

On culture teaching practice in senior high school English Class from the perspective of intercultural Third Space

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Abstract. While recent research on the cultivation of EFL learners' cultural awareness in senior high school has highlighted the pedagogical coping strategies based on culture teaching phenomena, theory-driven culture teaching practice has been under-explored. Informed by the theory of intercultural Third Space, this paper reports how to guide senior high school students to construct intercultural Third Space, so as to enhance their cultural awareness and intercultural critical thinking competence from the three-dimensional perspective of attitude, cognition, and behaviour, through a teaching case in the four stages of attitude cultivation, knowledge construction, simulated communication, and critical reflection. The study indicates that the concept of intercultural Third Space can theoretically make up for the deficiency of culture teaching in Chinese senior high school English class and practically provide teaching design support for classroom instruction.

1 Introduction

In the context of the new era of promoting Chinese culture to “go global” and advocating cultural self-confidence, it has become increasingly prominent to cultivate students' intercultural awareness and communicative competence. *The Standard for General High School English Curriculum (2017 Edition)* (hereinafter referred to as *the New Curriculum Standard*) issued by Chinese Ministry of education has established cultural awareness as the core literacy of senior high school English subject. At present, in response to the needs of the times and the requirements of *the new curriculum standard*, many cultural contents have been added to high school English textbooks, but due to the influence of the washback effect of the nation-wide college entrance examination, many senior high school English are still largely centered on language knowledge, laying emphasis on test-taking skills training ^[1].

Regularly scheduled English class is an important location to cultivate students' cultural awareness. However, culture teaching there is often formalized as a superficial description of cultural knowledge ^[2], while the instructional culture practices, which are more likely to trigger multicultural contrasts, students' deep thinking and conscious awareness, are often ignored ^[3]. Literature review shows that domestic studies in the field mostly focus on cultivating college students' intercultural awareness and their communicative competence, with little attention paid to culture teaching in senior high school. English teachers in senior high schools are generally confused about how to use teaching materials to carry out culture teaching effectively, so as to cultivate students' cultural awareness. In contrast, foreign scholars have introduced the theory of intercultural Third Space into foreign language teaching, helping students to learn

language and enhance their intercultural awareness through the co-construction of intercultural Third Space by joint efforts of teachers and students. Empirical studies ^[4-6] have shown that culture teaching guided by intercultural Third Space theory is helpful to improve students' intercultural awareness and communicative competence. This has certain reference significance for the culture teaching in domestic English class in senior high school. Accordingly, this study, from the theoretical perspective of intercultural Third Space, intended to explore how to carry out culture teaching in senior high school English class through teaching case analysis, so as to provide exemplary support and pedagogical implications for the cultivation of EFL students' intercultural awareness and communicative competence.

2 Theory of intercultural Third Space

The concept of intercultural Third Space was initially proposed by American professor Claire Kramsch in 1993, and later introduced into intercultural communication and foreign language teaching field. Afterwards, it was systematically elaborated and promoted by famous Australian linguists, such as, Lo Bianco, Dobinson and Pitts & Brooks et al., as well as Australian government education department. In Sino-foreign intercultural communication, Chinese culture is considered to be the first space, while the target language culture is regarded as the second space, and the Third Space is the middle ground between the two cultures, which is established through intercultural exploration and negotiation ^[7]. In the Third Space, both Chinese native culture and target language culture will be strengthened and deepened, and then merged into a new culture that allows communicators

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from different linguistic backgrounds to communicate successfully and smoothly [8].

Professor Ye [6] believed that foreign language teaching in China could start from Chinese context to help students build their own intercultural Third Space through cultural comparison and intercultural consultation, and help students absorb the essence of foreign cultures while learning and protecting Chinese culture. The above theoretical understanding breaks through the traditional foreign language teaching concept oriented by target language cultures, and it is beneficial to enhancing the status and role of Chinese culture in foreign language teaching. As for the instructional culture practice, through teaching cases, Gu [5] showed how to help students build an intercultural Third Space from five teaching steps and discussed the cultivation mode of students' intercultural communication competence. In addition, based on the opportunity of teaching Chinese at the University of Glasgow, Zhang [4] applied the intercultural Third Space theory to intercultural teaching in university English class from the perspective of intercultural communication semiotics. The results of the questionnaire survey verified the effectiveness and feasibility of intercultural Third Space theory in guiding the cultivation of students' intercultural awareness and communicative competence. However, the study failed to further demonstrate the specific teaching practice through classroom teaching cases.

Obviously, most of the theoretical studies aforementioned have demonstrated the effectiveness and feasibility of intercultural Third Space theory in foreign language teaching, although some tended to explore the application of intercultural Third Space theory into classroom teaching. But these studies largely focused on intercultural teaching in university English class, and little is known about the culture teaching in senior high school English class. The intercultural Third Space theory lays emphasis on the cultivation of students' multicultural awareness, holding that students' native culture should be the starting point of intercultural teaching and learning, and it shares equal importance as that of the target language culture. This perception is in accordance with the goal of *the New Curriculum Standard* for cultivating students' cultural awareness. Based on this, this study proposes that it would be necessary and feasible to apply the intercultural Third Space theory to the culture teaching in senior high school English class.

