

Research on Differences Between Chinese and American Foreign Language Classrooms and the Impact on English Education in China

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Abstract: In the context of globalization, the cultivation of foreign language abilities has emerged as a crucial objective in the pursuit of enhancing students' comprehensive quality. It is obvious that there are notable discrepancies in the concept and practice of foreign language teaching between China and the United States, which directly affects the formation and advancement of students' linguistic abilities. This paper focuses on English classrooms in Chinese universities and Spanish classrooms in the American universities, with a particular emphasis on the differences in teaching methods, classroom interactions, and assignment settings. The study used comparative survey method and literature review to study and analyze the foreign language classes of the two countries. The results show that Chinese university English classrooms tend to focus on the mastery of grammar and vocabulary, while Spanish classrooms in the United States pay more attention to the practical use of language and adopt interactive and task-oriented teaching methods. In light of these observations, this paper puts forward some suggestions for the improvement of English education strategies in China, including improving the interactivity in Chinese English classrooms, focusing on language practice and task-based teaching, so as to enhance students' practical application ability. The research aims to provide insights for English education in China and help students better adapt to and cope with the challenges of language learning and application in the context of globalization.

Keywords: English class, Foreign language education, English education, Teaching methods, Classroom interaction.

1. Introduction

The higher education systems of China and the United States are increasingly devoting attention to foreign language teaching. However, there are significant differences in the teaching concepts, methods and practices between the two countries due to cultural differences. The majority of the current research focuses on the theoretical and practical aspects of foreign language teaching, especially on the promotion of students' intercultural communicative competence through language teaching. Nevertheless, a research gap persists regarding a comparative analysis of foreign language teaching methodologies across different countries, particularly with respect to the most effective strategies for enhancing students' practical language abilities within the classroom setting.

This paper compares English classes in Chinese universities with Spanish classes in American universities through survey data and case studies, and specifically discusses the differences in teaching methods, classroom interaction and assignment settings. By analyzing these problems, this paper will reveal the advantages and disadvantages of China and the United States in foreign language teaching and attempt to extract some useful inspirations for English teaching in China from the teaching experience of the United States.

2. Introduction to Foreign Language Courses in China and America

2.1. Introduction to English Courses in Chinese Universities

The English course in Chinese universities represents a fundamental component of the curriculum for non-English majors. Li Zhiping believes that the traditional Chinese English teaching model is teacher-led, focusing on test-oriented education, and the teaching content mainly revolves around grammar and vocabulary, with an emphasis on the teaching process and ignoring the learning experience of students [1]. The course content is centered on the acquisition of linguistic forms and the enhancement of test-taking abilities, particularly in anticipation of the College English Test (CET-4 and CET-6). As a result, courses are often designed to be content-oriented, emphasizing the mastery of grammar rules, fixed expressions, and standardized testing skills.

With regard to the teaching methods employed, the traditional “teacher-centered” model continues to exert a dominant influence. Teachers occupy a dominant position in the classroom, usually focusing on lectures, while students are mostly passive recipients of knowledge, and classroom interaction is relatively limited. Although students occasionally engage in questions or simple class discussions, overall engagement remains relatively low. The main task of the students is to reinforce the knowledge acquired in the classroom through note-taking, completing homework assignments outside of class, and studying for examinations. In this model, the assessment method in the classroom is usually based on the results of the written test at the mid-term and final level, and the oral or practical communication skills are less assessed.

While some universities have initiated the implementation of more interactive teaching methods in recent years, such as group discussions, role-plays, and project-based learning, these innovative formats remain largely unavailable in the majority of institutions. Gao Xufeng identified the issue through an investigation that revealed a continued adherence to traditional teaching methods among English educators when designing classroom activities. In these traditional approaches, teachers assume a leading role in directing classroom activities, while students’ contributions are often limited to completing pre-defined tasks according to the instructor’s instructions. [2].

2.2. Introduction to Spanish Language Courses in United States Universities

In the foreign language education system of United States universities, Spanish language courses have been held in high regard, especially in the context of the large Hispanic population in United States and the growing demand for bilingualism, Spanish has become the preferred foreign language for many students. The teaching philosophy of the Spanish classroom emphasizes “language as a communication tool”, and its main goal is to foster students’ capacity to utilize Spanish with assurance and fluency in authentic settings. To enhance the practical use of the language, teachers incorporate a variety of teaching resources, including audio, video, news, cultural materials, etc., to help students better understand the culture and context of the Spanish-speaking country. One United States student reported that although he was already quite familiar with Spanish, the class discussions helped him further deepen his understanding of Spanish and its culture in critical thinking and analytical topics [3].

