

The Introduction Strategies of Culture in Junior Middle School English Reading Teaching

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Abstract: Language is an important part of the culture, so language teaching is inseparable from cultural teaching. In this era of globalization, language is not only a tool of communication, but also an important medium of cultural transmission and communication. English, as an international language, its importance is self-evident. However, in practical teaching, English reading class mainly focuses on vocabulary and reading skills, while ignoring the role of cultural background knowledge in reading comprehension. Based on the summary and analysis of various literature and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory, this paper put forwards some effective strategies to introduce English cultural knowledge into English reading teaching.

Keywords: Culture; Junior middle school English reading; Introduction strategies

1. Introduction

In the new era of world multi-polarization, economic globalization and cultural diversification, cross-cultural communication is becoming more and more frequent. The importance of cultural education is increasingly prominent. Only by understanding the culture of a country, can we know how to communicate with the country to seek cooperation and common development. Meanwhile, timely access to information is very important because every piece of information can lead to new opportunities. The understanding and processing of information depend on people's reading ability. Since English is the international language, it is even more important to improve English reading ability.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Culture

Edward B. Taylor, the anthropologist who first gives the definition of culture, defines it as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."^[1]

From the perspective of foreign language teaching, Hu Wenzhong^[2] defines culture as the whole way of life of a specific group, that is, the behavior pattern of a specific group and the value system that governs its behavior.

From the above-mentioned definitions, it can be seen that culture is shared and inherited by groups. It is related to lifestyle and deeply rooted in values and social norms.

2.2 Relationship between Language and Culture

Language is the carrier of culture. It stores all the social life experience of a nation and reflects the culture and characteristics of the nation. People also understand the culture of the nation in the process of language acquisition. Language is influenced by culture and is an important part of the culture.

Culture is the base of language, which means language cannot exist without culture^[3]. The different cultural structures of each nation will lead to various differences in the expression form of each nation's language. Every language has a specific cultural counterpart, and language and culture are permeated with each other. In our English teaching, western culture, especially British and American culture, can be seen everywhere. Therefore, English teaching should not be limited to the practice of pronunciation,

vocabulary, grammatical content and language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation, but also pay attention to the introduction of cultural thinking, so that students can acquire the culture of the language while acquiring the language, and ensure that students can learn the authentic language.

2.3 The Role of Background Knowledge in Reading Comprehension

Reading is the foundation of all other skills in language learning. The strong reading ability helps students to master the target language. Reading interacts with other skills, promotes the development of several other verbal transference skills, and paves the way for higher language achievement ^[4]. Zhang Huaijian and Huang Jianbin ^[5] mentioned in the article Background Knowledge and Reading Teaching that students must store certain cultural background knowledge in their minds in order to realize their understanding of reading passages. The more cultural background knowledge they possess, the better reading effect they gain.

If students know nothing about the background knowledge of English materials, they are likely to have a little understanding of the text, or even misunderstand the information conveyed in the material, which will affect their reading speed and effect ^[6]. Therefore, teachers should be fully aware of the important role of introducing cultural background knowledge in improving students' reading ability.

Cultural background knowledge will affect students' understanding of words and passages in reading. Culture is closely related to people's work and life. Different lifestyles will lead to the formation of different cultures. As a part of the language, the generation, development, enrichment and synonym evolution of words are inseparable from their cultural background. Many of them are rich in the unique cultural connotations of English-speaking countries, for example, Britain is an island country, and its maritime industry once led the world. The Han ethnic group lived and multiplied in the Asian continent, and people's life was inseparable from the land. When describing a person who spends too much money, in English, people will say in this way "spending money like water". However, in China, people like to compare money to dirt. There are many idioms about boats and water in English, such as, to rest on one's oars, to keep one's head above water, all at sea, etc., but there are no identical equivalents in Chinese.

