On the Principles and Contents of Culture Teaching in College English

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of English teaching is to cultivate students' language competence as well as cultural competence, which can eventually improve their intercultural communicative competence. But in China, especially inner part of mainland, the close relationship between language acquisition and culture acquisition hasn't called enough attention of the teachers and students, which results in some problems in students' cultural communication, such as miscommunication, Chinglish etc. There are several reasons for the problems, such as the students' poor English as well as the testing system which lays much emphasis on the form of language instead of the use of language etc. The article holds the view that we English teachers should follow some principles and choose the proper contents in our culture teaching. Only in this way can we effectively improve students' cultural awareness and achieve the goal of culture teaching. The principles are cognitive principle, assimilative principle, comparative principle and tolerant principle. The contents should contain the culture-loaded vocabulary, thinking patterns, non-verbal communication, value system, etiquette and customs, history and geography in English culture.

Keywords: culture teaching, principle, contents, and cultural awareness

1. INTRODUCTION

Language can't be isolated from culture. It's impossible to master a language without understanding its culture. Therefore, it's necessary to input culture related to the target language. From the perspective of foreign language teaching, the process of teaching a language should be the process of teaching its culture at the same time. Language teaching is closely related to culture teaching. The purpose of English teaching is to cultivate students' language competence as well as cultural competence, which eventually improve their intercultural communicative competence. However，intercultural communicative competence depends much on cultivating of intercultural awareness.

But in China, for different reasons, such as the students' poor English, the testing system which lays much emphasis on the form of language instead of the use of language, the close relationship between language acquisition and culture acquisition hasn't called enough attention of the teachers and students. What's more, the scope of culture is so large that cultural items cannot be found in a definite syllabus. The main teaching method used in class is still traditional grammar approach. Therefore, the culture teaching in most colleges is not paid much attention to, which results in students' poor intercultural communicative

competence. Problems have often occurred in intercultural communication.

2. PROBLEMS CAUSED BY STUDENTS' LACK OF INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS

2.1 Miscommunication

When responding other's "Thank you" after offering help, Chinese students will more naturally say "It's my duty." or "It's what I should do." That is really affected by the Chinese tradition, while the native speaker feels upset as s/he thinks you are fulfilling a task. The proper expression may be "It's my pleasure." or just simple "My pleasure".

A foreign teacher from London who is also working in my college once got his leg injured when walking. His students were concerned about him, and many of them asked him "Is your leg getting better?" or "Take care when walking." or "You should be more careful next time." He almost got emotionally disturbed.

Apparently the English sentences used by the Chinese students here were all grammatically correct but they caused some misunderstandings and upset. We can draw this conclusion: it is quiet necessary for those who learn a foreign language to have some knowledge about a particular culture and pay due attention to the different features between Chinese and western cultures.

2.2 Chinglish

Many college students translate English sentences and communicate with foreign teachers with the following structure: English words + Chinese speaking way + Chinese cultural background. They beset English to their native culture. Thus, the misunderstanding and offend would take place, and that also leads to Chinglish i.e. English in Chinese style. Chinglish is an abnormal language phenomenon, which is often used by Chinese EFL students and learners. Here I will select some typical errors from students' homework and essays. These errors can be divided into four kinds, that is, a) confusing the meaning of words; b) using flowery of cliché words; c) omitting indispensable words and d) wrong collocation. For example:

① It was a habit in Britain that everyone bowed as the Queen walked into the room. (F)

   It was a custom in Britain that everyone bowed as the Queen walked into the room. (T)

② It was rather difficult for the farmers to eradicate the weeds in the primitive periods. (F)

   It was rather difficult for the farmers to pull out the weeds in the old days. (T)

③ It is no use thinking about your failure in the examination, because what you have done is just like water tinder the bridge. (F)

   It is no use thinking about your failure in the examination, because what you have done can't be done. (T)

④ The living standard in coastal cities in three times high as that in the inner cities. (F)

   The living standard in coastal cities in three times as high as that in the inner cities. (T)

⑤ The policeman caught the thief's arm. (F)

   The policeman caught the thief by the arm. (T)

⑥ During the holiday, I learned to wrap dumplings. (F)

   During the holiday, I learned to make dumplings. (T)

