

A Study on Cross-cultural Barriers in Reading of English

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I. Introduction

Decoding and comprehension are the two main tasks for reading: In English learning, the elements, which influence the reading are linguistic knowledge, cultural background knowledge, language skills, and intelligent elements (the abilities of thought such as motivation, purpose, emotion and control). Mastering linguistic knowledge of phonetics, vocabulary and grammar is helpful to decode the word symbols. However, in the process of reading, many Chinese students already possess the above knowledge, but they still cannot comprehend the texts completely, so understanding the cultural content of what one reads is a crucial factor in reading comprehension. Because language is the carrier of culture, people's words and deeds reflect certain cultural connotation consciously or unconsciously. Every social communication possesses its own certain thought pattern, value, custom, and way of life. For "The influence of background to comprehension is larger than language knowledge." (Ma, 1995). Many studies indicate that without sufficient background knowledge of social culture, the readers cannot comprehend the deep meaning of texts. This paper will examine the cross-cultural difficulties in the process of English reading in three aspects: what the main difficulties are in reading, why these difficulties exist and how to reduce and eliminate them to achieve the exact comprehension.

The paper, from the perspective of cross-cultural communication, tries to analyze the role of cultural knowledge in reading comprehension, generalizes the comprehension barriers Chinese students meet in the comprehension process of English reading and explains the relationship between the barriers and language. The paper then analyzes the internal causes of the barriers. And lastly, it brings forth approaches and methods for eliminating the barriers.

I. The Role of Cultural Knowledge in Reading Comprehension

Along with the development of Applied Linguistics and Psycholinguistics, the American scholar, Goodman (1982) negated the traditional reading theory and posed a "psycholinguistic reading model", which considers that reading is not the process of passive decoding and reading literally any more. Rather it is the process of active "guessing – confirming" and interaction between the readers and the reading contents.

Reading comprehension is a complex process of the interaction between the writer's language and the readers' prior background knowledge or memory schemata. "Every stage of comprehension involves reader's background knowledge of culture (Anderson, 1997, 14:369)." Phillips (1984) pointed out: "a successful reading of any passage, depends upon a combination of linguistic knowledge, cognitive skill and general experience and knowledge of the world, whether acquired by experience or by learning, influence greatly the reading comprehension process, for the more the reader brings to the text, the more is taken away". Indeed, in the reading comprehension process, readers' linguistic element is very important, but sometimes we cannot read behind the lines except

by the help of background knowledge of culture, because the meanings of words are acquired in a certain circumstance of culture. Therefore, if a Chinese student does not know about the English culture, such as histories, values, mode of thinking, customs, religion and life style, he may fail to understand the exact meaning of the texts.

III. The Cultural Background Knowledge of and the Reading Comprehension of English.

For a long time, in China, English teaching has just focused on the language forms (such as phonetics, vocabulary and grammar) and ignored the effect of background knowledge of culture. As the carrier of culture, the cultural background of language is rather extensive. Lacking of the necessary cultural background may hinder people from comprehending language. For instance, when the President Reagan took up his post, an American told a Chinese teacher: "*the United States has gone from peanuts to popcorn.*" The syntax of this sentence is very simple. However, the Chinese teacher did not understand the sentence at that time until her friend explained to her that former president Jimmy Carter owned a big peanut farm while the present president Reagan is an actor and people eat popcorn while they watch TV. She suddenly realized the real humorous meaning of this sentence. From this case, we can see that to comprehend the language, not only depends on the comprehension of vocabulary and grammatical structures, but also depends on the comprehension of relevant background knowledge of culture. The differences of cross-cultural background in reading comprehension of English can be classified as the following aspects.

3.1 Historical Culture

Historical culture refers to the culture that is formed by the developing process of certain history and social heritage which varies between nations at often times. In the process of cross-cultural reading, we often meet the comprehension barriers that are caused by such differences of historical cultures. For example: *At a science museum you can feel your hair stand on end as harmless electricity passes through your body.* The phrase *one's hair stands on end* is an idiom, from a criminal's expression. In 1825, an Englishman named Probert was sentenced to death by hanging for stealing horses. While waiting for his execution at the gallows, Probert was extremely scared, the result of which made his hair stand straight up. Therefore, in English, *one's hair stands on end* means fear. The writer uses this idiom to emphasize that the museum is very weird and strange. However, if Chinese students do not know this idiom, they may fail to understand its idiomatic meaning over and above the direct meaning..

