Challenges and Strategies of Language Teaching in China and the United States: A Cross-cultural Perspective

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Abstract: As globalization goes deeper, interactions between countries become more active. In this trend, language is emphasized all over the world as an effective tool to communicate with others. With the development of China and the United States, the status of Chinese and English is becoming increasingly higher. At the same time, these two countries, both as friends and rivals, learn from and compete against each other. Language teaching serves as a bridge between the two countries for interaction. However, even if the system of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) or Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (TCSOL) has been mature, there are still some problems. This paper aims at talking about problems and effective strategies for language teaching between China and the United States from a cross-cultural perspective. On the whole, challenges mainly lie in cross-cultural understanding, language translation, teaching modes, and curriculum design.

Keywords: TESOL, TCSOL, culture diversity, globalization, cultural confidence

1. Introduction

The development of globalization means a greater and higher-level demand for language learning. China and the United States show great interest in mutual language teaching and learning in particular. Even if TESOL and TCSOL today are more mature and advanced than they were previously, there are still some problems blocking the progress of the language teaching career. There are mainly four challenges existing in language teaching, including difficulties in cultural understanding, troubles in language translation, bother resulting from different teaching modes, and problems with curriculum design. To tackle these problems, there are some relevant methods that could be put into effect. Effective language teaching is of vital importance to friendly communications between two countries, because it is likely to eliminate many contradictions by learning about each other thoroughly. The purpose of this paper is to point out deficiencies and come up with solutions about TESOL and TCSOL between two countries, and some of these findings and strategies are useful and practical to language teaching careers all over the world. In a word, this paper aims at finding out what hinders the development of language teaching and then putting forward some effective strategies which may be available for language education around the world in order to promote friendly exchanges among countries.

2.   Challenges and Strategies of Language Teaching in China and the United States

2.1.   Challenges and Strategies in Cross-cultural Understanding

The relationship between culture and language is complex. As a tool of communication, language is a part of the culture, because it reflects people's mental activities, such as their way of thinking, local customs, and practices. Meanwhile, language can also preserve and spread culture, because culture lies in the use of language. In terms of this comprehensive connection, Lankshear proposed that language functioned as "a precondition and a medium and a broker" of culture [1]. Therefore, learning a language is not a single action, but is about knowing the culture lying behind the language. "TESOL teachers are the mediators to make English learning distinct from 'language training' and make English learning more meaningful, interesting, and effective" [1]. In the tendency of globalization, intercultural communication is of vital importance among various countries to interpret each other, so it is necessary to combine language teaching with culture spreading. China and the United States attempt to use language teaching as a mediator to interact with each other.

2.1.1. Reasons for the Challenge in Cross-cultural Understanding

Even though language teaching can make a difference in culture dissemination, it is not so simple to get the culture accepted by people from other countries. The reason why foreign learners have difficulties in understanding distinct cultures is that they do not share the same "cultural gene" with natives. "Cultural gene" is that people know about their national culture very well and it is engraved in their memory. This memory of culture is passed down from generation to generation just like genes. Native people consistently live in a certain cultural context from a very young age, so they are extremely familiar with their national culture. However, foreign learners have access to exotic civilizations merely by learning in class but not experiencing them personally. Besides, the cultural contexts between foreigners and natives are sometimes quite diverse so it is hard for a foreigner to interpret other cultures. This phenomenon is also applicable to explain the cultural diversity between China and the United States. Chinese people have their own culture and it has special meanings to them, which cannot be sensed by American learners. For example, in a Chinese teaching class, American learners probably have no idea why Chinese people consider Qu Yuan as an extremely respectable giant. They can hardly say that they are moved by Qu Yuan just like Chinese people do because they have different cultural backgrounds and they cannot have empathy. Similarly, many Chinese learners in English classes also have trouble interpreting what festivals mean to American people, for instance, Christmas and Easter, because most of them have no religious faith. As a consequence, the problem that blocks interpretation between China and the United States is that they have diverse cultures, which makes the language not fully understood by each other. In a language-learning class, learners may speak Chinese or English at the same time, but it is difficult for them to understand the deeper meanings of the language. There is a barrier for learners to know about the various cultures and even learn the language well. Professor David Nunan says that "culture can be taught to others but you cannot educate them to respect and imitate the mode of culture" [2], which shows that whether the learners accept different cultures or not is a problem that should not be neglected.