Cultural differences also play a role in sentence comprehension. English sentences tend to take predicate verbs as the center, with subject-predicate structure as the main stem to expand other elements in the sentence, such as attributive, adverbial, complement. However, verbs (as well as nouns and pronouns) and other complex form changes cover most of the structural information, functional information, and even semantic information of the sentence, for example: predicate verbs not only indicate the meaning, but also in the form of the tense, subject-verb dynamic relationship, and other non-predicate verbs in the form of a strict difference. Non-predicate verbs can only be used in the corresponding non-finite form, so there are distinctions between infinitives, present participles, and past participles. Although the basic structure of Chinese sentences is the same as that of English sentences, emphasizing the subject, predicate and object, there are differences. The most obvious difference is that Chinese sentences emphasize parataxis while English sentences emphasize hypotaxis.

2.4 Zone of Proximal Development

The zone of proximal development refers to the difference between the level of problem-solving students can achieve with the help of adults' guidance and the level of problem solving they can achieve alone. It is actually a transitional state between two adjacent stages of development. This concept was put forward by the famous Soviet psychologist Vygotsky ^[7].

According to the theory of zone of proximal development, the first thing a teacher needs to understand is the gap between the current level of students and the level of academic achievement students are likely to achieve. Then according to the actual level of students, teacher can implement the corresponding classroom teaching. And the most important thing is that teaching should go beyond the development of students and effectively guide the development of students, so as to achieve effective teaching and guide students to develop towards a potential and higher level.

Based on Vygotsky's zone of Proximal Development theory, Wood, Brunet and Ross first introduced the term scaffolding into the concept of teaching. They mentioned in their book, *The Role of Tutoring in Problem Solving* ^[8], that "scaffolding consists essentially of the adult "controlling" those elements of a task that are initially beyond the learner's capacity, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence."

From this view, it can be seen that scaffolding instruction generally emphasize the function of teachers to build scaffolding. That is to say, in learning, teachers should provide students with appropriate clues or hints step by step, so that students can gradually climb through these scaffolding, discover and solve problems, master knowledge, improve problem solving ability, and grow into an independent learner.

When discussing the constructivism teaching mode, He Kekang ^[9] put forward the concrete procedures of scaffolding instruction: setting scaffolding, getting into context, independent exploration, collaborative learning and evaluation.

3. Problems of Culture Introduction in Junior Middle School Reading Teaching

3.1 Monotony of Introduction Method

With the support of the new curriculum reform, teaching reform and innovation are gradually put on the agenda, and the teaching mode of Junior middle school English reading has developed rapidly. However, it is undeniable that the new educational concept is not fully implemented in classroom teaching practice. Under the influence of the current high school entrance examination model, English reading teaching in junior middle school is still exam-oriented. Although teachers understand and begin to pay attention to student-orientation, the time limit of forty minutes per lesson and the pressure of entrance exams mean that there is not much time for students. In class, the teacher is still the absolute leader, and students are in a passive state of acceptance with a lack of thinking collision and teacher-student interaction, resulting in the single teaching of English knowledge.

Besides, searching materials, making PPT and editing videos are extremely time-consuming and labor-intensive, while cultural knowledge accounts for a small proportion in the exam. As a result, teachers' efforts have not brought the expected return, namely, improving students' scores. Therefore, they are not willing to spend more energy on the teaching design of cultural knowledge, and always import cultural knowledge through traditional and convenient ways, such as pictures, videos or oral lectures, which leads to the single method of culture introduction.

3.2 Lack of Connection to Real Life

“Efficient comprehension requires the ability to relate the textual material to one’s own knowledge ^[10].” This shows that comprehending a text is an interactive process between the reader’s cultural background knowledge and the text. However, most of what students read is divorced from real life because most textbooks only focus on the sentence level, vocabulary and grammar. The discourse in textbooks is mostly created by textbook writers in order to reflect some language points in a certain course. Although textbooks and texts provide valuable information to foreign language learners, they usually decompose language into discrete language points, and the ignorance of the daily application environment of these texts inevitably leads to the inability of foreign language learners to use the authentic language.

China’s traditional English classroom teaching practice with “textbooks” as the carrier has proved that most of the college, middle and primary school students who have never been exposed to “real” English materials will encounter great difficulties in reading the language materials such as timetables and rent advertisements in the society.