3.2 Regional Culture

Regional culture, here, refers to the culture that can be shaped by natural conditions and geographical environment of an area. These effects on culture may lend themselves to creating comprehension barriers to Chinese students of English reading. For example, (1) *Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art lovelier and more temperate.* This poem is a part of Shakespeare's sonnet 18. He compared the lover to a summer's day, which is difficult for Chinese students to understand. Only knowing some relevant geographical knowledge, can they get real understanding of this sonnet. As Britain is a high latitude country, the average summer temperature is about 20 degrees and the daytime is very long, from about 4 o'clock in the morning to about 10 o'clock at

night. Therefore, the summer in Britain is pleasantly cool and delightful. It is obviously different from the hot summer of most regions in China, especially, in south China, where the hot summer is very hard to endure and causes people to feel unhappy. (2) British poet Shelley's poem "*Ode to the West Wind*" compares the west wind to the warm and delightful wind that brings forth spring. However, to Chinese people, *the west wind not only means cold* but also means *declining and depressed*.

3.3 Social Culture

Language is an important component of culture, the existence and development of language are influenced by society, and the social phenomenon and vocabulary of a certain historical periods reflect the objective history of society. Such vocabulary may confuse foreign readers. For instance, when American President Nixon was in his second term of office, *Watergate* became a well-established and common term. It stands for a political scandal in the Nixon era associated with burglarizing an office of the Democrat Party located at the Watergate Hotel. in Washington. Elements within the Nixon administration created a large number of euphemisms to hide the scandal. For example, *intelligence gathering* replaces *eavesdropping*, *plumber* for *eavesdropper*. Chinese students may have difficulty in understanding these words.

3.4 Religious Culture

Religious culture is an important component in the lives of many human beings. It refers to the culture that is formed by religious belief of nation and can be embodied in the cultural differences of taboo of different nations. Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism are three main religions of China, which deeply influence Chinese people. On the contrary, many people living in European based and/or founded cultures believe in Christianity –or have been seriously influenced by Christian values. They believe that a single God created and organized the world. Because of differences of religious culture, Chinese students can misunderstand English reading., at times. For example, a sentence in the article "*Why Measure Life in Heartbeats*" is that *I believe, because of my religious faith, that I shall "return to father" in an after life that is beyond description*. Many Chinese readers comprehend *an after life* in the sentences as *the next life*. The reason of this misunderstanding is the differences of the two religious cultures. The *next life* is the term of oriental Buddhism, which refers to the samsara. On the contrary, Christianity does not have this concept, considering that after the death of human being, his soul will stay in Heaven or Hell and will not disappear. Therefore, they do not have the saying of *the next life*. So according to its religious background, *an after life* refers to *the time after people's death*.

Again, there is a need to emphasize cultural differences as being potentially extensive and complex. In the process of English reading, at times, we should focus on the understanding of cultural background to get a deeper understanding of the whole text

IV. Cultural Barriers in Relation to the language

In English reading, cultural barriers and language cannot be separated. Language is a carrier, which not only carries the information of language, but also carries the information of culture.. Every kind of language is created and developed in a certain historical circumstance of society. Therefore, "Language reflects the feature of nation. It contains not only the historical cultural

background of this nation, but also the view of life, the way of life and the way of thought of this nation (Xiao, 1997:159)". The result of the reflection can be seen in different aspects of a language system: vocabulary, sentences (including proverb and slang) and texts (including style and rhetoric).

