

Cultural Introduction in English Vocabulary Teaching in China

Chao Lei^a

Abstract

Every language possesses three cardinal elements: phonetic element, lexical element, and grammatical structure, of which lexis is the fundamental pillar that supports the huge system of a language. The close relationship between language and culture is most readily seen in words. In fact, being the most active and elastic element of a language, vocabulary has the greatest culture-loading capacity. Vocabulary teaching is an integral part of foreign language teaching. Its efficiency has a direct relation with the development of the learners' communicative competence. Vocabulary is culture-bound, so it is self-evident that culture introduction is indispensable in teaching. The author attempts to make a comparison between English and Chinese cultures, to make clear how cultural disparities exist in English and Chinese vocabulary, and to put forward some constructive suggestions on how to integrate culture into vocabulary teaching in Chinese schools, so as to promote the efficiency of vocabulary teaching and improve learners' competence in intercultural communication.

Keywords

Cultural differences, English vocabulary teaching, principles, approaches

In Leech's (1977) viewpoints of semantics, though in theory conceptual meaning is often the most important factor in communication, in some cases the importance of it will be reduced to almost zero. This best illustrates why communication failures always occur despite the fact that most English learners have a larger vocabulary than the 3,000 high-frequency words, which are considered by Palmer, one of the initiators of the Direct Method, to have covered more than 90% of words in an average English text (Palmer and Hornby 1973: 6). It follows that the non-conceptual meaning of English words should be necessarily included in vocabulary teaching.

Therefore, for the purpose of truly mastering the meaning of English words, one must at the same time have a deep understanding of cultures of the English-speaking countries.

Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners, making evident the limitation of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them. (Kramersch 1999: 38)

The difference, variability, and potential for conflict are characteristics of culture. It is not surprising that misunderstandings and breakdowns are often seen in cross-cultural communications.

^aZhoukou Normal University, China

Correspondent Author:

Chao Lei, School of Foreign Languages, Zhoukou Normal University, Zhoukou, Henan Province, China, post code: 466001

Therefore, emphasis on cultural contents may shed revealing light on vocabulary teaching.

STATUS QUO OF VOCABULARY TEACHING IN CHINA

Vocabulary is the block of a language and is loaded with a great deal of cultural information. More often than not, it is the connotative, affective, and associative meanings that determine the real meaning of a word, which is often neglected by English learners. It is often taken for granted that every English word and its Chinese conceptual equivalent have exactly the same conceptual and non-conceptual meanings. However, strictly speaking, there are no equivalent words at all between Chinese and English except some univocal technical terms and proper names. Most learners try to memorize new words merely according to the word list behind the text and take their meanings in the text for all. This is always the case in the traditional TEFL (Teach English as a Foreign Language) classroom in China. Learners emphasize much on word definitions, word formation, collocation, and vocabulary exercises, ignoring cultural differences and their influence on vocabulary.

In teaching practice, such sentences may have been seen in students' English composition. Consider the following sentences from their writing:

Their team won the race at last; full of pride, he looks as proud as a cock.

My parents are peasants, who work hard all day long on the farm. I must study hard to repay them, who wish me to become a dragon.

They are not clear that in English cock is seldom used to refer to a person. It is a taboo or (often in a derogatory sense) someone who thinks he is the most powerful or influential person among a group (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, LDCE). So “金鸡奖” in China's show business is rendered as Golden Rooster Awards. The word peasant contains a derogatory meaning and is not

suitable for the reference to one's respectable parents. And dragon is a frightening monster in English.

Yang (1999: 7) made an investigation into vocabulary teaching, designing a survey on what to teach and how to teach vocabulary. He carries out his survey by attending classes. What he finds well illustrates that in the present TEFL classroom most teachers pay very little attention to cultural differences and social use of language. That is, they take little care of whether the words the students use are appropriate under the situation, whether the students can efficiently apply what they have learned into actual communication. What is more, other scholars' findings happen to coincide with Yang's.