⑦ In the afternoon, I played table-tennis with Xiao Ming and I always won him. (F)

   In the afternoon, I played table-tennis with Xiao Ming and I always beat him. (T)

⑧ I and my classmates have been on good terms. (F)

   My classmates and I have been on good terms. (T)

3. REASONS FOR THE PROBLEMS

There are several reasons for the problems in students cultural awareness mentioned above. They are as follows:

3.1 Different Concepts of Values

From the history, China and western countries went through different historical periods and formed different concepts of values. China has thousands of years long feudalism period, in which, Confucianism and Taoism are regarded as the mainstream of Chinese thoughts. Confucius advocated that society should be peaceful and orderly as a result of conscious effort by both the ruler and the people, including their moral value principles and knowledge. Lao Zi also dreams of a peaceful and orderly society, but it is possible when the people return to a primitive simplicity, while the ruler does nothing to meddle in their natural way of life. All these thoughts have great influence on Chinese people and formed their characters as obedient, loyal and reserved.

Nevertheless, in western cultures religions tend to be monotheistic and humanized the concept of God and therefore project the cultural features of the culture that thinks of God, whereas in eastern tradition religions are polytheistic and keep the individual and his/her self-reflection as a midpoint. Western cultures bases its ethics on competitiveness while eastern culture build its on self-assertion quietude, calm, and humility.

Besides, Chinese stress collectivism and they also regard modesty as a moral excellence. Most western countries experienced a relatively short history of feudalism, so they advocate freedom and individualism. They think that independence and creativity are important and these values will be developed freely without being controlled by the power of the society, politics and religion.

3.2 Different Thinking Patterns

The western thinking pattern is a direct one, while the Chinese one is indirect. When westerners talk about something or write something, they express themselves directly instead of indirectly. In English, the topic sentence most often occurs at or near the beginning of each paragraph. However, in Chinese culture, the topic sentence is often the last sentence of every paragraph and paragraphs are structured so that we build towards the argumentative point. For example, in English essays, they express their opinions firstly and then focus on it; on the contrary, Chinese people often try to create an artistic conception during their conversation with others. The Chinese thinking pattern affects Chinese English learners greatly; which leads to the barrier of intercultural communication. Moreover, Chinese people tend to use trial questions and a mild tone in order to safeguard a harmonious relationship with others during their conversation.

More often than not, Chinese people do not go into the main point directly and they try to create a harmonious atmosphere by beating about the bush, in order to make the other side know what they mean gradually. Westerners do not have this habit, so they often do not understand what Chinese really want to say, because they regard communication as a process of ideas exchanging and information exchanging, paying more attention to show their own ideas, so they ask and answer questions directly.

4. THE GOALS OF CULTURE TEACHING

Based on the problems in students' intercultural communication, we discuss what and how we teachers should do to improve students culture awareness so as to develop

intercultural awareness and their intercultural communicative competence. But first, we should know what the goals of our culture teaching are.

Culture teaching is necessarily a part and parcel of teaching appropriate speech behavior. The goal is not for learners to internalize a particular culture or subculture, but rather to get the students to explore the reasons behind human behavior. This would enable a learner to have and even better understanding of both his own world and that of each of those he knows, encouraging him to proceed beyond the scope of merely securing an identification, which may in turn lower the barriers of stereotyping.

In Teaching Culture, Seelye (1995) provides a framework for facilitating the development of cross-cultural communication skills. The following is his seven goals of cultural instruction:

1) to help students to develop an understanding of the fact that all peoples exhibit culturally conditioned behavior.

2) to help students to develop and understanding that social variables such as age, sex, social class and place of residence influence the ways in which people speak and behave.

3) to help students to become more aware of conventional behavior in common situations in the target culture.

4) to help students to increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language.

5) to help students to develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence.

6) to help students to develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture.

7) to enhance students' interests in second language acquisition; to stimulate students' intellectual curiosity abut the target culture, and to encourage empathy towards its people.

What should be mentioned here is that before understanding other cultures, we must know our own culture well. An awareness of our own culture along with examples of contrasting cultures contributes greatly to the understanding of our own culture. We should identify those attitudes, prejudices, and opinions that we all carry around and that bias the way the world appears to us. Knowing our likes, dislikes, and the degrees of personal ethnocentrism enables us to place them out in the open so that we can detect the ways in which these attitudes influence communication. Hidden personal premises, which are directed at ideas, people, or entire cultures, are often the causes of many of our difficulties in understanding others.

