

TEACHING OF CULTURE  
IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Approved: Tom Lo Guidice

Date: April 20, 2011

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A Seminar Paper

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

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In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirement for the Degree

Master of Science in Education

English Education

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By

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2011

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all those who helped me during the writing of this paper. I gratefully acknowledge the help of my supervisor, Professor Tom LoGuidice, who has offered me valuable suggestions in my academic studies. In the preparation of the paper, he has spent much time reading through each draft and provided me with inspiring advice. Without his patient instruction, insightful criticism and expert guidance, the completion of this paper would not have been possible.

I also owe a special debt of gratitude to all the professors in the UWP Program, from whose devoted teaching and enlightening lectures I have benefited a lot.

Next, I express my gratitude to my parents who have always been helping me out of difficulties and supporting me.

Last, special thanks also go to my friend Lisa who has put considerable time and efforts in helping me with the writing of the paper.

Abstract

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Under the Supervision of Tom Lo Guidice, PhD

In recent years the EFL(English as a Foreign Language) pedagogy have been undergoing profound changes, but the importance of teaching culture in the EFL classroom has not been fully recognized by the language teachers and scholars. What is culture? Why should we teach culture in the EFL classroom? The author of the paper tries to answer these questions by reviewing the literature on the theory of culture teaching in the foreign language education.

Language and culture are intertwined. Because of different cultural backgrounds, misunderstandings often arise among people who speak different languages even when there are not any grammatical mistakes in their conversation, thus intercultural communication failure occurs. More and more foreign language educators have realized that they should attach more importance to culture in our foreign language teaching and a new term “culture teaching” is introduced.

This paper is organized by the author to first introduce the concept, content, goal, and significance of culture teaching, and its development both at home and abroad. Then a discussion of some specific strategies and techniques of culture teaching are presented. Finally, some suggestions are recommended. It may be noted that the author presents classical literature related to the concept of culture “for teaching” as well as more recent literature. There is also a “letter to professors” included in the Appendix to encourage the discussion to extend beyond this seminar paper as a need for continued discussion and research is needed.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
APPROVAL PAGE .....	i
TITLE PAGE .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Introduction	
Statement of the Problem	
Definitions of Terms	
Delimitations	
Method of Approach	
CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE.....	3
Rational of Culture Teaching	
Strategies of Culture Teaching	
Contemporary Views of Culture Teaching in China	
CHAPTER 3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	12
REFERENCES.....	15
APPENDIX	
Dear Professor Letter	



# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years the English as Foreign Language (EFL) pedagogy has been undergoing profound changes, but the importance of teaching culture in the EFL classroom has not been fully recognized by the language teachers and scholars. What is culture? Why should instructors teach culture in the EFL classroom? How can teachers teach culture effectively in the EFL classroom? The paper is a report to answer these questions on the base of reviewing the literature on the base theory of culture teaching in the foreign language education.

Foreign language learning is comprised of several components, including grammatical competence, communicative competence, language proficiency, as well as a change in attitudes towards one's own or another culture. A noted scholar, Hymes (1972) pointed out there is more to linguistic activity than the production of grammatical sentences. He also formulated the concept of communicative competence, emphasizing the important relationship between the grammatical and socio-cultural and psycholinguistic aspects of a person's competence. Based on communicative competence, scholars can claim that knowledge of another culture is indisputably an integral part of foreign language learning.

The Chinese EFL teachers and researchers nowadays have begun to realize the importance of cultural teaching. Much work and research have been done to raise the cultural awareness in English language teaching (Hu, 1997) .Nevertheless, many efforts are needed to improve the status quo of cultural teaching .In this paper the author will review the literature on the rationale of culture teaching in the EFL classroom, and provide the possible approaches to the effective teaching of culture in the Chinese universities.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem to be addressed is, why and how do teachers teach culture in the EFL classroom?

### **Definition of Terms**

**Culture** .All the accepted and patterned ways of a given people (Peck, 1998)

**Communicative Competence.** Ability to function in a truly communicative setting. (Savignon, 1972)

### **Delimitations of Research**

The research will be conducted through the Karman Library at the university of Wisconsin-Platteville, over ninety (90) days. Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite and Google/Google Scholar as the primary sources. Key search topics included Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite and Google/Google Scholar as the primary sources. Key search topics included “Culture”, “EFL”.