The research of vocabulary teaching in TEFL itself was a Cinderella in China. There have been few monographs about the subject until now. Anyway, opinions on vocabulary teaching are put forward by some linguists and educators. In recent years, intercultural communication has become an increasingly interesting topic of discussion for researchers. It brings some attention to the cultural factors in language, in which vocabulary is included. Xu (1988) made a sample study of what he called culturally loaded words, and assessed their relevance to English language teaching. Hu (1988: 136) argued that “vocabulary bears the most cultural elements in the system of language”. More attention has been paid to the role of vocabulary in foreign language teaching, and a growing body of studies of vocabulary teaching are well under way. Though they inspire vocabulary teaching a lot, most of these opinions provide little guidance for how to incorporate culture with vocabulary teaching. Therefore, in light of the achievements in the research, the author tries to show some tentative principles in vocabulary teaching in the next section.

CONTENTS OF CULTURAL INTRODUCTION IN VOCABULARY TEACHING

Culture teaching must be equipped with certain

attainable objectives. Seelye (1983: 49) put forward seven objectives of Target Culture Teaching (TCT):

- (1) The capability to understand people's ways of action;
- (2) The capability to understand the social variables;
- (3) The capability to understand the role of convention;
- (4) The awareness of culturally conditioned images;
- (5) The capability to evaluate the relative strength of a generality concerning the target culture;
- (6) The skills of locating and organizing information about the target culture;
- (7) The curiosity for the target culture and empathy towards its people.

Based on the seven objectives of TCT, culture introduction should embrace three aspects, that is, verbal, nonverbal, and ideological aspects. The verbal aspect of culture introduction in vocabulary teaching should include vocabulary vacancy, culturally loaded words, phrases and idioms, proverbs, euphemisms, taboos, and everyday speech acts. Teachers should aim at the connotations, associations, and semantic differences of words in English and Chinese cultures.

THE PRINCIPLES OF CULTURAL INTRODUCTION IN VOCABULARY TEACHING

Cognitive Principle

In terms of the cognitive principle, emphasis is placed on knowing and understanding, rather than behaving. To put it simply, the cognitive principle in culture teaching is that the students are required to know, to understand, and to learn the target culture. According to cognitive psychology and Noam Chomsky's theory of linguistics, foreign language learners must first acquire linguistic and cultural knowledge as the vehicle for communicating meanings and messages,

and then obtain the communicative competence. Learners always learn a foreign language on the basis of cognition. Chomsky assumes that man is born with what he calls Language Acquisition Device (LAD). But the characteristics between English and Chinese words are different; the learners' cognitive competence of their mother tongue will influence their learning of English words. So comparing two languages is not only possible but also necessary. Only in this way can students' competence in the learning of vocabulary be realized and strengthened.

Tolerance Principle

When speaking about the tolerance principle, we mean we must get rid of cultural discrimination. Cultural discrimination is the hodgepodge of ethnocentrism, cultural stereotypes, and cultural prejudices. Ethnocentrism includes both an attitude of superiority towards one's culture and feelings of hostility and negative opinions about alien cultures. Cultural stereotypes refer to a fixed idea or image of what a particular type of culture is like. And cultural prejudices refer to unfair, biased, or intolerant attitudes towards another culture.

Every culture has its unique traits. In today's situation of economic and scientific globalization, every culture without exception faces the problem of perfecting and developing itself. Only by respecting each other, learning from each other, and making progress together can different cultures become multicolored and prosperous.

Student-Centered Principle

Since success or failure in teaching is only determined by the students' language proficiency, the pedagogy should be student-centered. As an integral part of language teaching, cultural introduction in vocabulary teaching is no exception. Therefore, teachers should not only act as an information provider, but also make students motivated for cultural factors carried in vocabulary and propel them to learn actively instead

of receiving knowledge passively. After all, learning vocabulary is time-consuming and students cannot get instruction from teachers all their lives. Then, developing students' own ability to independently learn culture in vocabulary is another dimension to place emphasis on. This requires that teachers should create opportunities for students to think, realize, and discover the meaning of words. In this way, the important role of culture can be raised.

