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Tell Stories of Taishan Culture - An Empirical Study of Content-Based Instructions

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Abstract

Content-based Instructions (shortened as CBI) is an effective way of teaching and learning a foreign or second language especially in non-English spoken or bilingual English environments. We made tentative applications of CBI to our Chinese Culture subject in English language class and make certain progress since 2012. However from the former studies we found that it should be paid more attention in further studies about the balance between culture and language. What is more, less attention should be paid to culture in general, whereas, more attention in specific. So this paper is about a new objective: To apply Taishan culture into the CBI construction so as to improve students' Taishan culture understanding and expression abilities and English language abilities. Our method is applying Six-T approach, and the result has strong points and weak points, with the former highlighted. The conclusion is that it is quite helpful to apply CBI into teaching of one's own specific culture, and improve language skills accordingly.

Keywords

1. Introduction

As a subject in the English major in our university (when English is treated as a foreign language or second language), the English version Chinese Culture has been the concern of our program on the basis of Content-based Instructions (CBI) for four years since 2012. We made certain progress and improved the students' abilities in studying and expressing Chinese culture as well as in English language speaking and writing abilities.

1.1. Background

Last semester we aimed to put Taishan Cultural contents under the frame of Chinese Culture so as to make the culture closer to us students as our university just locates at the foot of Taishan. Before doing so we made a questionnaire to know how much students know about Taishan and her culture, simultaneously, we asked if students had the interest to know something about Taishan culture and their potential subjective intentions to improve the abilities in English language abilities since they are majoring in English language. The result is that students were very interested in what we were planning to do. According to the questionnaire, the majority of the students showed their intentions to express Taishan culture in English, while more than 65% worried about their ability esp. English speaking and writing abilities. So we tried to apply the CBI program into the class by choosing the typical Taishan culture as the content and guide students to express the cultures in English so as to improve their speaking and writing abilities fundamentally.

1.2. CBI

CBI is the shorten form of content-based instructions which originated in the 20th century Canada, as an "immersion" method of language teaching in the 60s, (GU) [1] and later in the middle of 70s in British LAC program (CHANG) [2].

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From then on CBI became populated in foreign or second languages teachings for immigrants in USA and Canada. In China, WANG [3] first analyzed the possibility of applying CBI into foreign language teaching in the year 1994. It was in the 21st century that CBI began to be applied into English teaching in the areas such as Agriculture (CAO) [4] and Nursery (GAO) [5] etc. to foster students' foreign language abilities on the basis of their major.

Brinton et al. [6] defined CBI as "the concurrent study of language and subject matter, with the form and sequence of language presentation dictated by content material". Actually, CBI has taken many forms since there were different levels of immersions. Met [7] stated that "a continuum of content and language integration" that ranges from the most content-driven to the most language-driven, with the total immersion in the former and partial immersion in the latter. Fredricka L. Stoller and William Grabe [8] has generalized eight approaches to CBI, and further more they proposed that all the approaches were theme based, "A futher commodity (at least implicitly) among many of the approaches discussed above, and a central notion in the Six-T's Approach is that all CBI is fundamentally theme-based (cf. Briton [9, 10]) " So they outlined six-T Approach to analyze the CBI classroom.

1.3. Taishan and Her Culture

Taishan is the most sacred and revered mountain in China. For centuries in history, she was regarded as the patriarch of five famous mountains. According to traditional Chinese belief, east is the holiest place where life springs. Taishan was the highest mountain in the east, so naturally she was chosen as the most ideal and honorable mountain for respect. In dynasties, emperors of great achievements would hold ceremonies to pray to the God in heaven on the peak and pay respect to the dead at the foot of the mountain. The ceremony was called Feng and Shan. Besides, each year in Lunar month February, March and April, ordinary people formed the custom of worshipping Goddess of Taishan--- Bixia Yuanjun, as she was believed to protect the safety of the people, family and the country. What's more, her essential role was of being able to promise a family a male child as traditional Chinese held that males were the inheritance of a family. Moreover, many poets and literati came to visit Taishan to eulogize the mountain and ascend the mountain to express their emotions. All in all, Taishan is such a great mountain with so ancient history and so prestigious honor and we are so close to her, that to introduce the culture to the world in English would be very interesting. [11, 12]

2. Questions Proposed

What we are going to do in our CBI class is to combine the content of Taishan culture and English language. The purpose is to foster students' language abilities on the basis of Taishan culture contents. But the question is the balance between the culture content and English language. That is: the class is more content-driven or more language-driven?

Another question is: different from the traditional way of teaching English in the second language classroom, can CBI class achieve the purpose of cultivating students' autonomous study interests or abilities?

With the questions concerned, we formulated a proposal by following the steps of Six-T (Enright and McCloskey [13]; Meinbach, Rothlein, & Fredericks [14]; etc.): Themes, Texts, Topics, Threads, Tasks, and Transitions.

2.1. Topics are Selected as the Follows

History of the mountain: History derived from the ancient history of Yao Shun period up to the present.