### **Method of Approach**

A brief review of the literature on the studies of culture teaching was conducted. Another review of literature on related research was conducted. The findings were summarized and synthesized, and recommendations on the approaches of cultural teaching are made.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

As will become evident, the role of cultural learning in the foreign language classroom has been the concern of many teachers and scholars and has sparked considerable controversy, yet its validity as an equal complement to language learning has often been overlooked or even impugned. In this paper, a brief review of literature on the studies of culture teaching will be conducted to clarify the current myths on teaching the culture in college EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom.

#### **Rationale of Culture Teaching**

The relationship between language and culture has been a focus of attention from a variety of disciplinary perspectives for years. Linguists, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and others have sought to understand whether and how cultural factors influence aspects of human behavior such as perception, cognition, language, and communication. Within language teaching, cultural factors have occasionally attracted the interest of both theoreticians and practitioners. Robert Lado was one of the first to suggest that cultural systems in the native culture could be compared with those in the target culture and serve as a source of transfer or interference in much the way other types of contrasting linguistic systems do. Others have examined a range of different aspects of second language use that are subject to culturally based influences, including classroom interaction, roles of teachers and students, and teaching styles (Hinkel, 2001).

What is culture? Raymond Williams (1983) claimed that culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. Scholars, in various disciplines, tried to define it from different aspects. A.Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (1952) made a list of about 300

definitions of culture in their book. They made a historical review on the significance of the word “culture”, classified these definitions into six categories and commented on each category of definitions. Though the book was published in 1950s, it still has great influence on people’s ideas about culture (Hu, 2002). Culture is viewed as civilization, the great achievements of a people as reflected in their history, social institutions, works of art, architecture, music, and literature (commonly referred to as “big C” culture). On the other hand, culture can be viewed as the customs, traditions, or practices that people carry out as part of their everyday lives; (“small c” culture). (Halverson, 1985). Culture is also defined in terms of intercultural communication (Lusig & Koester, 1999), the capacity and ability to enter other cultures and communicate effectively and appropriately, establish and maintain relationships, and carry out tasks with people of these cultures.

It has become axiomatic to state that there exists a close relationship between language and culture. It has long been recognized that language is an important part of a given culture and that the impact of culture upon a given language is something intrinsic and indispensable. More evidence can be gathered to substantiate the close relationship between language and culture if we have a brief survey of the related literature.

As early as in the 1920s, Bronislaw Malinowski, an anthropologist, did his field work on the Trobriand Islands off eastern New Guinea. He observed that in this primitive culture the meaning of a word greatly depended upon its occurrence in a given context, or rather, upon a real language situation in life. Based on phenomena like this, Malinowski claimed that language functions as a link in concerted human activity in its primitive use (Malinowski, 1923). Strongly influenced by the anthropological view of language and being fully aware of the importance of the context in the study of language use, Firth, a leading figure in a linguistic tradition later

known as the London School, tried to set up a model for illustrating the close relationship between language use and its concurrent factors. In the end, he developed his own theory of CONTEXT OF SITUATION, which can be summarized as follows:

1) The relevant features of the participants: persons, personalities:

(i) The verbal action of the participants.

(ii) The non-verbal action of the participants.

2) The relevant objects.

3) The effects of the verbal action (Firth, 1950)

In relation to the focus of our discussion here, two points can be made to show the strong culture-oriented implication of this theory. Like Sapir, though far less directly, Firth here seemed to suggest the creativity and diversity of linguistic characteristic in language use. On the other hand, what Firth emphasized in this theory is quite similar to a more updating sociological axiom in language use (Fishman, 1972). And the Firthian tradition in this respect was further developed by the founder of systemic-functional linguistics, M.A.K. Halliday, whose contributions to sociolinguistics could be better seen from his understanding of language from a socially semiotic or interactional perspective, his functional interpretation of grammar as a resource for meaning potential, and his linguistic model in the study of literature (Downes, 1998).

Benjamin Lee Whorf is an important figure in American anthropological linguistics and his famous hypothesis concerning language, thought and culture is a very influential and also extremely controversial theory in the study of the relationship between language and culture. From the early 1920s, as an amateur linguist, Whorf began to show an interest in language, anthropology, and archaeology. Later on, he attended some linguistic courses given by Sapir at Yale University and found particular resonance between his own ideas and those of Sapir. This

experience and his study of Hopi, an American Indian language, helped him develop his unique understanding of linguistic relativity, which is widely known as the SAPIR-WHORF HYPOTHESES. The hypothesis suggests that our language helps mould our way of thinking and, consequently, different languages may probably express our unique ways of understanding the world (Sapir, 1929). Following this argument, two important points could be captured in this theory. On the one hand, language may determine our thinking patterns; on the other hand, similarity between languages is relative, the greater their structural differentiation is, the more diverse their conceptualization of the world will be. For this reason, this hypothesis has alternatively been referred to as linguistic determinism and linguistic relativity—a view which was first expounded by the German ethnologist, Wilhelm von Humboldt (Crystal, 1985).