Relevance Principle

In teaching vocabulary, the cultural information should be relevant to students' expectation. However, from classroom observation, it is noticed that some teachers talk about some cultural information that has nothing to do with the words to be taught. It is far from the target of vocabulary teaching. Separating culture from its main carrier to emphasize its importance makes no sense at all. The practice of emphasizing culture at the price of sacrificing the time for teaching vocabulary comes largely from the misconception about the relationship between culture introduction and vocabulary teaching. The first should serve the latter, not vice versa. In short, the cultural introduction should follow the principle that when culture is emphasized, it cannot be divorced from vocabulary which is always the focus of vocabulary teaching.

APPROACHES OF CULTURE INTRODUCTION IN VOCABULARY TEACHING

A lack of practical knowledge of ways and means of culture teaching may prevent implementation. According to the above-mentioned principles, two main approaches, the fact-based approach and the task-based approach, are to be proposed, which can be easily operated in vocabulary teaching.

Contrastive Method

According to Lado (1957: 159), learners attempt to

transfer the features of their mother tongue to the second language. When the structures of the two languages are similar, students can get facilitation. When the two languages are different in features, interference occurs and results in errors. The misunderstanding or misuse of words is largely due to students' indifference to the cultural differences in the semantic associations evoked by the seemingly corresponding words in two languages. And Wang Li, a famous linguist, also said that the most effective way of foreign language teaching is the contrastive teaching of Chinese and the target language. Only by contrast can we see the common points and peculiar ones of various languages. By using this method, teachers may predict the difficulties that the students may come across, and in turn determine what they have to teach and what the students have to learn. On the one hand, TEFL teachers can make comparison between an English word and its Chinese equivalent on their connotations. For example, the word liberalism is often misunderstood by Chinese students who equal it with “自由主义”. As we all know, in Chinese, when we say “犯自由主义”, it merely means somebody has done something that is frowned on, perhaps a minor breaking of the rules, or perhaps stayed away from a meeting that he should have attended. This is quite different from the term liberalism or liberal as understood in the West. Consider these definitions of liberal given in LDCE:

As a noun: a person in favour of progress and reform and opposed to privilege.

As an adjective:

- (1) Willing to understand and respect the ideas and feelings of others;
- (2) Supporting or allowing some change (e.g. in political or religious affairs).

Therefore, in Westerners' view, liberalism has a derogatory sense. With such an idea, it will not be difficult for students to understand similar phenomena. On the other hand, English teachers can compare the different connotations of one English word with

another. Take for example, serpent and snake, statesman and politician, and peasant and farmer.

The contrastive analysis is a better approach to cope with vocabulary items with cultural load. Xu (1988) proposed a semantic model which covers different cultural loads as follows:

Cultural loads: $A < B$; $A > B$; $A \diamond B$

A = native cultural context; B = foreign cultural context

$A < B$: load smaller than that in foreign cultural context

$A > B$: load larger than that in foreign cultural context

$A \diamond B$: load smaller in some ways and larger in other ways than that in foreign cultural context, by orientation or by opposition, etc.

According to this semantic model, we can make a contrastive analysis in vocabulary cultural loads. Take drugstore, story, and social sciences for example:

(1) Social sciences $<$ 社会科学

“社会科学” covers all the academic fields not included in the natural and applied sciences and would include what are called “humanities” in English, branches of learning that deal mainly with the cultural aspects of civilization such as language, literature, and philosophy; while social sciences cover a smaller range of subjects—political sciences, economics, sociology, and other branches of learning that are concerned with human society, especially its organization and the relationship of individual members to it.

(2) Story $>$ 故事

In LDCE, story has the following definitions: (1) an account of events, real or imagined; (2) (informal, used by and to children) a lie; (3) an article in a newspaper, magazine, etc.; and (4) what people are saying; rumour. In Chinese, “故事” takes the first meaning.

(3) Drugstore \diamond 药店

In a “药店”, medicines and some kinds of medical apparatus are sold; while in a drugstore, medicines,

toiletries, and various other small articles are sold. One can even get food in a drugstore. Another important difference between a “药店” and a drugstore is that one can buy most kinds of medicines in a “药店”, but without a doctor’s prescription one can buy only a few kinds of medicine in a drugstore.