5. THE PRINCIPLES OF CULTURE TEACHING

In the process of foreign language teaching, due to the limitation of time and a lack of input from the cultural environment itself, it is impossible to cover everything about the target culture. Then how to conduct culture teaching in English classes? Or what principles should we follow in culture teaching? In order that students acquire cultural competence, culture teaching in College English classes must have definite objectives and teaching principles through which the objectives are realized. Therefore pedagogical principles are inevitably needed in college culture teaching. We consider the following four should be contained, i.e. cognitive principle, assimilative principle, comparative principle and tolerant principle.

5.1 Cognitive Principle

Cognitive principle in culture teaching is that the students are required to know, to

understand and to learn the target culture. In terms of cognitive principle, more attention should be put to knowing and understanding, rather than behaving. And we consider the cognitive principle as the chief principle in culture teaching. Cognitive principle is feasible in college English teaching. For nowadays, even many language teachers themselves have never visited any foreign countries. Their knowledge about the target culture is mainly indirect. They majority of students have few opportunities to study, work or live in the target culture community, so they can only get information about the target culture indirectly. What they are doing or learning is just to make good preparation for the future possibility of encountering the target culture. They have to access the culture through the language being taught, which is feasible for one important characteristic of culture is that culture can be learned. Besides, for most of the non-English majors, culture teaching is not an independent course, but an integral component of language teaching. Thus when they are taught foreign language, they are taught some basic knowledge about the target culture. So the study of cultural behaviors should be made an integral part of each lesson. Furthermore, for students to know the difference between two cultures lays the very foundation for developing their cultural sensitivity, tolerance and flexibility.

5.2 Assimilative Principle

As for assimilative principle, we mean that in culture teaching classes, it is not enough only to help the students understand and explain the target culture. The most important point lies in making the useful parts of the target culture serve us. The following explanations are the reasons to support the principle. First, every culture, belonging to its own nation and bearing its own national characteristics, needs to assimilate a good deal of foreign progressive culture to nourish itself, for every culture has its strong and weak points and should overcome its weak points by learning from another's strong points. Second, with the world being reduced to a global village, intercultural exchanges become more and more frequent. Just as is put by Mattrhew in the Bible, "Every kingdom divided against it is brought to decollation; and every city or house divided against itself, shall not stand." As a result, cultures have begun to merge. Cultures are developing in the direction of diverse ones. In a word, by assimilating alien cultures, our own culture flourishes.

5.3 Comparative Principle

Comparative principle is an attempt to make a comparison between the learners' own culture and the target culture so as to find out their similarities and differences. For instance, there are both similarities and differences between Chinese culture and Western cultures. With the comparative principle, Chinese learners can well comprehend the similarities and differences between their native culture and the target culture. With those differences and similarities of cultures in mind, it is more likely for learners to distinguish what is acceptable and what is unacceptable in the target culture, and it is less likely for them to wrongly interpret utterances according to their train of thought, replacing their target cultural pattern with their own cultural pattern. Comparison can help learners better understand the target culture and explain different cultural behavior so as to avoid just explaining another's behavior according to their own standards or bringing their own culture into other cultural situations. Only by comparing can learners distinguish the differences and improve the abilities of distinguishing acceptable culture and unacceptable culture, thus preventing them from accepting the target culture uncritically. In this way can people deepen each other's understanding and clear up the misunderstanding. Consequently, learners can improve their communicative competence.

