

Problems and Countermeasures: The Integration of Traditional Culture into College English Teaching in the Context of New Liberal Arts

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Abstract: *New Liberal Arts, as a new form of liberal arts education, has fostered the optimized English teaching in colleges and universities. English teaching emphasizes culture more than language, so College English teaching aims to nurture students' ability of telling good Chinese stories in English in the context of New Liberal Art construction. Integrating Chinese traditional culture into College English teaching is essential for this goal but there still exist some problems leading to poor integration. Via a questionnaire surveying 145 students, the actual problems are analysed from the perspectives of teachers and students, and 4 specific countermeasures are proposed including improving the teaching evaluation mechanism by increasing traditional culture content, enhancing cross-cultural communication ability by fostering English teachers' cultural literacy, optimizing teaching methods to create teaching activities suitable for traditional culture into English teaching and tapping new traditional culture elements with specialty feature combined.*

Keywords: *New Liberal Arts; traditional culture; college English teaching; problem analysis; countermeasures*

1. Introduction

Wang Shouren once remarked "Today, learning a foreign language is also about spreading Chinese ideas, academic thoughts and expanding the world market." Zhang Hongling stated that "Language teaching should involve cultural teaching, without which language teaching is boring and meaningless."^[1] Wen Qiufang adjusted "Whole Person Education" to "Key Competence" in the POA system.^[2] These all coincide with the mission of college English teaching. College English teaching aims to consolidate students' basic language skills, and more importantly, guide them to master traditional cultural knowledge and cultivate their awareness and ability of intercultural communication. Currently, facing frequent exchanges between China and the West, the focus is not simply on understanding western culture in English, but emphasizing the promotion of Chinese culture by telling good Chinese stories in English. Therefore, for the teaching purpose of "improving college students' ability to tell good Chinese stories in cross-cultural communication", how to integrate traditional culture into English teaching has become an important task for college teachers.

2. Research on the integration of traditional culture into college English teaching in the context of New Liberal Arts

2.1. Research target

The 2023 undergraduate non-English major freshmen in Wuhan University of Bioengineering are taken as research target. Those students are from 4 classes covering Medical Laboratory Technology, Internet of Things Engineering, Market Management and Visual Communication and Design. A total of 148 questionnaires are distributed and 145 valid questionnaires are collected. The recovery rate is as high as 98 %.

2.2. Research basis

Wuhan University of Bioengineering is privately-owned university where students mostly fail to

master English basic knowledge ideally compared with public universities. The targeted students are poor in English listening, speaking, reading and writing abilities. Comparatively speaking, students in Medical Laboratory Technology and Market Management are slightly better, and those from Visual Communication and Design generally have the weakest English foundation resulting from their common difficulty in phonetic symbols spelling, sentence reading, fragmented speaking and writing. In addition, students' attitudes towards English learning have been investigated. Some are negative towards or resistant to English courses, thinking it is "boring" or "difficult" or "useless". Teaching culture requires profound Chinese culture learning in English, undoubtedly creating more challenges for traditional culture integration into English teaching.

Fortunately, driven by the concept of New Liberal Arts, the textbooks for college English course are optimized, as *New Target University English Integrated Course Book 1 and 2* (hereinafter referred as *Integrated Course 1, 2*), edited by Liu Zhengguang of *Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press*, are selected for first year. These series of textbooks, reprinted in 2020, are both intellectual and humanistic, adding substantial Chinese cultural elements with response to the times and the concept of the New Liberal Arts, which eases the resistance to traditional culture integration.

2.3. Research method

Adopting qualitative and quantitative methods, the questionnaire contains 20 questions, 10 for each, the former testing whether the characteristic cultural vocabularies taught such as "Kongzi(Confucians)", "Ren(Benevolence)", "Shi Sheng(The Sage Poet)", "Duan Wu Jie(the Dragon Boat Festival)" and "Han Fu(Han Chinese clothing)" are mastered or not, the later examining students' attitude towards traditional culture introduced into English course, the proportion of traditional culture in actual teaching, and whether students' understanding of traditional culture has improved.

2.4. Research result

The data show that the traditional culture into college English course did not achieve the desired results. The specific research results are summarized as follows.

2.4.1. Changed learning purpose, but highlighted test-oriented need

When asked whether Chinese traditional culture integrated into English teaching is welcome, 52.4 % of the students say that they are very welcome to acquire the expressions of cultural words because their translation is examined in College English Band 4 Test (CET 4), 35.2 % answer it doesn't matter, and 12.4 % welcome it out of the needs of understanding Chinese culture and improving cross-cultural communication ability. Despite that a few are aware of the communicative function of language learning, its instrumental nature is still prominent, so half of the students are willing to learn cultural knowledges for exams.

2.4.2. Intense learning interest, but weak learning autonomy

When asked whether learning Chinese culture can stimulate their interest in English learning, 60.7 % say that interspersing Chinese cultural knowledge in English class can pull their psychological distance from English, 25.5 % say that they should learn English cultural knowledge in English class, and it is not necessary to learn Chinese culture, and meanwhile 13.8 % think "It has nothing to do with me". However, when asked whether they will learn Chinese cultural knowledge in free time, only about 25 % say they have followed the WeChat Official Account China Daily or occasionally browse CNN official website. That shows the traditional culture into the classroom can stimulate learning in learning, but students lack learning autonomy.

