The Effects of British and American Films and TV Series on Improving Intercultural Communication Competence

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Abstract: Culture refers to beliefs, norms, and attitudes that are used to guide our behaviors and to solve human problems. When people from different cultures communicate with each other, they have the experience of intercultural communication. It is an efficient way to improve intercultural communication competence by watching British and American Films and TV series. From films and TV series, people can have an exact visual perception about the nation’s language, thought, behavior, and customs, etc. Here are some effects of British and American Films and TV series on improving intercultural communication competence.

Introduction

Culture plays an important role in the intercultural communication. Culture may as well refer to beliefs, norms, and attitudes that are used to guide our behaviors and to solve human problems. The culture which is shared by the social interaction may take in many forms to transmit the beliefs, values and expectation of the human society[1]. When people from different cultures communicate with each other, they have the experience of intercultural communication.

In the era of globalization it is very important to improve intercultural communication. And British and American Films and TV series are good ways to improve intercultural communication competence. British and American Films and TV series cover the rich knowledge and culture of the two countries. The language they use comes from different levels of society, degrees of education, careers, ages and genders. They are the best combination of language and culture. They create real English application environment and have the language most close to social life. As English teaching materials, they make teaching closer to reality and learning more interesting.

In the paper, Hofstede’s cultural dimensions are used to analyse the different cultural values, which include individualism-collectivism, masculine-feminine cultures, power-distance, uncertainty avoidance, short-term and long-term orientation, indulgence and restraint. Among the six dimensions, individualism-collectivism, and power-distance dimension are used to discuss the different cultural values between Americans and Chinese, as they vary greatly measured by these two dimensions [2].

1. Intercultural Communication Competence

Fantini, Arias-Galicia and Guay (2014) discuss “cultural competence” as the “language-culture ability individuals develop for use in their native societies”. They refer cultural competence as an “acceptable and intelligible” performance within one’s society. “Intercultural competence”, on the other hand, refers to the “multiple abilities that allow one to interact effectively and appropriately across cultures”[3].

Cultural competence refers to an ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures and socio-economic background, particularly in the context of human resources, non-profit organizations, and government agencies whose employees work with persons from different
cultural/ethnic backgrounds. It comprises four components: (a) Awareness of one's own cultural worldview, (b) Attitude towards cultural differences, (c) Knowledge of different cultural practices and worldviews, and (d) Cross-cultural skills. Developing cultural competence results in an ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures[4].

2. Effects of British and American Films and TV Series on Communication

 Teachers can find rich resources of media materials including British and American Films and TV series and films. If these materials are properly used, it may in some degree remedy the deficiency of traditional textbooks and arouse students’ learning interests. It can provide students with visual feelings and can realize the cultural differences and conflicts, as well as improve students’ intercultural communication senses and the abilities by absorbing and applying intercultural communication knowledge.

 Here are some effects of British and American Films and TV series on improving intercultural communication competence.

2.1 Improving Listening and Speaking Ability

 British and American Films and TV series benefit listening because it can create a complete English listening atmosphere. Students can listen to native English and have images and thought in English as well. No other English materials can come up to watching British and American Films and TV series in amount of information.

 When watching British and American Films and TV series, students are exposed to the most used oral English vocabulary and different expression forms in different situations, so they can be personally on the scene. By watching, listening and speaking, they connect the expressions, feelings and actions of the characters to current situations so that to have an English thinking way, which means their senses are all covered by English. They will gradually find that they can use language naturally in practice. With text books combined with practices, students will have a deeper understanding of English, and learn native English.

2.2 Improving Intercultural Communication

 It can't be ignored because without understanding of a nation’s view of value, a person won't comprehend the nation’s way of expression language and behavior, and then mistakes will happen in communication. Western countries pay attention to individualism. Individualism is the moral stance, political philosophy, ideology, or social outlook that emphasizes the moral worth of the individual. It comes from classical humanism, which has the idea that the values of an individual comes from his thought, and he lives and develops according to his thought. Individualism emphasizes on equality, freedom and self-interest and pays high attention to the individual.