2.1.2. Strategies in Dealing with the Difficulty in Cross-cultural Understanding

There may be some strategies to deal with this problem. Since culture consciousness is one of the core competences in language learning [3], it is significant to develop learners' awareness to know about diverse cultures. TESOL and TCSOL teachers play a crucial role in this mode of teaching because they serve as a mediator to promote cultural communication. They also need to seek the

commonality of the two cultures to the greatest extent and find out students' ideas hidden in their minds [2], for example, they do not like some kind of cultural pattern which may make them uncomfortable. At the same time, teachers should guide students not only to respect and learn about the benefits of different cultures but also to develop a sense of cultural confidence. In an interview, Professor Hirvela says that if English can be connected with Chinese characteristics, Chinese people will feel proud and receptive for the reason that they are creating and speaking English in Chinese edition but not a foreign language [4]. As a consequence, it is important to consider language as an effective tool to eliminate the barrier between distinct countries instead of something that simply shows the differences. Even if people in a country speak a second language, they can also combine foreign language with their national features, such as their culture, living habits, and speaking patterns. Only in this way can they feel that foreign languages are not mysterious and complex at all, even quite familiar to them. In another interview, Professor Sun Yilin points out that it is TESOL teachers' duty to teach students both local and target cultures, helping them regard English as a global language and not simply an imitation of English-speaking countries [5]. Also, when American students learn Chinese, it is applicable that they use a more familiar and acceptable way to interpret Chinese and they can create a fresh approach to apply this language.

2.2. Challenges and Strategies in Language Translation

2.2.1. Challenges in the Translation of Discrepancies in Expressions

Another challenge in TESOL and TCSOL teaching is that translation between Chinese and English is intricate because of many discrepancies in the expressions, including grammar, writing patterns, linguistic habits, and so on. "One of the most obvious reasons why a particular content schema may fail to exist for a reader is that the schema is culturally specific and is not part of a particular reader's cultural background" [6]. English belongs to a fusional language while Chinese is an isolated language, so they are distributed to two disparate linguistic systems. To be specific, there is a usage called inflection in English grammar; however, Chinese characters hardly use inflections to express different grammatical forms. In the Chinese linguistic system, it is word order and function words that play a significant role in showing different grammar meanings. Moreover, the relationship between word class and syntactic constituents in Chinese is more complicated than that in English. For instance, in English, a subject usually refers to a noun composition like a noun or a gerund, however, in Chinese, many compositions can serve as a subject like verbs. As a result, it is not so easy to identify grammar constituents exactly while translating.

2.2.2. Challenges in the Translation of Idioms

Another problem is that translation may sometimes lack idiomaticity, which makes teaching float at the surface and not so thorough. The most obvious example is that there are many distinct idioms in both linguistic systems, such as two-part allegorical sayings in Chinese and slang in English. There is no doubt that different cultures deeply penetrate these diverse expressions and they are closely related to different language-using habits. It is fairly hard to completely take in the true meanings and usage of these expressions unless people live in a relevant context for a long time. Taking the idiom "rain cats and dogs" as an example, it refers to heavy rain in English but it is obscure for Chinese students in English-teaching class if they translate it literally because rain is totally unrelated to "cats and dogs". This problem hinders thorough interpretation between Chinese and English, especially when it comes to certain studying parts like daily communication exercises. Professor Levelt comes up with a conception called linguistic ontology [3]. He thinks that culture is most closed to language in terms of this concept, which means language cannot be fully interpreted without learning about the cultural context.

2.2.3. Challenges in the Translation of the Aesthetic

Except for these two problems above, there is another problem that shows the lack of aesthetic perception and lingering charm. For example, many traditional images and a writing technique named "one sang and the other three join in" exist in the original work in Chinese poem history "The Book of Songs", and the rhythm is quite beautiful if spoken out in Chinese. However, if teachers translate it into English in order to make students understand, it will be unavoidable to destroy the sense of beauty of these traditional Chinese poems. Similarly, the language of words and sentences is special and beautiful in English, but when Chinese students read the translation edition, it will not bring them the same experience as English speakers. In a word, it is a convenient way to translate foreign works for students to help them understand these classics, but they are very likely to misunderstand these works or ignore the original aesthetic feeling.

2.2.4. Strategies in Dealing with the Difficulty in Translation

Based on these problems, there are also several solutions that may take effect. Above all, TESOL and TCSOL teachers should teach students about the grammar rules of both languages so that they can not only know about the differences between them but also apply grammar regulations to their learning. Besides, it is a good way for teachers to create some communication contexts in class and guide students to use idiomatic expressions in these simulated language environments. As a saying goes, "Practice makes perfect". Consequently, if students often speak real Chinese or English, they can probably get familiar with the foreign language. When teachers intend to introduce some foreign works to students, it is better for them to do free translation first and then repeat after radio tapes or teachers. In this way, they are capable to sense the real beauty of a foreign language.

2.3. Challenges and Strategies in the Two Different Teaching Modes

Due to distinct cultural traditions, China and the United States share different models of instruction in class. As a result, a problem will occur. It may be difficult for students to adapt to a class that is taken by a foreign teacher because foreign teachers will probably be influenced by their own country's teaching models.

