

A Survey of the Changes in Cultural Awareness in Chinese Students

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This paper aims to illustrate that great emphasis has been placed on cultural awareness for quite a few years in college English teaching in China. At present, students are not just satisfied with learning different cultures, but rather they want to assimilate, compare, and accommodate different cultures. Meanwhile, they continue to stick to some traditional Chinese beliefs. This paper explores the changes in cultural awareness in Chinese students and several ways that have been used to develop their cultural awareness. A survey involving value orientations and lifestyles was conducted among 197 non-English majors in Harbin Institute of Technology. On the basis of a detailed analysis, the result is that, with the changes in cultural awareness in Chinese students, there are some internal changes in their value orientations and lifestyles.

It is generally acknowledged that we are all shaped by our cultural background, which influences how we understand the world around us, perceive ourselves, and communicate with other people. What is considered an appropriate behavior in one culture is frequently inappropriate in another, for people see, interpret, and evaluate things in different ways. It seems that cultural differences could increase the level of misunderstanding, complexity and confusion and make agreement difficult to reach. As a matter of fact, it's beneficial for anyone to have a better understanding of cultural differences because it creates valuable new skills, behaviors, and perceptions to get the society moving forward. More importantly, the 20th century witnessed the great process of globalization and gave life to the term "global village," with many different cultures mixing in it. Even though globalization has removed many gaps and differences that have existed between and among nations, it is difficult to communicate with each other in different cultures without possessing cultural awareness. Therefore, it is necessary for people to develop cultural awareness in order to increase their communication ability and freedom of choice in the global village. It can also improve one's qualities of openness and flexibility in relation to other cultures and involve internal changes in terms of lifestyles, perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and values.

For the past few years, great attention has been paid to intercultural awareness either in college English teaching or in some other related respects in China. Researchers both abroad and at home have conducted a lot of research on this topic and great achievements have been made. The aim of this paper is to illustrate that at present the cultural awareness of Chinese students has improved. For this reason there is a great change in their lifestyles and some value orientations. A survey has been done to demonstrate that Chinese students are able to assimilate, compare, and accommodate different lifestyles and values but meanwhile are continuing to stick to some traditional Chinese beliefs. The reason they have this ability is because their cultural awareness has been improved in several ways.

Ways Used to Improve Cultural Awareness in Chinese Students

Cultural awareness is not a new term for the Chinese. Both teachers and students in China have realized that cultural awareness becomes central when they have to interact with people from other cultures. For this reason several ways have been tried to develop students' cultural awareness.

Open Policy in China

China has undergone rapid economic advancement since the initiation of its reform and opening-up policy 30 years ago. Chinese people have achieved remarkable success in economics and science and technology. Also China's comprehensive national strength and international status have been greatly raised. What's more, China has found a path of sustainable development owing to reform and opening-up.

In the last three decades of economic reform and opening-up, a great deal of information about science and technology, literature and arts, and mass media has flooded into China. Gradually people's cultural awareness has been influenced. Chinese people have come to accept and even incorporate more advanced and diverse information into their lives by selecting the essence and discarding the dross. People's living standard, lifestyles, and ways of thinking have been greatly changed. On the other hand, China's reform and opening-up has benefited people around the world, for China has become a center of global economic development.

College English Curriculum Requirements

In order to keep up with the new development of higher education in China, increase teaching reform, and improve teaching quality and efficiency, *College English Curriculum Requirements* was issued by the Department of Education in 2007 to provide colleges and universities with the guidelines for English teaching to non-English majors. It claims that: "Under the guidance of theories of foreign language teaching, College English has as its main components: knowledge and practical skills of the English language, learning strategies and international communication" (p. 2). The objective of College English is:

To develop students' ability to use English in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking, so that in their future studies and careers as well as social interactions they will be able to communicate effectively, and at the same time enhance their ability to study independently and improve their general cultural awareness so as to meet the needs of China's social development and international exchange. (p. 4)

In designing the College English courses, it requires "to take into full consideration the development of students' cultural capacity and the teaching of knowledge about different cultures in the world" (p. 18). It is obvious that cultural awareness has been highlighted in

college English teaching; Language teachers take it for granted that they should integrate cultural teaching into their language classes.

Teachers' Instruction

It is important for the language teachers to clearly illustrate the goals of cultural teaching. At present, the teaching goals have shifted from the simple memorization of cultural facts to a higher order: the acquisition of "interactional competence." Teachers in class purposefully develop the students:

1) To perceive the differences and similarities between cultures and appreciate them; the students need to understand cultural differences and recognize that everyone in the world is not "just like me" (Brown, 1994, p. 167). We are not all the same. There are so many differences between cultures that students should come to understand, accept, respect and value them. Meanwhile, students need to understand that similarities and differences are equally important. There are no such distinctions as superior and inferior cultures and it's necessary to help the students know both what and how to communicate in intercultural situations in order to avoid misunderstanding and pragmatic failures and reduce the effects of cultural shock.