The contrastive method is also suitable for understanding idioms in both cultures. Some English idioms are not only similar to Chinese idioms in form, but also in meaning, such as: great minds think alike (英雄所见略同); to save one’s face (保全面子); burn one’s boats (破釜沉舟); walls have ears (隔墙有耳); and a bolt from the blue (晴天霹雳). However, some idioms with the same meaning are represented in different forms in the two languages. Compare, for instance, “一箭双雕” in Chinese with to kill two birds with one stone in English; “穷得象叫化子” with as poor as a church mouse; “力大如牛” with as strong as a horse; and “多如牛毛” with plentiful as blackberries.

Derivation

There are many words which originate from literature, the *Bible*, fairy tales, fables, and so on. If their sources can be made clear in a few words, students will be deeply impressed. This method is especially useful when allusions are introduced. Knowledge of an allusion’s cultural origin may help students comprehend what it really means. For example, when teaching the phrase a Pandora’s box, the teacher may tell students that in Greek mythology how Pandora was sent to the earth by the god as a form of punishment and she finally opened the box that Zeus gave her and all the evils that were in it flew out and since then had caused trouble to mankind. Hence, a Pandora’s box becomes the embodiment of a present or something that may seem valuable but brings trouble and misfortune. And if we just talk white elephant literally, it is very difficult for students to infer its meaning correctly. In fact, its meaning is closely connected with its origin: it was said white

elephant was viewed as a symbol of holiness in Thailand hundreds of years ago. According to the rule at that time, it was illegal to let white elephant work. Therefore, if the king wanted to punish his subordinates, he would give a white elephant to the person. The latter had to exhaust all his savings to support the elephant. Then from the legend, the phrase acquired the meaning “costly or troublesome possession which is useless to its owner”. With this in mind, students may have a clear idea about its meaning so that misunderstandings can be avoided. There are so many such idioms in English as Achilles’ heel, catch-22, Ivy League, Jack of all trades, olive branch, skeleton in the cupboard, and Sphinx’s riddle. Additionally, just as the origin of vocabulary in most cases has something to do with a story which may attract students’ attention, the method embodies the pedagogical principle of combining education with recreation (Dörnyei 1990).

Association

Every word is surrounded by a network of association which connects it with other terms. The human lexis is, therefore, believed to be a web-like structure of interconnected links. An intricate network of association forms the “associative field” of a word. When there is a to-be-learned word with cultural background, teachers may associate it with the words with similar cultural background. For example, we cannot make clear what is implied in Separation of the Three Powers without associating it with the President, Congress, and the Supreme Court.

Meaning is to a great extent determined by the position a word occupies in its semantic field. In English, polysemy and homonym are quite common phenomena. A word or word form may have several different senses. For each word in such cases, we should also try to know its related words so as not to misunderstand the word in different contexts. Figuring out the associations between words undoubtedly helps understand them better than before. And persons

producing more relevant associations are superior problem-solvers. So, teachers should assist students in forming the habit of association to enhance their ability to use English more freely and naturally.

Error Correction

Error correction refers to the analysis and study of the errors made by learners. Undoubtedly, it is impossible for students to answer all the questions correctly. Once errors occur, this method may be put into use. An analysis of the learners’ errors gives evidence of their competence in learning. According to students’ answers, teachers can find out where the difficulties lie in learning.

Error correction generally consists of five stages: identification, description, explanation, evaluation, and correction. Teachers should keep their eyes on the cultural errors made by students when they speak or write. For example, a student once wrote, “The propaganda of family planning has benefited our country’s modernization”. How should “宣传” be translated into English? Not as propaganda! In English, propaganda is information, frequently exaggerated or false, which is spread by political groups in order to influence the public (LDCE). In the West, propaganda connotes the meaning of exaggerating the fact and deceiving (e.g. he launched an attack on the use of propaganda to intimidate the population). However, more often than not, “宣传” in China does not carry such a sense at all. Conversely, it is mainly used in a positive sense. Consider, for example, “宣传发动群众” and “宣传部”. Out of this reason, in some cases, it is advisable to use publicity instead of propaganda (e.g. to publicize the benefits of family planning; he is now in charge of publicity).