4.1 Vocabulary

As the basic element of language, vocabulary is the backbone of the whole language system. It certainly reflects the differences of culture most obviously and extensively. On the one hand, some English words can have their equivalents in Chinese, so during the process of reading, readers from different cultures may not experience culturally related comprehension barriers. However, there may be many words in one culture, for which the equivalents can not be found in other cultures; in other words, "vocabulary vacancy". On the other hand, although we can find the equivalent word, the meaning extent of a word and the connotation of culture are not complete equivalent between different cultures. The differences of culture in vocabulary can be reflected in the following:

For example, (1) In English, *privacy* means *state of being away from others, alone and undisturbed* while it usually refers to *personal secrets and the secrets and unusual behaviors of personal life* in Chinese. (2) *Exploitation* means *using or developing fully so as to get profit* in English while in Chinese, it usually means *use selfishly and unfairly for one's own advantage or profit*.

Secondly, many English words can find the equivalents in Chinese while the cultural connotations of them are different. Three aspects will be concerned: the quantity of the equivalents, the meaning extent of the equivalents and the cultural association of the equivalents.

(1) The numbers of equivalents of English and Chinese are not always the same. For example, the word *cousin* in Chinese can have a different meaning. A complete translation of *Biaome* could be a sister younger than me and on my mother's side.

(2) There is one equivalent word in Chinese to an English word, but the meaning extent of two words are not exactly the same. One reason may be is that the meaning extent of English vocabulary is larger than that of Chinese vocabulary. For instance, *morning* in English refers to time section from midnight (zero hour) to twelve o'clock in twenty-four hours' system, but in Chinese, *morning* refers to the time section from dawn to noon. Another situation is that the meaning extent of English vocabulary is smaller than that of Chinese vocabulary. For instance, in English culture, *family* usually refers to *the family of two generations including parents and children*, even refers to *the family of a couple, which does not want children*. However, in Chinese, the *family* refers to *the family of three generations including grandparents, parents and children*; sometimes it even refers to *the family of four generations*.

(3) English words can find the equivalent in Chinese but these two kinds of cultures give each word different cultural association within society. For example, *the red color*, in English culture, *red stands for danger*; but in Chinese, *red for happiness, fortune and authority*. In English culture, *13* is an unlucky number. On the contrary, in Chinese, *13* is a lucky number, while *4* is an unlucky number, for *4* has the same pronunciation of Chinese *Si* (means death).

4.2 Sentences

Cross-cultural barriers not only exist in the abundant vocabulary, but also exist in the aspect of sentences (including proverb and slang). Although the word and its meaning are almost the same, the sentence that is composed of the vocabulary expresses different meaning. This is very hard for Chinese students to understand. For example,

He is a professional.

She is a professional.

From the angle of language, the two sentences above describe a person who is engaged in a kind of specific profession. Actually, from the perspectives of region, sex, profession and society, the first sentence means that *he is a professional boxer*; but the later may mean that *she is a prostitute*.

Chinese students often meet comprehension barriers while reading English proverbs because the proverbs contain abundant connotations of culture. For instance,

An Englishman's home is his castle.

A woman, a dog and a walnut tree, the more you beat them, the better they be. In the first proverb, according to English culture, everyone's home is sacred and cannot be infringed. In ancient Britain, even the police could not enter one's house to make an arrest. In the second proverb, we know that in ancient Britain, a woman's status was very low, such that they were considered to be tractable just like a dog. But how the walnut tree be such an integrated part of this proverb? It is because there was a superstition in ancient Britain. People considered that if they beat the trunk of the walnut tree in spring, the tree would bear many more walnuts in that year.

Slang is also a component of culture, which may create barriers to understanding reading. Here is a conversation demonstrative of some these challenges which a Chinese reader might have with dealing with English slang.

A: Will you really come?

B: You kill me.