2.3.1. Challenges in the Different Teaching Modes of Interaction

In Chinese classes, teachers prefer to talk about their own thoughts or simply tell students about the final answer to a certain question. The interaction between teachers and students is not so active to some extent, because teachers behave more like a speaker than a listener. The advantage of this teaching mode is that the class discipline is often good because students are accustomed to listening to class quietly. This mode is influenced by traditional Confucianism for the reason that it advocates a kind of sense of hierarchy that teachers should be highly respected as a symbol of authority. On the contrary, teachers in America prefer to encourage students to talk about their own thoughts, guiding them to find out the answer to a question instead of giving them one directly. They are used to organizing a seminar in class and in the process they share their ideas with freedom, not fearing that their opinions are not convincing. As a matter of fact, teachers will lead students to think about what their logical fallacy is by asking critical questions about their ideas. This teaching model can bring an active interaction but sometimes the class will be interrupted. This kind of teaching can date back to the modern west period and is edified by the notion of equality and freedom.

2.3.2. Challenges in the Different Teaching Modes of Explanation

Besides, the mindsets of the people from both countries are somehow different. In general, Chinese teachers like to give lots of examples in class for a more concrete explanation but ignore systematizing and theorizing argumentation. In other words, the teaching contents aim at a certain context but are not applicable to universal scenes. What is valuable is that a sense of integral thinking is revealed from the Chinese class, which helps students grasp what they learn on the whole. Nevertheless, they do not pay enough attention to some details which may seem insignificant [7]. As for the American class, the teaching process is logical and theoretical but the drawback is that, sometimes, the explanation is too abstract for students to fully and immediately interpret.

2.3.3. Strategies in Dealing with the Differences in the Two Teaching Modes

In terms of this issue, TESOL and TCSOL teachers should adjust measures to local conditions, selecting different teaching models in diverse regions and distinct classes. Beyond that, "the effect of learners' characteristics on strategy instruction is also of paramount importance. Characteristics such as culture, learning style, motivation, age, gender, and learning beliefs can greatly influence learners' receptiveness of strategy training [8], so it is important to focus on individual differences. "It is the teacher who should be sensitized to the types of beliefs that students hold and the possible consequences that these beliefs might have for the language learning and instruction" [8]. At the same time, teachers are supposed to try their best to overcome their own drawbacks originated from their previous classes when they are students. They not only need to construct a sense of self-identity but also change their identities, equipping the mindsets of both Chinese and American [9]. For example, they can present a lecture as well as organize some discussions in order to cater to students' needs by combining the Chinese mode with the Western mode. Also, they can talk about a question logically but follow with some concrete examples.

2.4. Challenges and Strategies in the Traditional Curriculum Design

2.4.1. Challenges in Multi-aged Curriculum Design

As the degree of globalization is becoming increasingly thorough, the purpose of language learning has changed from basic needs to academic use or other special purposes [5]. The demand for TESOL and TCSOL is improving so traditional teaching models hardly fit the condition that countries carry out competition and cooperation of higher quality. Besides, different from the past, more students of different ages participate in learning a second language, but new strategies for these students have not yet been mature. According to Professor Krashen, adults grasp a language through a process named Acquisition-Learning, which makes it more difficult for them to learn a new language compared to young children [10]. This theory demonstrates that different groups of students have their own features so the teaching strategies should be various. The courses should be arranged according to various levels of education objects, like children, primary school, middle school, and university students [11]. However, the fact is that current methods are not so applicable and specific to students, for example, some teaching contents are so difficult for young children but too easy for senior students.

2.4.2. Strategies in Dealing with the Difficulty in Curriculum Designing

For these problems, several methods can be taken. First of all, with the help of TESOL and TCSOL associations, more high-qualified teachers should be fostered and textbook editions are supposed to be adapted in order to cater to the needs of different groups of students. Furthermore, advanced

technology can be applied in TESOL and TCSOL classes rather than be excluded, such as multimedia teaching and online classes. Meanwhile, TESOL and TCSOL also aim at breaking down cultural barriers between the two countries. Professor David Nunan says that "Teachers shouldn't recommend or propagate a certain kind of culture on purpose but should simply impart knowledge [2]". In the process of teaching, students are capable to learn about various cultures automatically, which is beneficial to improve friendly exchanges bilaterally.

3.   Conclusion

Language teaching is becoming a tendency in the situation of globalization and almost all countries take part in language education. For China and the United States, it is meaningful to let language teaching serve as a bridge of communication, pushing the friendly exchange to a higher level. For the moment, some problems indeed exist in language learning but several methods can probably take effect. When encountering difficulties in understanding other cultures, teachers are supposed to guide students not only to respect other cultures but also to feel confident about their own culture. In face of the challenges of idioms and aesthetic translation, it is a good way to teach students about differences between two language systems and then create a real context in class. When it comes to challenges in the different teaching modes of interaction and explanation, teachers can take advantage of both sides of two teaching modes, which can optimize the class effect. Last but not least, to overcome the drawbacks of traditional course design, especially for students of different ages, the curriculum design should be improved in order to satisfy the current needs. Although the strategies mentioned in this paper are helpful, they also have some defects. For example, the actual results of these solutions are unforeseen and hard to guarantee. Besides, there are other challenges and problems that are not come up with in this paper, which may be a focus for future studies.

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