On Cultural Stereotype and Its Implications for English Teaching

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Abstract. Cultural stereotype is the over-generalization of cultural differences. And it is one thinking mode which ignores the differences in the group. There must be false in stereotype, but it is necessary to establish culture stereotype in cultural teaching. The more accurate cultural stereotype is, the more accurate we predict the other’s behaviors, the more successful the intercultural communication is. We should not only establish cultural stereotype but also be brave enough to break it. We should also know why it is so as well as what it is, and take its possible changes in the future into account.

Introduction

In recent years, cultural differences have been paid more and more attention in linguistics and language teaching. More people realize that the different cultural orientations, life styles, values, thinking modes, time orientations, social norms and so on are main reasons for inter-cultural communication failure. The study on cultural differences cannot avoid generalization of cultural differences which is related to cultural stereotype.

The Definition of Cultural Stereotype

The concept of stereotype was first put forward by Walter Lippmann (1922) [1,2]. It refers to the oversimplified opinion of one group towards the other. According to Ron Scollon and Suzanne Wong Scollon (2000), stereotype is one thinking mode which ignores differences in the group [3]. When the two cultural groups are regarded completely different and contradictory, cultural stereotype occurs. The scholars made a lot of stereotype classifications about east and west cultures. For example, Chinese are group-oriented whereas Americans are individual-oriented; Chinese belong to emotion type whereas Americans belong to instrument type.

The black-white classification of cultural stereotype is in essence over-simplified, over-generalized and one-dimensional. It emphasizes cultural generality, but ignores cultural particularity and it exaggerates group differences but ignores individual differences. The typical generalization of cultural stereotype is prone to overgeneralization. In addition, cultural stereotype has one big drawback, that is, it is closely related to ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is that one individual takes his group/race as the center, building up his group/race and belittling another group/race. People often take it for granted that the values, social standards, language rules, etc. of their own group/race are more authentic and truer. The above drawback may help or strengthen the contradiction of different cultures, and causes communication failure. Therefore, people usually hold a negative attitude towards cultural stereotype. Is it necessary to establish it in cultural teaching? The answer is yes.
The Necessities for Establishment of Cultural Stereotype

Lippmann took stereotype as a passive concept at first and thought it is false and irrational. But later psychologists more and more take it as a neutral concept. Stereotype is a universal and unavoidable cognitive mode for human beings. The world is so sophisticated and disorderly that it must be simplified and generalized into an orderly framework to better understand all kinds of phenomena. Ron Scollon and Suzanne Wong Scollon (2000) [3] also point out that in the cross-cultural communication field, anthropologists, social linguists, scholars in communication and foreign language teachers all believe that there are differences between people and the differences inevitably lead to stereotype thinking. If we establish cultural stereotype as accurate as possible, communication failure can be avoided in the most degree, otherwise we will take our cultural maxim as the standard to communicate with others. The more accurate we predict to the other’s behaviors, the more successful the intercultural communication is.

Take the difference between English and Chinese discourse structures as an example. In our English teaching, we find Chinese students’ paragraph organization lacks topic sentence and if any, it seldom appears at the beginning of the paragraph, thus a good composition to us Chinese is usually unnatural to foreigners. If we help students establish the cultural stereotype about discourse structure, they can grasp this writing skill, and will not apply Chinese discourse mode to English writing mechanically. When writing or having a talk, a Chinese usually retain the main idea or key problem to the last or just imply it while a westerner is used to coming straight to the point. We sum up the Chinese discourse structure as a topic-delaying inductive one and the English discourse structure as a topic-first deductive one. By establishing such cultural stereotype, students will write less chinglish composition and commit less communication mistakes.

The Establishment of Cultural Stereotype

From the above discussion, we can see that although culture stereotype has its drawbacks, we must establish it. In fact, the fault does not lie in cultural stereotype but our biased view about it. How to establish cultural stereotype?

First, we should hold a correct attitude towards paradox of intercultural communication – the contradiction brought out by cultural stereotype. On one hand, cultural stereotype helps people in different cultures understand each better. On the other hand, it makes man-made barriers to prevent communication and understanding. Just as Gao Yihong (2000) [4] points out cultural stereotype has the mission of building a bridge for cultural exchanges, and at the same time, it has the danger of building a wall to separate cultures. Therefore, in cultural teaching, we should not only establish cultural stereotype but also challenge it.