3.3 Boring Content

On the one hand, the imported cultural content is too easy for students. In reading teaching, what teachers teach is more intellectual than cultural. The test-oriented construction of reading content ignores the cultivation of thinking ability, communicative ability and cultural quality, while grammar knowledge analysis occupies the leading position in teaching ^[11]. However, when teachers focus more on the grammar knowledge, there is little cultural knowledge involved. What is taught is usually the superficial knowledge that students have learned in daily life. For example, when mentioning Halloween, the teacher may talk about the custom of trick-or-treating but does not introduce the origin of Halloween, which will cause students to feel bored because they have mastered the knowledge. Besides, teachers' choice of cultural materials in reading teaching is mostly confined to teaching materials and ignores the extension of students' extra-curricular culture. However, the part about culture in textbooks is too easy for students. In today’s information age, students can get it easily by searching the Internet, so they feel its content is simple and boring.

On the other hand, the cultural knowledge taught by teachers is beyond students' understanding level and difficult to understand. Students' interest in learning often comes from a sense of achievement. When the content of the study is beyond students' understanding, students feel confused, which leads to the students' losing motivation and thinking the knowledge is boring. For example, when a teacher is explaining an article and comes across a concept like Achilles' heel, telling students that it represents weakness without going into the story behind it will confuse students who are not familiar with Western mythology.

Besides, the topics about culture in textbooks are limited and not all students are interested in them, which leads to the loss of motivation for students to learn.

4. Strategies of Culture Introduction

4.1 Adopting a Variety of Forms and Means to Introduce English Culture

4.1.1 Duty report.

As junior high school students, the cultural knowledge to learn is relatively simple, so students can display it through their own search and summary. Scaffolding also encourages teachers to help students develop their ability to explore and learn on their own. Therefore, teachers can assign students to do a duty report about English culture before class. For example, when some western festivals come, teachers should design various related topics and organize students to further collect relevant festival materials and customs. Finally, students present the materials they have compiled in front of the whole class. During this process, students can learn how to collect information and learn independently. Besides, students can have a more solid grasp of the knowledge.

According to the scaffolding method, teachers should introduce how to analyze and understand similar concepts before students proceed to autonomous learning. Therefore, when assigning tasks, teachers should tell students what aspects they need to show. For example, when students are going to introduce Thanksgiving Day, they should include its origin, celebration time, customs and so on.

4.1.2 Comparative method.

Comparative method is a very important means in intercultural communication teaching. Only through comparison can the similarities and differences between the structure and culture of students' mother tongue and target language be found out, so as to obtain a cultural sensitivity of cross-cultural communication^[12]. Meanwhile, teaching western culture based on the Chinese culture that students know is also a good way to get into context.

According to Vygotsky's zone of Proximal Development theory, teachers should provide students with a helping hand on their existing knowledge level so that they can reach a new level of knowledge. "For the cultural import in English teachings, we need to seek common grounds, so to make the English cultural teaching easy to implement and the students can easily understand it^[13]." In the process of culture introduction, students have a deep understanding of Chinese traditional festivals, so teachers can explain similar western festivals through the festivals that students already know. For example, the Spring Festival in China is very similar to Christmas in the west. Teachers can help students learn about Christmas by comparing the similarities and differences between the two.

4.1.3 Situational method.

Ellis^[14] said that teaching activities that fail to provide learners with natural communication opportunities will deprive learner of the main source of language material, thus preventing acquisition. Language learners use language to participate in social communication activities and acquire language and cultural knowledge, which in turn become the material for individual mental activities. Therefore, the best way to learn foreign culture is through scene simulation. Students can experience the English context in the role-playing and improve their English communicative ability. For instance, in the classroom, students can simulate real-life scenes through greetings, inquiring, chatting, thanking, apology, telephone calls and such scenario simulation. This can cultivate students' English language habits and language standards. At the same time, teachers should participate in students, give guidance, timely comment and correct the mistakes of students. "If students say something that is correct in linguistic form but unsuitable in their roles and situations, teachers should point out the mistakes. And gradually, students' sensitiveness of culture will be enhanced^[15]." Students can learn from it, improve their English communicative ability, and feel the knowledge of English culture. In addition, scaffolding instruction

points out the importance of evaluation. After each group finishes the scene simulation, teacher can invite several students to comment on the performance of group members or other groups, or make comments himself. This can help students understand their strengths and weaknesses and make improvements.