3 Analysis of a culture teaching case

Intercultural teaching from the theoretical perspective of Third Space, focuses on cultivating students' critical reflection ability by elevating intercultural instruction from superficial level to the level of the essence [9]. In practice, culture teaching can be carried out from three aspects, that is, learning culture, comparing culture and exploring intercultural Third Space [10]. What follows is an elaboration of a culture teaching case.

As reading materials are important carriers of culture, and learning to read is a dominant way to enhance students' cultural awareness, reading teaching design

should not only focus on language and structure to help students get information and understand the points of view, but also should pay more attention to the emotions, culture and values entailed in the reading materials [11]. We randomly selected the reading material (*Why do we celebrate festivals?*) as an example, from Unit 1 *Festivals and celebrations* in the revised edition of *Compulsory 3* published by *People's Education Press*, which is now widely adopted throughout China. Through a teaching case analysis and expounding the underlying rationality, we aimed to demonstrate how to construct an intercultural Third Space in specific teaching scenarios to cultivate students' cultural awareness and communication competence as well as provide some pedagogical implications for classroom teaching.

3.1 Analysis of teaching materials

This reading material was selected from a unit which focuses on the theme of festivals. It is an expository essay, mainly about the significance of festivals, origin and development of festival changes and the reason for human to celebrate festivals. Part one puts forward the theme, that is, there are many differences between Chinese and foreign festival cultures, but their demands and aspirations are similar. Part two points out that the harvest festival is celebrated in different ways under different cultural backgrounds, but the implied meaning is the same. Part three introduces that some festival traditions have disappeared, but some festivals burst out new meanings with social development and people's life. Part four describes the change of festival customs brought by the trend of commercialization. Part five summarizes the significance of festivals in our life. Through reading, students are able to learn about the major Chinese and foreign festivals, understand the role of festivals in the inheritance of national values, see the commonality of human values in different festivals, and comprehend the connotation of a community with a shared future for mankind. Besides, there are two illustrations alongside the essay. One is about the Mid-Autumn Festival, including the elements of the moon, moon cakes, lanterns and tea, creating a joyous celebration scene. The other is about the Mother's Day with gifts, carnations and cards, showing a warm atmosphere of gratitude. The Mid-Autumn Festival picture representing Chinese culture is placed in the front, while the Mother's Day representing global culture is in the background. The layout clearly embodies our cultural self-confidence and the disposition of tolerance and inclusiveness.

3.2 Analysis of teaching stages

Stage 1: Attitude Cultivation

The first stage intends to inspire students' motivation and interest in understanding and learning Chinese and foreign cultures, and train students to examine cultural differences with an objective and inclusive attitude.

Activity 1: Activate Background Knowledge

Class begins with the video playing of classic American Christmas songs and the opening symphony of

the Chinese New Year Gala. The video playing is designed to activate students' existing knowledge and experience of festivals and celebrations, and to create an active learning atmosphere, thus stimulate their interest in the topic of *Festivals and Celebrations*. Next, the question "Why do some young Chinese and supermarket celebrate Christmas in China?" is posed, aiming to lead students into thinking about the social and cultural motivation behind western festival culture and its influence on Chinese culture, and also setting up cognitive scaffolding for students' reading comprehension.

Activity 2: Brainstorm

In the form of group discussion, students are asked to give more examples of festivals at home and abroad, and try to share some festival customs and cultural connotations. This activity is supposed to broaden students' horizon and to provide them a discursive space to understand Chinese festival customs as well as that of foreign countries, so as to stimulate students' desire to explore Chinese culture and national pride in English. Also, the activity is helpful to "guide students to appreciate alien cultures and solve cultural conflicts with an open, inclusive and negotiated attitude, and develop the preliminary awareness of building intercultural Third Space ^{[5]70}.

Stage 2: Knowledge Construction

Stage 2 focuses on students' intercultural knowledge. The teaching design is largely targeted at helping students to enrich their language and culture knowledge, as well as to improve their reading skills.

Activity 1: Language Knowledge Learning

Ask students to read the essay and find out the words, phrases and sentences related to festivals and encourage them to explain them with relevant culture knowledge. Afterwards, give students some feedback to deepen their understandings. Then, arrange some controlled and semi-controlled language practice activities, such as filling in the blank, choosing and answering briefly, guiding students to consolidate the relevant grammar, vocabulary and pragmatic knowledge in the essay, and then lead them to talk about some common Chinese and western festival and relevant customs in English.