2.4.3. Valued cultural teaching, but monotonous teaching content

When asked the proportion of traditional culture in teaching, nearly 90 % students reflect that teachers pay more attention to introducing traditional culture with the comparison between Chinese and Western cultures. What is lacking is that the teaching content taught is mostly from the textbooks or those likely to be examined in CET 4 translation, and most of them are narrated in words and orally. As a consequence, the teaching content is relatively monotonous. Knowledge expansion via multimedia means like video and pictures is recommended so as to make knowledge learning interesting.

2.4.4. Relatively-good teaching effect, but unsmooth knowledge output

The correct rates of each objective questions are over 60 %. Seemingly, these students have a good

grasp of cultural words, indicating that the students have well remembered the corresponding English expressions, but whether they can speak or write them correctly is unknown. This answer may be founded in “Do you think it is difficult to tell good Chinese stories in English? Please state the reason.” Almost all students believe “It’s so difficult” and “I can’t speak English fluently”, “I know little about Chinese culture” and “I don’t have such opportunities to chat with foreigners” are the common reasons.

3. Problem analysis of the integration of traditional culture into college English teaching in the context of New Liberal Arts

3.1. Teachers

Insufficient cultural knowledge accumulation, and improper teaching objectives. Western cultural knowledge used to be given first priority in college English teaching, resulting in the English teachers merely knowing about Western cultural knowledge deeply but a little about local culture. Insufficient cultural knowledge accumulation has undoubtedly caused two phenomena: first, teachers’ excessive reliance on textbooks when preparing lessons, as well as their poor knowledge transfer ability, accounting for failure to actively explore relevant knowledge points; second, improper teaching aims have been set. With Western culture orientation, teachers may hold the idea that integrating traditional culture into English classroom is for unit teaching or CET 4, instead of cultivating cultural consciousness and building cultural self-confidence.

Poor awareness of cross-cultural communication and a teaching activity for all classes. Cultural teaching aims to deepen students’ understanding of Chinese and foreign cultures, cultivate their cultural awareness, and improve their cross-cultural communication skills.^[3] Some teachers still care translation and grammar practices but ignore or fail to conduct the humanistic education, thinking “Limited class hours cannot ensure extra time for cultural teaching.”, in which their weak cross-cultural communication awareness is reflected. Another reflection is on the design of teaching activities. Teachers assume they have already designed perfect teaching activities, but students are “indifferent” and even “deadly silent”. Teachers used to feel frustrated and confused. In fact, the reason behind is that these activities are untargeted, since the same one is implemented without any modification in different classes, without students’ majors taken into consideration. For example, students in Medical Laboratory Technology are more interested in medical knowledge, and market management knowledge is less attractive for them.

3.2. Students

Severe dependence on classroom teaching, and one-sided knowledge acquisition channels. The most ideal is to keep balance between basic teaching objectives and traditional culture integration. As a matter of fact, the teaching time is far from enough, so naturally it is impossible to cover all aspects of Chinese culture as expected. On the other hand, freshmen have plenty of spare time since, as, during the first year, general courses like Situation and Policies are offered. In the Information Age where abundant resources are available, the students surveyed rely on classroom teaching to obtain knowledge, and fail to pick up the traditional cultural elements they are interested in outside the classroom for in-depth study.

Superficial understanding of knowledge, and unsatisfactory intercultural communicative competence. Students’ willingness to learn traditional culture in English class is mostly out of test needs, not yet realizing that language learning is more for communication, which is confirmed by the fact that only 12.4 % of students have cross-cultural communication awareness. Students’ superficial understanding of traditional culture is not conducive to a smooth cross-cultural communication. Taking *Integrated Course 2 Unit 1 Understanding Chinese Culture and Tradition* as an instance, Confucius’s life and achievements are introduced in the lead-in activities, and his core idea “Benevolence” is presented in the text where Chinese and interpretation of “Benevolence” are compared so that students will make aware of the uniqueness of Chinese culture. In the process of learning, students care more about English written expression than cultural connotation. Owing to their bad oral speaking and coupled with a lack of understanding of traditional culture, the communication is unsmooth. For example, when required to introduce Confucius to the Westerners, the conversation may abruptly end in the beginning sentence “Confucius is a Chinese great thinker”.

4. Countermeasures for the integration of traditional culture into college English teaching in the context of New Liberal Arts

As for these students, consolidating their basic language knowledge is still the main task, but in the context of New Liberal Arts, culture teaching requires great attention. Based on this questionnaire survey, the problems are analyzed in an attempt to give useful countermeasures.