5.4 Tolerant Principle

Tolerant principle is the principle of no cultural discrimination and it is also very important in culture teaching. In the process of second culture learning, learners usually approach and study a foreign culture from the perspective of their native culture. Therefore, it is impossible to escape the influence of cultural discrimination, which is hodgepodge of ethnocentrism, cultural stereotypes and cultural prejudice. Ethnocentrism refers to the assumption that "the worldview of one's own culture is central to all reality." (Bennett, 1984, p.33) Ethnocentrism includes both an attitude of superiority of one's culture and feelings of hostility and negative opinions towards other cultures. Cultural stereotypes refers to a fixed idea or image of that a particular culture is like. Cultural prejudice refers to an unfair, biases, or intolerant attitude towards another culture. Teacher should inform learners of English culture as objectively and neutrally as they can. At the same time, they should provide clear unbiased description about target culture and emphasize that the differences are just differences and learners should not judge which norms are better or superior. Both learners and the teacher should be encouraged to find their own position between the two cultures so that they can appreciate different cultures and expand their views without risking their identity and over-simplifying or over-generalizing their ideas toward different cultures. By doing so, teachers can prevent learners from conceiving prejudiced ideas towards both cultures. Thus an awareness and tolerance of the cultural differences can well be developed.

It is true that how to raise the intercultural awareness in language classes is an expanding problem for language teachers and the four principles mentioned above may be incomplete or may not be our sole guideline. To a certain extent, however, they serve as the basic rules on which the culture teaching is based in the teaching.

6. THE CONTENTS OF CULTURE TEACHING

The content of culture teaching refers to the aspects of culture that teachers and students should pay attention to in foreign language teaching and learning. Based on the status quo of College English teaching, the content of culture teaching may be explored from five aspects: culture-loaded vocabulary, thinking patterns, non-verbal communication, value system, etiquette and customs, history and geography in the target culture.

6.1 Culture-Loaded Vocabulary

The language of a nation must be loaded with its special cultural connotations. Vocabulary is the basic element of a language, on which the system of the language can depend. Therefore, the rich connotation of the vocabulary can most present the culture differences of different nations. Hu Wenzhong (2000) also holds that vocabulary is the most active and culture-loaded element of a language. The material environment, social structure and beliefs of a nation are always first displayed in the vocabulary of its language. Eg. Individualism means "*aichufengtou*" or "*chengneng*"，which is obviously derogatory. But westerners, especially Americans always consider it commendatory because in their countries, people highly value individual interest, admire individual will and personal strivings and advocate the personal freedom, power and independence.

However, because of the differences of two languages and cultures as well as the differences of the social life and two people's understandings toward the objective world, some words and terms in one language don't have counterparts in the other language, which is called "lexical gap". Lexical gap exists extensively between Chinese and English. For example, we can hardly put the Chinese "*yingyang*" into English, i.e. there is no counterpart

for it in English, for Chinese philosophic thinking or values is much different from that of the Westerns. "*yingyang*" comes from Chinese ancient Daoism, which holds the views that everything in the world has its two sides. And these two sides can depend and restrict each other, or even transmit reciprocally. Similarly, we can also find no conparts for "Salad", "Coco cola", "Mc Donald's" in English, because they only exsit in the Western culture, thus we just translate the terms according to their pronunciation "*sela*"，"*kekoukele*"，"*maidanglao*".

Another typical vocabulary difference is the word association, or the associative meaning of a word，which refers to the unique emotional assessment and association people from different cultures hold toward some special object. For example, in Chinese "（gou/dog）" always has the connotative meaning of "being repulsive or contemptible", which is obvious so derogatory as in "*zougou*" or "*gouzui li tu buchu xiangya*". However, the word "dog" has no such derogatory connotation in English. Instead, it has the meaning of "being faithful, friendly and cute". So we can often hear such sentences as "You are really a lucky dog." or "Love me, love my dog." More examples can be seen in color words. In the Western countries, the color of blue is always used to represent "being depressed or obscene" which in our Chinese culture the color of blue stands for solemn and yellow represent being obscene.

In a word, vocabulary and its usage have very close relations to its culture background. That is to say, when we are teaching vocabulary, not only should we teach the students the literal meaning and usage of the word, but we should also introduce its culture connotation to the students, especially present the specific usage of the word in real cultural situation.