This kind of real-life situation simulation not only helps students better understand the language material but also improves their cultural awareness and cross-cultural communication skills. The benefits of creating real-life situations in teaching are manifold. It enables students to learn in a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere, reducing learning anxiety and enhancing motivation. At the same time, it also helps students closely integrate the knowledge learned with real life, improving the practicality and sustainability of learning. Through this approach, students can not only learn knowledge from books but also develop the ability to solve real-world problems, laying a solid language foundation for their future work and life.

In a nutshell, creating real-life situations in English teaching is an effective teaching method. It provides students with a language learning environment close to reality, helping them to better master and apply English, and lays a solid foundation for their future communication and career development.

4.2 Using Realistic Reading Materials

The purpose of learning a language is to communication, namely the use of language in the authentic language environment. Only by providing real language and cultural background knowledge can students improve their language and communicative competence in reading. Besides, the first step in the scaffolding instruction is to provide students with the materials they need to build the scaffold. Therefore, it is very necessary for teachers to select authentic reading materials before teaching reading classes.

Using realistic English materials can help students better understand how the language is used in real situations, thereby improving their reading comprehension. These materials usually contain a wealth of vocabulary, grammatical structure and cultural background, which will help students improve their overall English level. By reading these materials, students are not only able to learn new words and phrases, but also to understand the characteristics of texts in different topics and genres, thereby enhancing their critical thinking and analytical skills. In addition, authentic English materials can also stimulate students' interest in learning, as these materials are often closely related to students' life experiences and interests. For example, students might read articles about sports, music, technology, or pop culture that interest them. This correlation can not only improve students' motivation to read, but also help them apply their language knowledge to real life.

Reading material should be close to real life. Teachers can search for English advertisements, movie and TV lines, English lyrics and so on to teach students how to use real language in specific scenes. Besides, "it's acknowledged that literature is a reflection of the social, political, cultural development of the society ^[16]." From this point of view, teachers can select suitable articles from literary works and help students dig into their cultural connotations. This not only helps to provide authentic and realistic materials for students, but also improves students' literary accomplishment.

4.3 Selecting Suitable Content for Students' Development Needs

Attitude affects students' learning. As is discussed above, students get tired of learning when the content is easy or beyond their understanding level. Therefore, the content suitable for students' development level should be selected when teaching cultural knowledge. That is to say, in the process of reading teaching, teachers must understand the current level of students and use it to improve students' English reading level. For example, teachers can ask questions in class or ask students to do test papers to get to know students' current level.

Besides, interest affects students' attitude towards learning. "Students will be more motivated to learn when learning content and activities center on examples from popular culture ^[17]." Therefore, teachers should choose a variety of topics that students are interested in, such as Greek mythology, National Basketball Association, superheroes and so on. From this aspects, the easiest and most direct way to introduce culture into English teaching is through English movies. The language, culture and emotion conveyed in movies can arouse students' interest in English learning, so as to better improve the classroom teaching effect and greatly improve students' learning efficiency. At the same time, compared with the limited topics in textbooks, movies have various themes, so teachers can choose appropriate movies according to the content to be taught. For example, when explaining western discrimination against black people, teachers can choose *Green Book*, *The Blind Side*, *Hidden Figures* and other movies.

This can not only stimulate interest in learning, but also let students through the intuitive picture of the knowledge have a deep impression.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, culture and language are inseparable and cultural background knowledge is very important to improve students' reading ability. Based on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory, this paper proposes some effective ways for English teachers to introduce culture into reading class. First, by making use of various ways, teacher can expand students' knowledge about foreign culture. Second, authentic reading materials should be provided to students. Third, the selected cultural knowledge should meet the development needs of students. These can effectively improve the reading ability of middle school students.

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