Second, when establishing cultural stereotype, we should help students know about why it is so as well as what it is [5]. By doing so, students can know the exception to cultural stereotype and its negative influence effectively. We again take the different discourse structures in Chinese and English as an example to illustrate this point. The difference between Chinese and English discourse structure can be explained by the different thinking modes-curve thinking mode of Chinese and linear thinking mode of westerners. The difference can also be explained by different cultural orientations. Chinese culture is of other-oriented culture. The speaker or writer puts himself on the subordinate position and take inductive discourse structure to give the listener or reader a certain freedom and show his respect and politeness. The west culture centers on individualism and orients
parallel and equal relationship, thus they take the deductive discourse structure to show the equality and identity. Therefore, Chinese can also take the deductive discourse structure when speaker and listener are in equal position and an American can take inductive discourse structure when he asks for money from friends or ask friends to do a difficult task.

Lastly, we should take the developing view to establish cultural stereotype. Anything is developing, including cultural stereotype. There is no unchangeable stereotype [6]. For example, we had no enough communication with other countries before the reform. When we mentioned the capitalist countries, we believed that they valued money above everything else, were indifferent, advocated sex liberation and sex freedom and the poor people lived in extreme misery. In 1980s, we worshipped the west blindly, believing everything in the west was good, there appeared the fever of going abroad. At present, our view is heading for objectivity. The foreigners have a lot in common with us. They also attach much importance to marriage and affection.

**Implications for English Teaching**

Teachers are not just professionals but also human beings with their own experiences and histories through which they may have acquired prejudices and stereotypes about other cultures. Learners often rem ember a brief remark in the classroom for many years afterwards, though teachers are not always conscious of how they express their acquired stereotypes.

These remarks may be negative or positive. Some teachers are positively prejudiced about the countries where their target language is spoken, and wish to pass this enthusiasm on to their leaners. This might be seen as the role of the teacher but it is debatable whether teachers should try to influence attitudes or not. So, this is one of the first issues teachers need to think about. The response to this problem may be different from individual to individual according to their education backgrounds. Some teachers believe that they should not attempt to influence learners’ attitudes towards other countries and in fact should be careful only to deal with the cognitive dimension of learning. Other teachers may feel that it is part of their pedagogical responsibility to influence attitudes.

Although it was suggested that teachers should attempt to break through learners’ stereotypes and prejudices, there may be a need to include stereotypes in the materials so that the apparent usefulness of stereotypes can be addressed. Stereotypes operate on a different level to other kinds of knowledge: they simplify and they allow people to act quickly. People can make judgments and act upon them quickly if they use stereotypes whatever the context, not just in connection with other countries. This makes them attractive but deceptive. Knowledge of a more differentiated and accurate kind depends on recognizing the variation in people, but this requires more effort and is easily avoided.

This is by no means to say that we can do without any stereotypes at all in foreign language teaching—after all identities are often defined in stereotypes, even by people defining themselves. The way one nation sees another is at least partly dependent on how it thinks about itself. Stereotypes are there to be challenged, for this is the only way to develop an individual who is ready to discover the essence of others in members of other cultures and understand the complexity they embody.
On the other hand, it is inevitable and proper that learners have views on other cultures and the values, beliefs and behaviors they embody. The question for teachers is how they respond to learners' views. Do they take a neutral position? Do they take a clear and explicit position in favor of the values in other cultures which their learners may reject? Do they allow learners' views to go unchallenged?

Teachers should first challenge leaners to make explicit the basis on which they make judgements about others, and to encourage them to be aware of the culturally-determined nature of their basis for making judgments. This is not the same as challenging and criticizing learners' beliefs and basis for judgment about other cultures. It is simply an encouragement to them to see how others might consider their position, whether it is religious, secular, ethical, philosophical or pragmatic.

Teachers cannot be neutral on cultural issues since they respond to other cultures human beings and not just as language. They need; teachers. as therefore to consider how their own stereotypes and prejudices may influence their teaching subconsciously, and what the effects of this may be on learners. They also need to reflect upon how they respond to and challenge their learners’ prejudices not only as teachers but also as human beings subconsciously influenced by their experience of otherness.

Conclusion

It is necessary to establish cultural stereotype in foreign language teaching although it has some limits, in order to avoid communication failure, we should not only establish cultural stereotype but also be brave enough to break it, and take its future changes into consideration.

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