6.2 Thinking Patterns

Thinking patterns, also termed as "ways of thinking", greatly influence intercultural communication. Language is the carrier to thought as well as the way to express thought. Ways of thinking restrict sentence structures. Distinction of thinking ways exists between Chinese and English cultures. The attitude towards being praised is quite different between the Chinese and westerners. Chinese thinking pattern is circular, synthetic and associative while American one is linear, logic and analytic. We must admit that thinking pattern influences the way of speaking and behaving. Chinese people tend to speak in a circular and indirect way while Americans are in the linear and straight forward way. To Chinese, American way of speaking is impolite, while to Americans, the Chinese way lacks of confidence and beats the bushes. Ignorance of these differences in thinking pattern is certain to influence the effectiveness of the cross-cultural communication. That's why when we talk to a foreigner，we need to direct and focus on the point rather than indirect and deviate from the point. For example, the Chinese consider modesty to be good virtue. Being praised, they often feel shy. When someone says "Your handwriting is very good" They may answer "No，I'm sorry，it's bad". The Chinese often say "No，no" when people pay them compliment or when they are offered something. While in the west，people consider self-confidence to be good virtue. Being praised, they will feel very happy to accept your flattery. If someone says: "Your hand writing is very good." A westerner will reply "Thank you very much." The same is as the following: When an American says "Your dress is beautiful", He expects you to say "I'm glad you like it." He doesn't expect you to tell him where you bought it and how much it costs. This is the problem of the differences in the mode of thinking between the Chinese and the westerners but not the problem in grammar or vocabulary. These differences have great influence upon our smooth communication.

6.3 Non-Verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication, just like verbal language, is also a part of culture, and the carrier of culture. Language is the principal medium of communication, and we have successfully used and understood quite a lot about this special kind of communication. Apart from verbal communication, we communicate in many other ways, such as postures, gestures，facial expressions, eye contact, addressing, environmental background and the use of space and distance. All these are non-verbal communicative ways. Most experts realize that language only passes 35% or so of the content of the information, while the other 65% is passed by non-verbal behaviors in face-to-face communication. Hall highlights the importance of the study of non-verbal communication by maintaining that "Formal training in the language, history, government, and customs of another nation is only the first step in a comprehensive program. Of equal importance is an introduction to the non-verbal language which exists in every country of the world and among the various groups within each country." (Hall, 1959, p.10) Non-verbal messages are divided into two comprehensive categories: those that are primarily produced by the body and those that the individual combines with the setting. The former category includes appearance，movement，facial expressions，eye contact，touch，smell，and Para-language; and the latter refers to space，time and silence etc. This kind of knowledge is crucial to students for their understanding of the target culture, as well as for their appropriate manner and behavior in intercultural communication. Therefore; our English teachers must take the systematic input of non-verbal messages into class as necessary teaching content.

6.4 Value System

Value is the orienting consideration and evaluation to what is acceptable and what is not. It is a concept and it influences people's behavior and thinking patterns. A value system represents what is expected or hoped for, required or forbidden. It is not a report of actual conduct but is the system of criteria by which conduct is judged and sanctions applied. Any cultural difference revealed in communicative actions can find its explanation in the difference of value system. Therefore, traditional value system is considered as the core of a culture. Value system is formed in its culture and reflects the cultural features. Due to the close relation between culture and value system, value system cannot be ignored in intercultural communication.

Like most other oriental cultures，the Chinese culture values collectivism in every way of people's lives. The Chinese emphasize the group over the individual, accept constituted authority，and insist upon the insignificance of the individual. The dominant value is conformity with the group. People traditionally live in big family, attend one another and maintain good relationship and integrity of the family，which in turn, contribute to the stability of the whole nation. The Chinese display great caution in expressing personal opinions and in modifying their opinions to be consistent with those of others around them. Thus we can see that Chinese people have a completely different value system from native English speakers. Chinese people value tradition, but westerners dispose it and consider it as "rusty","old"or"something to be thrown away"; Chinese people tend to express their feelings in an indirect way and they value modesty and collectivism. Chinese people always deny or belittle themselves when they are praised. Chinese parents always say that their children are very naughty，not very bright and so on，even though their children in fact are the top students in the class. Nowadays, most young people have changed their ideas about modesty. In sharp

contrast，the Western culture is characterized by individualism. It encourages self-assertion, independence, self-confidence and frank expression of opinions and shows up to argue back when challenged. In this man-centered society, all the desires, requests and interests of the individuals are viewed as supreme.

As Hu Wenzhong stated，"At a large extent, value system is the guiding principle in both language and culture study. Learning the target value system in foreign language class is not only an effective way to increase language learners' cultural awareness so as to guarantee successful communication, but also a way to widen their thinking space．" (Hu Wenzhong, 1998, p.57) Differences in value system may obstacle intercultural communication and even become disturbance of objective thinking，because people are so accustomed to their own value orientation and will reject the thinking patterns used by people in another culture. Therefore，it is rather difficult or even impossible to understand the native speakers' behavior patterns without knowing their value systems such as independence, individualism etc.