 For example, “Prison Break” is a typical American TV series that represent individualism. It tells a story about Michael Scofield, who is struggling for his life in prison. His brother, Lincoln Burrows, who is found guilty for murder and put into prison, will be sentenced to death. However, Michael is convinced of Lincoln’s innocence and formulates an escape plan to save his brother. In order to have access to Fox River, Michael commits armed robbery. As a result, he is put into jail—the Fox River, where his brother is imprisoned. As a structural engineer, he knows about the blue print of the prison buildings. The only purpose of his coming here is escaping from the prison with Lincoln. But, in the prison, he meets many accidents. In this TV series, most characters are criminals, but these criminals have many rights like ordinary citizens. When Michael explored the way to escape from prison, he was burned by the steam pipe. When he was found, what the jailer first do is to give him treatment instead of leaving him to die. No matter whether the criminal is heinous, the TV series still pays attention to every individual soul. It is because in western culture, every individual is respected. Chinese culture tends to be collectivism, that is, most people think the group has priority over the individual. In China, many people may think the theme is unacceptable for they believe that heinous criminals need to be put to death let alone respect them.

 Another difference is personal independence. The power-distance in America and British is lower
than that in China. Western people think their soul is independence, and everybody is equal, even between parents and children. Students may find that in British and American Films and TV series, many children don’t call their parents dad and mum but call their names directly. However, in China, the power-distance is high, parents have authority over their children and the children should be obedient to their parents. Western people sense of independence can be attributed to their childhood. They grow up as individuals and they are not the property or extension of their parents. They are taught to be responsible for themselves. They do part-time jobs when they are very young because they want to be economically independent.

American TV series “Growing Pains” is a typical example. It was a sitcom, which went through seven very successful seasons, each special in its own way. “Growing Pains” was about a family of six, the Seavers, who lived on Long Island, New York. The mother, Maggie, was a journalist who worked for the Long Island newspaper in the first three seasons of the sitcom. She got a job as the news anchor and worked there before she decided to stay at home as a housewife. The father, Jason Seaver, was a psychiatrist. At first, he had his practice at home, but then he moved his practice out of the house to an office. Together, Maggie and Jason raised four children. They often worried about who would stay home with the baby or would be there for the kids. They often think the responsibility belongs to each other. They even fought over about it but eventually settled. The main story is about their children’ growing. In Episode 46, the eldest of the four children Mike, a cheeky but charming boy found a job in a video shop. Although the result was not good, he still had had the thought of earning money by himself. This to some degree represents the independence of western children. Also, in this TV series, the way the parents raising their children was not to decide the future for their children but was to respect their choices and give advice, which is very different from Chinese parents. Chinese children’s sense of independence is not intense. They generally think that their parents have the responsibility for everything, even when they become adults. And parents are always willing to leave property to their children.

Because of culture difference, culture conflicts appear. For example, the movie “Chinese treatment” tells about the cultural conflicts between China and America by making scraping therapy the focus. In the movie, Chinese and American cultures have the process from contradiction to conflicts, and finally understanding. In the “Chinese treatment”, after years of hard work, Xu Datong, a Chinese immigrant to the US, has finally achieved success as an outstanding video game designer. With his promising career and loving family, he feels he has become a true American. Datong’s father comes over from China, and uses a traditional Chinese medical technique, called guasha (scraping therapy), to treat Datong’s son, Dennis. Unexpectedly, an American doctor thinks the bruises on Dennis’ back left by the scraping therapy are signs of child abuse, and the finger is pointed at Datong. And then, his bad luck continues. The conflict is the treatment of scraping therapy. In China, scraping therapy is a traditional Chinese medical treatment, and American people can’t understand it. During the treatment, the doctor uses a wooden board to repeatedly slide across the patient’s acupuncture points, which works like acupuncture in similar principles. This treatment can’t avoid leaving bruise on the skin. Therefore, when the visiting grandpa uses this method to his grandson, the bruise leaves. Because the scraping treatment belongs to traditional medicine, American can’t figure out the theory of it, and they don’t recognize it was a treatment.

Therefore, it is necessary for students to find the differences between cultures and accept them so that they can have a deeper understanding about culture, which benefits the intercultural communication.

Conclusion

By watching British and American Films and TV series, students can contact original English, which not only ensures the authenticity of language materials and environment, but also represents the knowledge of culture and skills of communication, so that students’ English competence, expression competence and intercultural communication competence can be improved.

British and American Films and TV series can bring students unforgettable language and cultural experience, make them find out fun of learning English, broaden their vocabulary, as well as
promote their listening and speaking abilities. On the condition that English learners can’t have enough chance to touch native English and English countries’ cultures directly, British and American Films and TV series, carrying rich and true language and culture, can be the favorable tool to develop and improve students’ intercultural communication competence. In a word, British and American Films and TV series can improve students’ sensibility and adaptability of cultures, which is an effective way of improving students’ intercultural communication competence.

References