It is very hard for Chinese students to understand this conversation, because the sentence of B is slang. It means (*If I won't come, you kill me.*) In other words, *I will come certainly.*

4.3 Texts

Texts are another aspect of cultural phenomenon. There are many differences between the texts of English and Chinese. Firstly, in English, as texts are influenced by thought patterns, there are logic and coherence relationships between the sentences and paragraphs, such as the sentences that express time relationship, space relationship, comparison and diversion, inference and conclusion. Secondly, language forms (including the using of repeat, synonym and the parallel structures), the means of connection (such as substitution, ellipsis and anaphora) and logic arrangement combine together to influence the structures of texts, and these three aspects are different from Chinese. For example,

Many years ago, there was an old woman. She did not like children at all, but she loved cats. She had black cats and white cats. She had mother cats and baby cats, so the children all came to her house. They came to play with the cats. More and more cats came to the old woman's house. Soon there were too many cats. The old woman could not feed them all. Then she had an idea. "The children love my cats," she thought, so she gave each child a cat. Then she was happy. And the children were happy, and the cats were happy, too, because they each had a home. (Helen Fritch)

The texts of English emphasize inflexion. We can see the text above is connected by form. (1) repetition: woman, children, cats. (2) anaphora relationship: *she, her - woman; they - children; they, them - cats.* (3) logic relationship: *but, so, then, and.* On the contrary, Chinese focuses on parataxis, the text is connected by the meaning.

In the aspect of rhetoric, there are great differences between English and Chinese. Take metaphor for examples, (1) *to spend money like water*; in English, people use *water* to compare that someone spends money freely. On the contrary, in Chinese, people use *to spend money like soil* to

express the same meaning. (2) *to live a dog's life* in English, while in Chinese *to live a pig's and dog's life* is used to express that someone has a hard life..

From what has been discussed above, cross-cultural barriers conceal many aspects of language. Understanding the social culture of English language is helpful for comprehending English texts. The more Chinese students understand English culture, the less comprehension barriers they will meet in English reading.

V. The Internal Causes of the Cross-cultural Barriers

Besides the external causes including reader's vocabulary and the knowledge of grammar and cross-cultural background, this paper will also examine the internal causes. This includes thought pattern and value as the two most essential ones.

5.1 Thought Patterns

Every foreign language learners naturally and easily apply their habits of mother language to foreign language mechanically. Sometimes it works but sometimes it does not, because of the differences between mother language and foreign language. The habits here refer to the thought patterns. The differences of thought patterns are the main reason of causing cross-cultural barriers.

5.1.1. Linear Thought and Indirect Thought

People from so called English speaking and culture based countries prefer linear thought. They express their thought straightforward and they are used to writing the first sentence as the topic sentence, and then supplying materials to support it .On the contrary, Chinese nationals prefers indirect thought, which is similar to gyre. They are used to describing the external environment first and pointing out the topic at last. These different thought patterns influence the structure of the text. English texts emphasize that the whole paragraph must be a complete unit, the topic sentence should be pointed out at first, and then the meaning of the text should be connected in a certain orderly and logically, straight line manner.

5.1.2. Formal Logic Thought and Dialectical Thought

English emphasizes formal logic thought, for example, the structure of sentence is inflexion. In other words, they use every kind of connecting approaches to complete the grammatical form, while the Chinese focuses on dialectical thought, the expressive form of language is guided by meaning, and the sentence is loose. These two different thought patterns between English and Chinese influence the connection of the text, which we have been discussed in Section IV4.3.

5.2. Values

Some experts considered that in the view of philosophy, value is a very common concept. It includes economy, politics, morality, art, religion, science, culture and even the common connotation and essence of gains and losses, kindness and evil, beauty and ugliness, pros and cons in every field of daily life.

Different cultures have different values. There are many differences of value concepts between English and Chinese culturally based countries. These differences cause varied thought patterns, standards of morality and behaviors.

5.2.1. Individualism and Collectivism

Individualism is the idea that the rights and freedom of the individual are the most important in the society. The interests of the individual are considered to be more important than the interests of the group. It is the outcome of historical development and traditional culture of the West. On the contrary, Chinese emphasize collectivism. The interests of the collectivism are considered to be more important than the interest of the individual. They cherish the complete and stable family,

maintain harmony and avoid confrontations. Individualism is a legal right and freedom in English culture, which cannot be infringed by others. So, there are plentiful English words contain the prefix of *ego* and *self*, such as *ego analysis*, *egocentric*, *ego ideal*, *egoism*, *egoist*, *ego psychology*; *self-control*, *self-confidence*, *self-esteem*, *self-made*, *self-reliance*, *self-respect*.