6.5 Etiquette and Customs

Etiquette in a society is an objective reflection of its culture. Its different cultural contents might be the obstacles of comprehension. To know about the different etiquettes in English learning and teaching is very important. You can't understand or use English correctly if you know nothing about it. For instance, if a Chinese is invited to a house for the first time, perhaps what he says isn't really what he wants. When the host asks him, "Would you like some tea"? The Chinese guest will answer, "No thank you". But the Chinese hosts know it is just courteous and will still make tea for the guests. On the contrary the American is quite different from the Chinese. They will frankly tell whether they would like to drink or not. For a Chinese who doesn't know the culture of English-speaking countries，it will be amusing to communicate with them in the Chinese way. Once an American was invited to a Chinese family, He really didn't want to drink，so he said in an American way．"No，thank you." However，the Chinese thought it was courtesy and insisted making tea for him. According to American's customs，since the host has made the tea，he had better drink it up. So the host kept making tea while the guest kept drinking. In the end he drank many glasses of tea. Another example is about the experience of a Chinese who went abroad for the first time. After getting off the plane, he stayed at a native Australian's house. The host asked if he was hungry and if he wanted to have something to eat. He answered politely "No". And the host believed so and didn't invite him to have dinner. The young man had nothing to eat for a whole night. He was hungry indeed. As a result，the next morning he had to say frankly"Yes". He was afraid if he said "No" again，he might not have breakfast.

Customs are influenced and even shaped by the beliefs and values of people in a given community, at the same time customs reflect the beliefs and values. People are brought up in the community and they are so accustomed to their own ways of doing things that they can't accept the different actions by which other people accomplish the same purpose. Therefore，customs differences have great tendency to bring ill feeling or conflicts in intercultural communication. Therefore, in language classes，customs traits should not be considered as trivial things that will not influence language learning. Customs, especially those concerning the basic aspects of daily life, such as greeting and compliments etc. should be introduced to students.

6.6 History and Geography

As for college students, they need to get to know the significant historical developments of the country or region, including the history of minorities and significant symbols, notable

events and trends, and the main historical personalities as well as critical issues past and present. For the historical understanding and empathy that are needed in language learning context, all above mentioned needs to be looked at from the point of view of native speakers whose historical perceptions, values, political knowledge, and preferences provide the main basis. For example, Washington and Lincoln: the former was regarded as "father of his country". To the American people，Washington symbolized dignity statesmanship and above all, honesty. The latter is a classic example of the self-made man，which embodied the American Dream，that is to say, an individual with ability, perseverance and strength of character can achieve success no matter how humble his beginning is.

Besides the history of target culture, the learner needs some sense of physical location to which relates the target language. A case in point is"carry coals to Newcastle"and"meet one's Waterloo". A better understanding of these expressions lies in one's historical or geographical knowledge — where is New castle? What is it famous for? Where is Waterloo? What historic event is it related to? The learners need an orientation to the geography of the country as a whole. If we are designing as syllabus，a choice has to be made of a particular country or region to be considered as the main target area，ranking other possible areas in an order of priority. In choosing a target area, our principal concern will be describing how native speakers perceive the geography.

7. Conclusion

English Teaching is not only language teaching, instead, it should involve culture teaching, which is generally accepted by most English teachers and experts. The task of foreign language teaching is to cultivate the talents who can communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds. With the integration of the global economy, China's entry into WTO and more and more frequent international association, English educators should attach more importance to improving students' intercultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence.

The current situation and the communicative failure due to students' lack of intercultural awareness make it urgent to conduct cultural instruction in English teaching. The principles of cultural instruction should be cognitive, assimilative, comparative and tolerant. As for the contents of the cultural instruction, the culture-loaded vocabulary, thinking patterns, nonverbal communication, value system, etiquette and customs, history and geography etc. should all be contained. In brief, it is teachers' responsibility to expose the students to the English culture as much and frequently as possible so as to help them to acquire intercultural communicative competence.

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