Classroom interaction represents a significant aspect of Spanish language instruction, with frequent engagement between teachers and students, as well as among students themselves. In addition to their role as dispensers of knowledge, teachers serve as facilitators of classroom activities, encouraging students to learn through mistakes and gradually improve their language fluency and self-confidence by fostering a relaxed and open language environment.

3. Comparison of Foreign Language Classes in China and America

3.1. Comparison of Teaching Methods

The English classrooms in Chinese universities and Spanish classrooms in United States universities have significant differences in teaching methods, reflecting the differences in educational philosophies and teaching objectives between the two countries.

The most significant distinction between the two teaching modalities is the manner in which instruction is delivered. Zhu Jianfei pointed out in his article that teachers spend a lot of time teaching vocabulary, grammar and syntax in English classrooms, and students input far more language than output. Due to the lack of adequate opportunities for speaking practice, many students are prone to falling into the trap of "dumb English" [4]. Teachers guide students through textbooks and fixed lesson plans, and the curriculum design is biased towards the combing of knowledge points and test preparation. This pedagogical approach facilitates the rapid acquisition of substantial linguistic knowledge, particularly in the context of enhancing test performance. Nevertheless, this approach has also been shown to result in a diminished capacity for Chinese students to express themselves orally and in practice.

In contrast, Spanish classes in United States universities adopt a "student-centered" teaching model, with more emphasis on the practical application of the language. Since the late 90s of the 20th century, American universities have carried out teaching reforms and promoted the reform of "student-centered" undergraduate education models, such as Syracuse University and the University of Arizona. [5]. In the classroom, teachers play the role of facilitators, stimulating students' interest in learning through interactions, discussions, and task-driven activities. Teaching is not limited to teaching materials, but combines real life scenarios, through simulated dialogues, role play, group discussions, etc., so that students can learn language through interaction. This task- and project-oriented approach helps students improve their fluency and accuracy in language expression through engagement.

3.2. Comparison of Classroom Interaction

There are obvious differences in classroom interaction between English classrooms in Chinese universities and Spanish classrooms in the American universities. From the perspective of the frequency and form of classroom interaction, English classrooms in Chinese universities lack of interactive. In most cases, the class is mainly taught by the teacher, and the students are mainly learning by listening to lectures and taking notes. As a result of this class format, the interaction between teachers and students is often limited to a simple form in which the teacher asks questions, and the students answer. Interaction in the classroom is usually aimed at testing students' mastery of knowledge points, rather than improving language skills through communication.

In contrast, interaction is a core part of Spanish classes at United States universities, and it is present throughout the teaching process. Group activities and cooperative tasks are an important part of the Spanish classroom, where students apply their knowledge of the language in cooperation with their peers, enhancing their practical language skills and increasing their confidence in communicating in real-life situations.

The difference in classroom atmosphere also affects the interaction effect of the two classes. English classes in Chinese universities are usually more formal, and the authoritative nature of the teachers and the introverted nature of the Chinese students have made students accustomed to passively receiving knowledge and being cautious in their interactions for fear of making mistakes. This kind of classroom atmosphere suppresses students' initiative to a certain extent, and many students are afraid to bring up questions or ideas in class even if they have them.

On the contrary, the atmosphere of Spanish language classes in the United States is more open and inclusive. Fortunately, teachers can significantly improve the classroom atmosphere and make the classroom more active and productive by changing the way they interact in the classroom and increasing the motivation of students to participate [6]. In the classroom, mistakes are seen as part of learning. This relaxed environment reduces students' anxiety and allows them to use language more relaxed and naturally in interactions. The interaction between students has also become more positive because of this open atmosphere, and classes are often filled with lively discussions and participation.

3.3. Comparison of Assignment Settings

There are also significant differences in assignment settings between English classrooms in Chinese universities and Spanish classrooms in the American universities.