Activity 2: Cultural Knowledge Learning

After careful reading, students are expected to verbally list the names and specific dates of some important Chinese and western festivals, and also be able to discuss the ways and traditional customs of important festivals and celebration activities in pairs. Meanwhile, arrange 1-2 activities to explore the reasons for the origin of different festivals in groups. For example, upon Chinese special snack "Tang Yuan", which is closely related with Lantern Festival, arrange pair work to ask students to explain Chinese reunion culture behind "Tang Yuan" in English. Such kinds of activity design are beneficial to helping students understand the uniqueness of festivals and the celebrations in different countries and are also useful to aid students to establish the concept of the Third Space that festival culture is bred in national culture, and form the cultural awareness of respecting various traditional festivals around the world.

Stage 3: Simulated Communication

Simulation activities, such as interview, role play and situational communication, are effective in helping students consolidate their personal experience of cultural differences, so as to deepen the understanding and perception of world festival culture. These activities are also useful in helping students to build their own intercultural Third Space and improve their understanding of Chinese and western festival culture.

Activity Example: Situational Communication

Students are required to randomly form a group of 3-5. Upon a situational cultural conflict, each group is supposed to create a dialogue. Through dialogue and communication, they expected to gradually understand each other's festival culture and the values behind it until misunderstandings are eliminated.

The purpose of the situational communication is to let students personally experience the differences in speech acts caused by different cultural orientations, values, behaviour habits and ways of thinking, which are involved in intercultural communication, so as to help students recognize the importance of cultural knowledge in intercultural communication. At the same time, the activity can help students understand intercultural communication needs to strive to establish a Third Space for the integration of Chinese and foreign cultures, without favouring Chinese culture or blindly worships foreign cultures. Meanwhile, students are taught to be responsible for helping their conversational partner appreciate Chinese culture with a positive attitude and find a mutually acceptable communication plan.

Stage 4: Critical Reflection

Students should reflect on their learning achievements, recording what they have learned in the form of quick writing, and express their understanding and position on intercultural communication.

Activity Example: reflection Log

Through reflection logs writing, students are enabled to evaluate their learning outcomes and their performance in situational communication objectively. For example, they can reflect on the following questions: 1) Have you built an intercultural Third Space? 2) Is your cultural knowledge sufficient to meet their needs of communication? 3) Can the other person understand them in intercultural communication? 4) Are you satisfied with your communication performance? 5) Have you improved your cultural knowledge and awareness after learning the unit? Reflective journal writing aims to help students construct intercultural Third Space, breaking through inherent cultural bias, and enabling students to understand their own intercultural communication attitudes, knowledge and behaviours ^[5], and develop their intercultural communicative competence.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

As an important part of the core literacy of English discipline, "cultural awareness", closely related with one's cognition, understanding and appreciation of Chinese and foreign culture, is students' knowledge quality, humanistic quality and behaviour quality in the context of globalization ^[12]. Meanwhile, cultural

awareness has been regulated as an important teaching goal of English curriculum in the new era of socialist construction in China. However, at present, in some senior high school English class, the tendency of “taking western culture and values as the criterion, emphasizing cultural norms of behaviour and ignoring local culture”^{[13]14} is not conducive to the goal-achievement. The intercultural Third Space theory emphasizes that “national language and culture is the starting point of intercultural exploration”^{[6]122}. It can guide students to construct intercultural Third Space, treat Chinese native culture and heterogeneous culture equally, “avoid ethnocentrism or national nihilism, and improve students’ intercultural critical thinking ability”^{[14]66}, which can theoretically make up for the weakness of the culture teaching in English class.

Through a reading teaching case, this study demonstrated how to apply the intercultural Third Space theory to culture teaching in senior high school English class, from the three-dimensional perspective of attitude, cognition and behaviour, so as to improve students’ cultural awareness and critical thinking ability. In teaching practice, teachers and practitioners can improve their teaching by adhering to the following four points. First, bear in mind that “attitude cultivation” stage aims to stimulate students’ interest in understanding and learning native and foreign cultures, and initially establish an “inclusive and appreciative attitude” toward alien cultures based on a full understanding of Chinese culture^{[15]4}. Secondly, follow the proposition advocated by the intercultural Third Space theory that language and culture are inseparable^[6, 16]. “Knowledge construction” stage with a focus on the organic combination of language knowledge and culture teaching, makes language learning a “communicative behaviour permeated with culture”^{[17]4}. Thirdly, try “simulation communication” to help students construct the intercultural Third Space, to discover and solve potential cultural conflicts through active negotiation. Fourth, arrange “critical reflection” activity to guide students to objectively evaluate their learning results from affective, cognitive and behavioural dimensions. The sequential design of the above four stages is expected to raise students’ cultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence from simple “perception” and “understanding” to the level of “identification”, “cognition”, “attitude” and “behaviour”^{[18]7}, and thus promote the long-term development of students’ English language and cultural literacy.

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