4.1. Improve the teaching evaluation mechanism by increasing traditional culture content

For traditional college English teaching evaluation, examination performance serves as the core index to evaluate students' learning and teachers' teaching.^[4] But students' comprehensive language ability is what should be ultimately considered in teaching evaluation, including cross-cultural communication and cultural ability. In the final test, reading and writing competencies are mainly tested while students' mastery and application of traditional cultural knowledge are examined in a way that whether they know how to translate cultural words like "Wushu (Martial arts)" and four-character expressions like "feng yu tong zhou(through thick and thin)", taking up a small proportion.

More cultural elements can be added into English teaching while the original evaluation proportion is unchanged. Specifically, for summative assessment, involving more traditional culture-related elements into the final test is helpful. Of course, the difficulty level is supposed to be reasonably controlled. There are two approaches in the formative evaluation: first, include students' participation in culture-related activities such as thinking and discussion, presentation and teamwork into evaluation indicators with strict qualification; second, reform the forms of daily assignments accounting for 20 % by decreasing papers and increase reading and oral assignments. For example, teachers recommend English classics or materials related to Chinese culture, carry out reading activities every week in groups, and check 1-2 groups 5 minutes before class, and an oral report is a must. Apart from that, students are required to finish oral communication assignments and submit them in the form of video. In particular, it should be noted that for all the above activities, timely, effective, reasonable and incentive feedbacks are essential to students' enthusiasm stimulation.

4.2. Enhance cross-cultural communication ability by fostering English teachers' cultural literacy

To fulfill cultural responsibilities, teachers must first have rich knowledge and high cultural literacy.^[5] Under the background of New Liberal Arts, updating teaching concepts, consolidating traditional Chinese cultural reserves are under the way for cultural literacy improvement, cross-cultural communication ability enhancement. Only by doing this can Chinese stories told well.

Carry out online and offline training activities to foster their cultural literacy. For training activities offline, there are 4 feasible measures: 1) regularly invite experts to popularize the traditional cultural knowledge that can be integrated into English teaching; 2) invite teacher representatives to share successful experiences; 3) organize young teachers to observe excellent lessons; 3) hold the "Traditional Culture into English Classroom" teaching competition. For online activities, online training tasks can be arranged each semester to encourage independent learning via Internet platforms such as MOOC. Appropriate rewards can be given for excellent ones as encouragement and motivation.

4.3. Optimize teaching methods to create teaching activities suitable for traditional culture into English teaching

Guidelines on College English Teaching emphasizes that teachers should improve teaching methods to create active learning environment and conditions.^[6] Therefore, teachers are bound to use teaching methods flexibly according to varied teaching content, such as task-based teaching and cultural display and comparison. The teaching of *Integrated Course 2 Unit 2 Left Behind* themed on Motherly Love is a typically good example. At first, the teacher gives the instruction "Please find Chinese stories which praise motherly love", asking student groups to find typical Chinese stories and then share them in public; next, presenting the famous stories via videos, the teacher introduces the relevant expressions such as "*The Song of Parting Son*" and "*The Story of Meneius's Mother Moving House Three Times*"; finally, students are guided to compare the characteristics of Chinese and Western motherly love for deep understanding of Chinese mother image.

From the perspective of teaching practice, limited class hours are an important factor affecting Chinese stories telling.^[7] The extracurricular activity is an extension of classroom teaching, so organizes

students to take part in relevant extracurricular activities out of their own interests. Those activities, including English fun dubbing, short play *Stepmother's Tea Party*, English poetry recitation, English storytelling, not only broaden students' channels for understanding profound traditional culture, but also enable them to appreciate traditional culture in a relaxing and pleasant atmosphere. There is no doubt that students' ability to narrate Chinese culture in English will be improved if these activities are carried out smoothly.

4.4. Tap new traditional culture elements with specialty feature combined

Taking the major as the starting point, traditional culture integration into English teaching can follow the principle of combining with specialty to fully tap the relevant traditional cultural elements. In practice, the traditional culture integrated into the actual teaching is mostly popular and common culture of ancient China. This kind of content is not attractive to the post-00 s students and lacks professionalism. In order to enhance students' interest and awareness of the importance of integrating traditional culture into classroom, teachers need to integrate new traditional cultural elements into different majors. This not only meets the actual needs of students' learning, but also provides convenience for English literature reading in the future. *Integrated Course 2 Unit 4 Great Men, Great Minds* is here taken as an example. For students majoring in Medical Laboratory Technology, some famous medical experts such as Hospital President Zhang Dingyu and his great contribution are suitable, and meanwhile the relevant professional expressions "Amyotrophic lateral Sclerosis (ALS)" and "Covid-19 epidemic" can be introduced. But for those in Visual Communication and Art major, this kind of knowledge never catches their attention.

5. Conclusion

Recent researches on related topics have emerged one after another, with many constructive measures. But in view of the fact that no consistent academic opinions have been reached and the college English teaching varies, different actions should be taken in line with different conditions in terms of integrating traditional culture into college English teaching. College English teachers needs to adopt specific teaching strategies based on the conditions of themselves and students' conditions for producing better teaching effect. Under the background of New Liberal Arts education, the author proposes that the cultural education, especially the traditional cultural education, is an urgent task for all colleges and universities. In this paper, specific countermeasures are given to the problems reflected in the questionnaire, hoping to help promote college English teaching in the future.

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