Mythology of the mountain: Shigandang (the stone from Taishan which said to be a warrior protecting the safety of people, and legends about him to be a man who saved the emperor's life in traditional Chinese history); Binglingwang (The King named Bingling) etc.

Gods and Goddesses: God of Taishan; Bixia Yuanjun (Goddess of Taishan) etc.

Religious beliefs: Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism

Spirits of the mountain: pilgrimage of different people (common people including the young, the old, female, male etc.; literati such as poets, calligrapher etc.; emperors and other officials etc.)

Buildings: Dai Temple Pagodas Stone Inscriptions; ancient buildings such as Hall of Tiankuang; Pagodas; Pavilions; Tablets and so on.

Stories or legends of Historical Relics: wudafusong (a famous pine tree which once protected the First Emperor of Qin Dynasty---Qinshihuang); wanxianlou (a building holds ten-thousand fairies); zhangrenfeng (The Father-in-law Peak) etc.

2.2. Process

Texts are seriously selected from works of typical English materials written by foreign scholars or professors in order to make typical English environment.

Then, students were grouped into different teams to discuss the topics and prepare their presentations to introduce their topics and interpretations of the topics after class as tasks or assignments. And in class, a representative of each group would generate their ideas (the theme) and give the presentation.

2.3. Assessment

The assessment of the result of the class is multidimensional: the 30%usual participation + 60%the final score + bonus. The usual participation is based on the each assignment after each topics discussed. The final score is based on the final introduction of a particular culture. And the final score is assessed by average score of three teachers. And bonus is always given to those students who did good job in preparation and presentation.

Procedures

Before each class, students did amount of preparations such as looking for information associated with certain topics, typical English expressions, and PPT displays etc with their team members. And in class, they were free to express their opinions in culture contents, and teachers were guiding and explaining some cultural misunderstandings. Usually discussions and debates would arise to further the insights into certain topics. And this would require students to research more and think more to the related subjects such as history or art, so that there would be research reports as a result. Teachers in class would be guiding or leading, but not teaching. This provided students a better English-immerging environment, although the major was more than a bilingual one. After each class, there were assignments concerning more topics for students to research and prepare. Questions and problems would be discussed in our QQ group or among team members, and teachers would be their helper when necessary.

2.4. More About the Result

At the beginning of semester, the procedure carried on very slowly, and then in the middle much more quickly, at last quite smoothly and successfully. What is more interesting is that we did a lot of comparison between English and Chinese culture understandings in certain topics such as architecture. We looked into the reasons of the misunderstandings or gaps in different cultures, so that more topics can be further into cross-cultural analysis. This is a further study later in our CBI courses.

3. Conclusions

3.1. Strong Points

Generally, the CBI practice of a semester has provided students good opportunities to be familiar with Taishan culture. They had great interest to research, to interview and to find out evidences and details of the culture both in English and Chinese. Their initiative of learning was totally improved. As to language abilities, students have formed the habit of speaking English in class, which is much better than before. Several students became interested in culture written in English original books, which was a great improvement as they felt dull before. Another point is that when talking about certain topics, such as architecture, we advised students to visit Dai Temple or Taishan to have a close study of the buildings so that they were learning by seeing. All in all, students benefited a lot in culture and language learning.

As to teachers in CBI construction, this is a new research area which gives us a retrospection to our local culture and a further thinking to connect it with the Chinese culture as a frame. Therefore, more close attention was paid to Taishan culture and above all the interpretation and introduction of the culture is more indispensable. A further study is that CBI research has also improved teachers' motive drive in translating or transferring the culture to the world so that intercultural communication can be narrowed down to definite regions, such as Taishan. This regional culture propagating will be our keen focus later besides classroom teaching and learning of a foreign language.

3.2. Weak Points

The class is more content-driven or more language-driven?

As in most CBI classes, the question of the balance between content and language is always the major concern. Because English is our foreign language, the environment is not so English-like, although it is our major. In fact, it is more bilingual in teaching and learning English language. Thus when Taishan culture was introduced, students would have to know more about the culture in Chinese then they could understand what the English content was about. And in class, teachers would have to handle the balance of content and language as our main purpose is to practice our language abilities but not the content. So our class is more language-driven, although more time was spent to find out contents. As the dilemma being, both teachers and students have to be aware that we need to focus on language abilities, especially reading and speaking.

Another problem is the assessment standard. How to make the score more professional and acceptable, is always our concern, even we are trying our best. More scientific norms to evaluate are necessary for CBI class assessment. These norms should include the language abilities as well as the preparation steps such as the contents available and self-study abilities in creativity and innovation.

3.3. Suggestions

So from the above, the suggestion for participants is to make further studies in cross-cultural discussions. The suggestion for the CBI is to form a scientific and reasonable assessment system. The suggestion for the students is to do more and efficient research work in culture.

3.4. Generalization

From our CBI empirical study in Taishan culture, we have made some progress in language learning compared with former studies in CBI. And we have found our shortcomings in both language and culture studies. We also found our further study interests in cross-cultural analysis in CBI construction. And we also proposed suggestions for better improvement in CBI.

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