as “Evolution” of Chinese Characters, their work is first made by 3-Dimensional printing and then made into stainless steel sculptures. They take Chinese characters as means of expression. Chinese calligraphy and painting, western surrealism, abstract painting and animation are all joined together. It is the mixture of tradition and modernity, abstraction and figuration as well as oriental and western styles. Each stroke carries the key to unlock the mystery of Chinese written characters. No matter how much progress Chinese characters have made over the past thousands of years, say, from the inscriptions found on bones or tortoise shells, to seal character, official script, further on to cursive script, running hand, down to nowadays regular script, one thing never changes: the combination of a component plus a radical to make a character. For instance, radical 人 with a component 山 makes 仙, means “super natural being”.

That is the quintessence of Chinese written characters. 6000 years ago, written characters appeared in different parts of the world. But most of them have lost in history, rest as dead languages without practical value. Today only a very small number of scholars are able to decipher them. But Chinese characters which are still dynamic after several thousand years of use still function as cultural symbols for people to trace, comprehend and to enjoy. After several thousand years of evolution, Chinese characters are more than just written characters for communication purpose or a form of traditional art as we enjoy in calligraphy. Instead, they have become a new visual resource. They are new blood in dynamic Chinese civilization and a new eye-catching image of contemporary art. We can proudly say they have already injected vigor and vitality into world culture nowadays.