From the perspective of assignment form, most of the English assignments in Chinese universities are mainly written exercises, focusing on vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension and writing skills. Students are usually required to complete exercises in the workbook to consolidate the grammar knowledge and language rules learned in class. Spanish classes at United States universities offer a variety of assignments, with many speaking tasks, listening exercises, and culturally relevant project assignments in addition to traditional written exercises. For example, students may be asked to complete a video assignment in Spanish to record a video of themselves introducing their hometown or discussing a social topic in Spanish.

Homework feedback is also a big difference between the two classes. The research of Jiang Yayu and Liu Shiwen shows that classroom evaluation is an important part of the teaching process, and teacher feedback is one of the most common ways of classroom evaluation, which has a direct impact on students' learning. Through effective assessment, students are not only able to better understand what they are learning, but also stimulate their motivation to learn and promote a more positive attitude towards learning [7]. In English classrooms in China, feedback on assignments is usually done through group explanations, where teachers give a unified explanation of common mistakes. Although this method can quickly cover the common problems of most students, due to the lack of personalized feedback, students' individual weaknesses and improvement needs are often not effectively addressed.

In Spanish classrooms in the United States, teachers focus more on personalized feedback. Students' work is often marked in detail and with individual suggestions from the teacher, especially in speaking and writing assignments, where the teacher suggests specific evaluation to each student's expression, vocabulary use, and grammatical structure. In addition to this, students can also discuss their progress and learning confusion with teachers through face-to-face interviews or tutoring hours.

4. Enlightenment of Foreign Language Classroom in United States to English Education Practice in China

By comparing the differences in teaching methods, classroom interaction and homework settings between English classrooms in Chinese universities and Spanish classrooms in the American universities, it can be clearly seen that some characteristics of United States foreign language classrooms provide useful inspiration for Chinese English education practice. Drawing on these

characteristics, English language teaching in China can be optimized in many aspects, especially in terms of improving students' practical language use and classroom participation. Rui Xiaohua and Yan Hongfei concluded that university English classrooms need to be student-centered, and teachers should respect students' learning dominance, and make the classroom a platform for effective communication between teachers and students by improving the teacher-student relationship and activating classroom interaction [8].

Firstly, the shift in teaching methods is one of the most important parts in the English classroom in China. The United States "student-centered" teaching philosophy in the foreign language classroom makes the classroom more focused on the practical application of language, not just the teaching of grammar and vocabulary. Mastering a language is not only about mastering its systematic knowledge, but more importantly, mastering the skills to communicate with others in language [9]. Chinese university English classrooms can try to introduce more task-based language teaching, which encourages students to use language naturally in task execution by setting tasks with practical application scenarios. Such an approach not only enhances students' linguistic abilities but also fosters greater confidence in their capacity to communicate in English in everyday contexts.

Secondly, the strength of classroom interaction is also crucial for the improvement of English teaching in China. The interaction between teachers and students represents a core element in FLT, and good interaction can not only enhance the effectiveness of classroom teaching, but also have a significant impact on overall learning outcomes [10]. The Chinese English classrooms can learn from the interactive model of the United States and increase cooperation and communication among students through group discussions, role plays, classroom debates, etc. Interaction not only helps to consolidate language knowledge, but also improves students' ability to use the language in real-life situations, especially in speaking and listening.

5. Conclusion

The comparison of Chinese university English classrooms with United States university Spanish classrooms in terms of teaching methods, classroom interaction, student engagement, and assignment settings clearly reveals the significant differences between the two. These differences not only mirror the disparate attributes of the educational systems in the two countries, but also exert a profound influence on the advancement of students' linguistic abilities.

It would be advantageous for Chinese English education to adopt several beneficial practices observed in foreign language classrooms in the United States, particularly those pertaining to enhancing classroom interaction and student engagement. By encouraging students to actively participate in classroom activities, the traditional teacher-centered model can be enhanced, thereby facilitating students' agency in language practice. These improvements will facilitate a more effective English language teaching approach in China, aligning it better with the demands of the global context. This will enable students to utilize English with greater confidence in practical communication scenarios.

However, this paper merely presents the differences between foreign language classrooms in China and the United States and their implications for English education in China, based on a synthesis of literature and classroom observations. The study is only based on the existing literature and a limited number of classroom observations, and thus lacks a substantial empirical data set to support its findings. Therefore, future research should investigate these issues further through larger questionnaires, experimental studies, and even specific teaching interventions, particularly with regard to the effective application of United States interactive pedagogy to English classrooms in China and the conduct of more systematic empirical research.

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