Nida, a well-known linguist and translation theorist, also made some brilliant points concerning the relationship between language and culture. Nida held that culture is the totality of beliefs and practices of a society; nothing is of greater strategic importance than the language through which its beliefs are expressed and transmitted and by which most interaction of its members takes place (Nida, 2001). The relation between language and culture would not constitute such serious difficulties for intercultural understanding if it were not for the numerous misconceptions about language and its function within a society. For many years Nida had been involved in the Bible translation work across different languages and his rich experience in this respect leads him to claim that, as translators, if we want to do a good job in intercultural communication, there are five types of sub-culture we should be fully aware of: 1) ecological culture; 2) linguistic culture; 3) religious culture; 4) material culture; 5) social culture (Nida, 1964). Samovar and Porter (1995) point out that culture is transmitted from generation to generation and is based on symbols. In their view, it is through language that culture can be passed down from

individual to individual, group to group, and generation to generation. Language can be verbal, nonverbal or iconic. Therefore, there would be no culture without language. On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture. Culture is the root for certain language to exist. It has a great influence on the existence and development of language in pronunciation, vocabulary and structure. Different cultural features give rise to different linguistic features.

All the researches on the relationship between language and culture mentioned above suggest that a conscious understanding of the cultural background of the target language is important for language learners. In other words, a successful master of a given language has much to do with an understanding of that culture. Language is a part of culture and plays a very important role in it. Without language, culture would not be possible. On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture; it reflects culture. In the broadest sense, language is the symbolic representation of a people, and it comprises their historical and cultural backgrounds as well as their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking.

### **Strategies of Culture Teaching**

According to Omaggio-Hadley (2003), lecture may be the most common technique that has been used by classroom teachers. This strategy can be effective if teachers pay attention to several points:(1) keep it brief; (2) enliven it with visuals, regalia, and accounts of personal experiences ;(3) focus on some specific aspect of cultural experience;(4) have students take notes; and (5) use follow-up techniques in which students use the target language actively, either in order to ask questions or to practice the new vocabulary, structures, or situations in the lecture in a cultural context. Native informants can be valuable resources to the classroom teachers, because they can be seen as sources of current information about the target culture and as

linguistic models for students. Galloway (1981) gave a number of guidelines for ensuring a successful classroom visit by a native speaker informant. She suggests that the class compile a directory of resource persons in the community as a project, an idea that relates to the goal of “communities” in the national standards. Galloway added that it is best not to expect native speaker informants to give a formal presentation; rather, they can engage in an informal dialogue with students.

Students often approach target-cultural phenomena from within their own native-language cultural framework. This is certainly understandable if we adopt a schema-based view of comprehension. From the mid of 1960s, especially after 1970s, researchers introduced a series of techniques of teaching culture in classroom (Seelye, 1985; Hughes, 1986; Hu & Gao, 1997). According to Seelye (1993), the culture assimilator was first envisioned as a programmed, out-of-class technique that would help individuals adjust to a new culture. Culture assimilators comprise short descriptions of various situations where one person from the target culture interacts with persons from the home culture. Then follow four possible interpretations of the meaning of the behavior and speech of the interactants, especially those from the target culture. Once the students have read the description, they choose one of the four options they think is the correct interpretation of the situation. When every single student has made his choice, they discuss why some options are correct or incorrect. The main thrust of culture assimilators is that they are good methods of giving students understanding about cultural information and may even promote emotional empathy or affect if students have strong feelings about one or more of the options.

It is also important to deal well with several relationships in EFL teaching.