2) To understand the target culture from an insider's perspectives; students need to interpret accurately the value systems, religious beliefs, conventions, and behaviors in the target culture from an insider's perspectives rather than from an outsider's views. Only in this way can they get to know and appreciate not only their own identities but the others in different communities as well.

3) To realize the importance of integrating culture into language teaching and acquire a good language competence via cultural learning; many language teachers have incorporated the cultural teaching into language teaching so as to develop students' cultural awareness. It can be declared that if cultural awareness is not realized in language teaching, both the communication and the personality of the learners may be affected negatively. From another point of view, if cultural aspects of the target language are not considered, cultural shocks may occur in genuine dialogues, no matter how good one is in his linguistic, pragmatic or discourse knowledge. The desired aims won't be achieved. There are different ways to teach culture in language classes. As far as my university (Harbin Institute of Technology) is concerned, the most common method for cultural teaching is that teachers in language classes have talked about history, literary, scientific or artistic achievements in the target culture usually with the aid of audio-visual materials. Some optional courses about culture have been offered, such as Communication Skills, American Society and Culture, Appreciation of English Movie Songs and so on. By teaching culture, the competence of language use can be greatly and accurately promoted.

Online Education

Online education refers to any form of learning or teaching that takes place via a computer network. With internet changing our everyday life so profoundly, higher education

is also experiencing great changes in its teaching and learning. There is no doubt that computers are useful tools in teaching and learning foreign languages. We can obtain a lot of new information and numerous opportunities for communication either by e-mail or on the World Wide Web. In this case, it is of great significance for us to explore the ways of integrating classroom teaching with online learning.

In the information age, it's easy and unbelievably fast and convenient for people to access English materials. The advanced technology has made it possible for one to watch, read and listen to news or other materials in English online that are newer and closer to native speakers' life, customs, and cultures. People are able to spend much less time gathering information and spend more time analyzing it, which is conducive to fostering creative and unique ideas. Through cable TV, one can watch CNN, BBC, HBO, ABC, etc. Through local TV English programs, for instance, CCTV9, one can get information about what's happening at home and abroad in English. Through the internet, all English electronic newspapers and magazines are accessible. With a click of the mouse thousands of millions of information items about the world will appear in seconds. So long as one has a computer connected to the internet, he can always teach himself anywhere and anytime. As a result, it's easy for students to get to know and appreciate different cultures via online learning. The information coming from the internet has a great effect on them.

Research Design

A survey was conducted in order to show the changes of the cultural awareness in Chinese students.

Subjects

The subjects who participated in the research were 206 non-English majors, 41 girls and 165 boys at the age of 20 to 22, in Harbin Institute of Technology. They were randomly chosen from four classes. Two classes are majoring in Architecture, one in Civil Engineering and another one in Environmental Engineering. Two hundred and three students turned in their questionnaires while six of them were discarded. Their feedback was regarded as invalid in the final analysis mostly because their answers were unfinished or not clear.

Instruments

The survey instrument used in the research is a questionnaire compiled by myself after referring to Kohl's value option cards. The questionnaire is divided into two parts which investigate respectively students' background information of English learning and their perception of certain cultural values. Part 1, including five questions, is intended to find out the number of years students have spent learning English, the time they spend each day in learning English, the hours they surf on English websites and the attitude towards making an e-pal or a foreign friend whose native language is English in order to communicate by either chatting online or sending e-mails to each other. In this part, all of the questions are designed

in the form of multiple choices marked A, B, C, and D. There are 12 statements in Part 2 covering five aspects in terms of values and lifestyles, such as food, clothing, entertainment, money, love and marriage, behavior, concept of time and so on. Each has three options of "Yes," "No," and "Indifferent." The responses are expressed as a percentage.

Data Analysis and Findings

The students responded to the questionnaires under the supervision of the instructor during classroom time. No time restriction was imposed, however, it took the subjects nearly 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire. From the data collected in Part 1, we can see that 71% of the students have been learning English for more than 8 years and all of the students have learned English systematically for 8 years; that is to say, 4 years in junior high schools, 3 years in senior high schools and 1 year in college. Forty-five percent of the students spend 2 hours surfing on the internet every day and 42% have the sense that they have got more information about the world through the internet. More than half (58 %) of the students prefer making an e-pal or a foreign friend whose native language is English. Since Part 1 only functions to help us get to know more about the subjects' background on English learning, no detailed analysis is involved. A detailed analysis has been conducted on Part 2. The following is the data collected, analysis, and findings for each statement:

From Table 1, students were asked to answer some questions relating to their value orientations. With Items 1 and 2, we can see most students (65.5%) feel uncomfortable making a speech or voicing their opinions in public and 60.4% students feel shy or nervous at arguing with their supervisors or teachers.