5.2.2. Independence and Dependence

Independence is an important feature of the western culture. The tradition and spirit of self-dependence influence the young generation. The educational patterns and principles of society, school and family in every aspect influence their views of life continuously. Generally speaking, the youth ages from 18 to 21 tend to solve their problems by themselves both in economy and emotion, for they consider that depending on parents is ashamed of. Making friends, marriage or other personal affairs are their own businesses, and they need not get their parents' permission. At the same time, parents do not interfere with their children's privacy, including marriage, work and hobby. On the contrary, in China, the elder generation always tells the younger generation what they should do and what they should not do. Before making a decision, the younger generation often asks for their parents for opinions. The younger generation depends on their parents and other relatives to gain opportunity, such as finding a good job.

VI. Some possible ways to Eliminate the Difficulties in Reading

As language and culture combine together, Chinese students meet cross-cultural barriers of every aspect in the process of English reading. Obviously, fundamental to text comprehension is the reader's ability to master the language knowledge and understand the culture of the language. The improvement of this ability is the main approach for reducing and even eliminating the cross-cultural barriers in the process of reading. Here are some suggestions about how to deal with the difficulties in reading.

6.1 To Improve English Proficiency and Reading Skills

Language knowledge is the prerequisite of reading. It may influence the effect for reading directly. To Chinese students, language knowledge is very important because usually it is the weak section and it is an important medium to deliver information. If students cannot comprehend the words and sentences of the texts, it is very hard for them to make use of the information and cues of the texts to comprehend the whole text. Good reading skills can improve readers' reading speed and help them pick up the necessary information in short time. Therefore, in the primary stage of English learning, students should focus on the language knowledge, improve their proficiency in English, and pave the way for next stages. Teachers should teach different kinds of reading skills in different stages to train students' reading abilities and encourage them to use the different skills properly in the process of reading.

6.2 To Establish and Strengthen the Cultural Sense

Teachers should choose famous works and literary pieces of English culture as the reading materials as much as possible. Many such works and literary pieces can be of high quality in terms of spiritual culture. The more they learn from reading actual reading, they do in English, it is hoped that the more that Chinese students of English reading will improve their reading abilities. We should consciously combine the language teaching and cultural elements, such as to input the proper cultural knowledge while teaching. For example, when teachers mention the *Bible*, they can introduce some characters and stories in the *Bible*. When they mention one kind of Western festival, they may introduce others properly. Moreover, teachers should encourage and lead students to read more about the history, geography, local affair and customs of English culture. In every stage and

aspect of language learning, teachers should encourage students to discover cultural phenomenon and cultural connotation and often compare English and Chinese cultures and find out their differences to strengthen the sensitivity to the culture of the target language.

6.3 Questioning and Discussion

Questioning can be divided into three stages: (1) pre-reading. The questions of this stage are the leading questions to stimulate students' cultural knowledge of their mother language and interest in different cultures. (2) while-reading. Put forward one or two important questions before their reading and let them read with questions. After their reading, teachers should put forward the analytical questions to stimulate students to analyze, synthesize and generalize the phenomenon of the different culture. (3) post-reading. Compare the cultures of mother language and English and put forward some subjective questions. Teachers should lead students to rethink and discuss some questions of culture in the process of discussion. Teachers should also encourage students to try their best to use the target language. In this way, students will get deeper understanding of English culture.

VII. Conclusion

People like to use the "global village" to describe the present world. Because of frequent cross-cultural communication, the world has become smaller and smaller. Therefore, it seems that we live in the same village. However, it does not necessarily mean that differences of cross-culture become smaller and smaller. On the contrary, it may be that there is an increase in mis-understandings and communicative barriers because of frequent cross-cultural communication, As a foreign language learner, we should not only learn the knowledge of language, but also try our best to contact the social and cultural aspects of English countries and learn the background knowledge of literature, history, geography, local condition and customs. We should use every means to enlarge our field of view. Only in this way, can we get better understanding of the differences between English culture and Chinese culture so as to eliminate the comprehension barriers of cross-culture communication and improve our overall abilities in English reading

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