(1) Relationship between Language and Culture

It has been axiomatic in our view that culture learning has to take place as an integral part of language learning, and vice versa. The mere acquisition of information about a foreign country without the psychological demands of integrated language and culture learning, is inadequate as a basis for education through foreign language teaching (Byram,1994)

### (2)Relationship between Target culture and Home culture

According to Straub (1999), what educators should always have in mind when teaching culture is the need to raise their students' awareness of their own culture, to provide them with some kinds of met language in order to talk about culture, and to cultivate a degree of intellectual objectivity essential in cross-cultural analysis. What is more, another objective permeating the teaching of culture is to foster understanding of the target culture from an insider's perspective—an empathetic view that permits the student to accurately interpret foreign cultural behaviors. Grove (1982) claimed that before venturing into unknown territories, learners must first become conversant with what it means to be part of a culture, their own culture. By exploring their own culture, by discussing the very values, expectations, traditions, customs, and rituals they unconsciously take part in, they are ready to reflect upon the values, expectations, and traditions of others with a higher degree of intellectual objectivity (Straub, 1999).

### (3)Relationship between Language Teaching and Culture Teaching

The integration of EFL and culture teaching is not only theoretically necessary but also pragmatically beneficial. It should be reiterated that language teaching is culture teaching, and by teaching a language , one is inevitably already teaching culture (McLeod,1976),and gaining insights into the foreign language should automatically presuppose immersion in the foreign culture, in so far as these two, language and culture, language teaching and culture teaching, all go hand in hand. Making clear the relationship between language teaching and culture teaching

is the premise of our EFL teaching. In designing activities for cultural instruction, it is important to consider the purpose for the activity, as well as its usefulness in teaching language and culture in an integrative fashion. Lafayette (1978, 1988) claimed that the most basic issue in intercultural education is the degree to which the study of language and culture are integrated.

### **Contemporary Views of Culture Teaching in China**

While it is now generally agreed that foreign language teaching should include the components of culture, there seems to be confusion on what culture teachers should teach in the EFL classrooms. For a long time, culture teaching research in China concentrate on the introduction of the target culture, with the home culture neglected. Some researchers even identify culture teaching with the teaching of target culture (Hu, 2002). In practice, introducing the target culture is emphasized in the EFL classroom, while the home culture is ignored. This has caused the “Aphasia of Chinese culture” in English learning and teaching.

The concept of “Aphasia of Chinese culture” was put forward by CongCong in 2000. It refers to the phenomenon that Chinese foreign language learners lack the ability of expressing Chinese culture in foreign languages during intercultural communication (Cong, 2000). This article has raised the concerns of foreign language educators as well as researchers. Recently, some researchers did empirical researches on this phenomenon among the college English learners; their findings supported Cong’s arguments (Xiao&Li, 2010). As is revealed, there exists the “aphasia” of different levels in our English teachers and learners’ knowledge of Chinese culture and their English expressions in particular. The “Aphasia of Chinese Culture” causes many serious problems. It obstructs the cross-cultural communication, and hinders the learner’s awareness of his/her own cultural identity in the international communication. Foreign language educators and researchers made some suggestions on overcoming the “Aphasia of Chinese

Culture”. First, it is essential that the policy makers establish the official role of Chinese culture in English teaching. Second, English educators in China should find a cultural teaching approach that fits in the Chinese context. Third, English textbook compilers and writers should incorporate Chinese culture in the textbooks and materials (Xiao&Li, 2010). Researchers also suggest that English teachers in China improve their own knowledge and competence in Chinese culture and be conscious of the important role of home culture in English teaching (Luo&Li, 2010). One educator even claims that it is necessary to pay more attention to the output of home culture, rather than the input of target language culture (Hua, 2010).

In this chapter, a brief review of related literature on culture teaching was conducted. First, various definitions on culture were reviewed. Then, the literature on the research of relationship between culture and language and justified the role of culture in foreign language teaching was presented. After the rationale of culture teaching, then a discussion of the strategies of teaching the culture in EFL classroom was presented. In the last part of this chapter, the recent research on the cultural teaching was reviewed. Of special importance was the concept of “Aphasia of Chinese Culture” (Cong, 2000), and the possible harmful effects it may have on EFL teaching. Some suggestions for countering “Aphasia” were discussed and reviewed.