As for the value of money, 40.1% students think that money can do everything for you while a large percentage of students (52.3%) think that money is the source of all evil. The latter percentage is higher than the former one. Items 5, 6 and 7 are related to love and marriage. From the table it is clear that most of the students (65.5%) hold the traditional view against pre-marital sex. However, most students (61.9%) can accept divorce. The percentages of positive and negative attitude towards cross-marriage are almost even, 37.1% and 39.1% respectively. Item 8 is about the concept of time. It is clear from the table that a great number of students (71.1%) have a strong concept of time.

Apparently, most students still keep to traditional Chinese beliefs in their value orientations. They believe in harmony instead of confrontation, collectivism rather than individualism, obedience but not aggression and so on (Jia, 1998, pp. 58-74). Chinese tradition appears to appreciate having the harmonious atmosphere more highly than destroying it with individual thoughts and feelings. Chinese students from a young age are taught to respect and obey their elders or supervisors and not to be aggressive in a group. It's natural and wise for one to keep silent even though he has some contrary opinions. From this point it's easy to understand the fact that many students feel uncomfortable making a speech or voicing their opinion in public and therefore keep silent in class, and why students feel shy and nervous when arguing with their supervisors. It's known that one's values determine not only one's ways of thinking but one's lifestyles as well.

Table 1: Value Orientations

No.	Item analysis	Yes		No		Indifferent	
		Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
1	I feel comfortable delivering a speech or voicing my opinion in public.	22	11.2	129	65.5	46	23.4
2	I feel shy or nervous at arguing with my supervisors or teachers.	119	60.4	35	17.8	43	21.8
3	Money can make the ghost do things for you.	79	40.1	107	54.3	11	5.6
4	Money is the source of all evil.	103	52.3	82	41.6	12	6.1
5	Your attitude towards sex before marriage is natural.	23	14.2	129	65.5	45	22.8
6	Your attitude towards divorce is acceptable.	122	61.9	75	38.1	0	0
7	Your attitude towards cross-marriage is fine and good.	73	37.1	77	39.1	47	23.9
8	We should always be punctual whenever doing something.	146	71.1	51	25.9	0	0

n=197

Table 2 is an investigation on Chinese students' lifestyles:

Table 2: Lifestyle

No.	Item analysis	Yes		No		Indifferent	
		Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
9	I like eating western fast food, such as KFC, Pizza Hut or McDonald's.	117	59.4	47	23.9	33	16.8
10	I prefer wearing blue jeans, sneakers and T-shirts.	144	73.1	28	14.2	25	12.7
11	I'd like to have some name brands to wear, such as Adidas, Nike, Columbia and Jack Wolf and so on.	53	26.9	65	33	79	40.1
12	I like traveling, climbing mountains, playing balls or do shopping etc. to entertain myself instead of staying at home in my spare time.	129	65.5	56	28.4	12	6.1

n=197

From Table 2 we can see there is a great change in Chinese students' lifestyles. Most of the students in the 1970s and 1980s had little sense of fast food and sneakers. However, students in 21st century are quite different in the food they have, the clothes they wear and the ways they adopt to entertain themselves every day. The following figures will demonstrate this clearly. In Item 9, 59.4% students like having fast food which is known as junk food, since it is convenient and easy to serve and eat. A large number of students (73.1%) prefer wearing jeans, sneakers, and T-shirts. The percentage of the students who have negative ideas

about this item is quite small, only 14.2%. It can be seen from Item 11 that only 26.9% of the students hold positive attitudes towards name brands in their clothes while the percentages of the students who are indifferent and disagree with the idea are 40.1% and 33% respectively, taking up more than half of the total number. From Item 12, we can see that an overwhelming majority of students (65.5%) would like to entertain themselves by doing various kinds of things in their spare time.

From the above analysis, more than half of the college students have adapted themselves to the western ways in their daily life, such as having fast food wearing jeans and sneakers, and entertaining themselves with some recreational activities. For Chinese students, some foreign life styles are not strange any more. On the contrary, in some respects they have not only accepted them but they are living in the same way as well.

From the above two tables, it's clear that for Chinese students there are great changes in their lifestyles than in their values, attitudes, and beliefs. They are more globalized in their daily life but they still persist in some traditional culture which we appreciate most. However, there is one point that is worth mentioning. Though a large percentage of students persist in some traditional Chinese values, such as abstinence from pre-marital sex, young students have some different attitudes toward divorce and cross-marriage compared with their previous generations. In a sense, the longer the students get to know the world either in the classroom or from the Internet in English, the more changes they will have in their lifestyles or value orientations.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that at present culture teaching has inevitably become an integral part of English instruction. Culture teaching has aimed to foster students' cultural awareness, and accordingly develop students' comprehensive English competency. By having a good command of diversity and similarity across cultures, students can learn to reduce stereotypes, ignorance, and deep-rooted prejudices that may exist, but rather enjoy and value the other cultures, get to know their own identities and have some internal changes. Nowadays with the changes in cultural awareness in Chinese students, they have acquired the ability to see both the positive and negative aspects of cultural differences. They can compare, absorb and discard something different. They are trying to gaining more without losing their own. And moreover, they can better enjoy their own culture while improving and expanding it.

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