## CHAPTER 3

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With the development of science and technology and the globalization of world economy, the communication between various cultures has become closer and more frequent. The intercultural communication has become one of the themes of modern society, which calls for the emergence of culture teaching. The teaching of culture should become an integral part of foreign language instruction. Frontiers have opened and never before have nations come closer to one another—in theory, at least. As a result, people from different cultures weave their lives into an international fabric that is beginning to fray at the edges by virtue of miscommunication and propaganda. In order to avoid this ignominious cultural and political disintegration, and foster empathy and understanding, teachers should present students with a true picture or representation of another culture and language (Singhal, 1998). And this will be achieved only if cultural awareness is viewed as something more than merely a compartmentalized subject within the foreign language curriculum; that is, when culture “inhabits” the classroom and undergirds every language activity. In addition, the efforts of the scholars of the last four decades have postulated a strong interrelation between language and culture and have gradually brought along a new culture teaching and learning focus. Culture became fully recognized as the great necessity for language study. It is deemed of great necessity for students to achieve a working knowledge of the language. Nevertheless, culture teaching practice remains limited in college English classes and our students are suffering from a lack of the target cultural knowledge, which surely and directly influences their ability to use the language appropriately. Thus the teaching of culture to the non-English major students is still a challenging task that requires our painful efforts to

fulfill.

Efforts should be made to improve culture teaching in college EFL education. First a new culture teaching syllabus should be designed to guide English language teaching and learning, which defines the goals, the content, and the assessment of culture teaching and learning along with language learning itself. It is urgent to supplement in the syllabus a catalogue of cultural elements as the basis of the teaching and test. Culture teaching must synchronize language teaching. Matching the system of cultural items with that of language teaching, culture teaching is carried out throughout language teaching. In this way, the combination of the two systems constructs an integrated framework for college English teaching. Second, language testing should provide a scientific, objective, unified and standardized means for the evaluation of the course and the students' English level. In order to develop students' intercultural communicative competence, in college English test, the testing of cultural knowledge of the target language and its appropriate use in authentic communication should be taken into consideration along with linguistic knowledge. Third, necessary changes should be made in college English textbooks. Textbooks should include a wide range of cultural and intercultural knowledge to raise the students' awareness of intercultural issues and enable them to communicate effectively and appropriately in a variety of communicative contexts. A good college English textbook should include more cultural elements and introduce the target culture step by step in a systematic way. At the same time, the Chinese culture should not be ignored in the textbook. How to express and diffuse one's own culture in another language is a very important component of foreign language study. In addition, the styles of texts should be various. It can greatly strengthen the students' intercultural communicative competence by arousing their interests through reading different styles of writing. Finally, cultural teaching should include

both the teaching of target language culture and that of home culture. The foreign language educators should bear in their mind that the ability to express and communicate the Chinese culture in English is a crucial cultural competence they need to cultivate in their students. Provided improvements are made in all these respects, college students will excel in their future intercultural communication with all-round quality.

The paper is just a tentative study of culture teaching in college English teaching. The aim of the paper is to draw people's attention to the inseparable relationship between language and culture, language teaching and culture teaching; state the knowledge about culture teaching; and stress the difficulties of culture teaching. It is author's hope the study will be helpful in the research and practice of college English teaching. After all, culture teaching is vitally important applicable, and challenging.

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10(1)39-46

APPENDIX

March 19, 2011

Dear Professor:

I am honored that you will read my letter of explanation of how I am using my knowledge of culture and teaching English as a foreign language.

I reviewed the literature about culture in the paper. First, the different definitions of culture are given and reviewed. Then I examined some previous researches on the relationship of language and culture. The researches conducted by the anthropologists and linguists supported the view that language and culture are inseparable, and that the teaching of a language should involve its culture. Some current views of teaching the Chinese culture in EFL classroom are also reviewed. Researchers argue that culture teaching in EFL classroom should include the teaching of home culture.

Some strategies of teaching the culture are provided in the paper. According to Omaggio-Hadley (2003), lecture is the most common way of culture teaching. Teachers can make it effective by the aid of visual materials and follow-up activities. Galloway (1981) suggests classroom visits by a native speaker informant. Seelye (1993) provides the concept of the culture assimilator, an out-of class technique that would help individuals adjust to a new culture. In my own teaching, I always integrate the teaching of culture with language teaching. When I teach the new words, I would explain the cultural connotation of the word together with its semantic meanings. Also I would pause during the teaching to provide the cultural background information that is related to the studying material.

Besides, I offered an optional course on the introduction of Western culture. In the course, I would give a systematic instruction on the most basic and fundamental elements of Western culture. Films were employed to intrigue the interest of the students on certain historic periods in the Western history.

The paper is just a tentative study on the cultural teaching, it still lacks of both breadth and depth. Your response and advice regarding the topic of this letter would be most appreciated.

Sincerely,

Howard Hou