Meanwhile, teachers can create some opportunities for students to find out their errors and correct them. Some cases can be provided for students to discuss. In such a way, teachers can easily build up a lively atmosphere where students may greatly strengthen their cultural awareness, whereby they can avoid such

mistakes in cross-cultural communications.

Mini Dramas and Plays

If conditions permit, foreign language learners can be organized to put on mini dramas and plays. A mini drama may consist of three or four brief episodes, each of which contains one or more examples of communication. The process of putting on a mini drama is a process of self-confrontation to foreign language learners. First, they are led to experience the vagueness of much intercultural communication due to the different cultural connotations of the words. Then, by identifying with characters in the drama, learners will experience the realization that “these could happen to me, too”. Through the performance of the mini drama, they can become aware of the cultural conflicts and learn that meanings of words are not limited within their denotations.

A play can be created based on a folk story, a fair tale, or even a short novel. The awareness of cultural factors is involved during the preparation work because the participants have to write the manuscript, set the play, and design stage costumes which are all culturally constrained. The whole process can not only improve their ability to master the words involved in the play, but also enhance their cultural awareness.

Generally speaking, topic-oriented and activity-oriented approaches of learning usually go hand in hand, because they are related and coherent. There is no distinct clear-cut border between topic and activity orientation. The significance of division lies in the interplay of topic and activity in teaching practice.

The above-mentioned methods are mostly adopted in class. Since the class time is limited, teachers may guide students to learn the cultural background of words after class. Some films or TV plays are also helpful for students to have a deeper understanding and better memory of some words which are peculiar in English-speaking countries. Furthermore, there are some other techniques and tools worthy of attention, such as “culture islands”, lectures, newspapers, and

“culture capsules”.

By way of the above-mentioned methods of cultural introduction in vocabulary learning, English learners can gradually accumulate and internalize the knowledge of connotations, and develop the sensibility to the culture-loaded words, thus laying a solid foundation for their improvement of linguistic and communicative competence.

CONCLUSIONS

Cultural disparities between the English world and China lead to their respective traits in language. At the lexical level, words with the same denotations, though, have no similar connotations in different cultures. The theory of Contextualism maintains that words can have distinct meanings only when they occur in certain contexts, and since culture is the broadest context, in vocabulary teaching, the cultural ingredient should be taken into consideration.

The detachment of culture from vocabulary teaching results in students’ weakness in communication. The status quo of vocabulary teaching and the research of TEFL in China show that the cultural aspect of vocabulary has been slighted, to some degree. Though some linguists have recently emphasized the close relationship between vocabulary and culture, research concerning how to include culture in vocabulary teaching still remains to be improved. Wang (2002: 10) argued, “I agree that culture should be taught when teaching language, but I don’t know clearly which items should be put, which parts should be emphasized, and what approaches should be taken”. Considering the lack of literature in this field, the author summarizes the predecessors’ insightful views and attempts to show practical ways to incorporate culture with vocabulary in TEFL systematically and effectively.

In summary, vocabulary teaching and studying cannot be separated from culture. The cultural ingredient in vocabulary teaching is a topic worthy of

careful study for teachers and researchers in improving the quality of TEFL.

References

- Dörnyei, Z. 1990. "Conceptualizing Motivation in Foreign-Language Learning." *Language Learning* 40(1):45-78.
- Hu, W. 1988. *Linguistics: A Course Book*. Beijing: Beijing University Press.
- Kramsch, C. 1999. *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lado, R. 1957. *Linguistics Across Culture*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Leech, G. 1977. *Semantics*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Palmer, H. E. and A. S. Hornby. 1973. *Thousand-Word English*. London: Harrap.
- Seelye, H. N. 1983. *Teaching Culture*. Lincolnwood, IL.: National Textbook Company.
- Wang, Z. 2002. *An Advanced Course of English Lexicology*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Xu, G. Z. 1988. "Culturally Loaded Words and English Language Teaching in Intercultural Communication." *Modern Foreign Language* 64(4):102.
- Yang, L. 1999. *Intercultural Communication in English*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Bio

Chao Lei, M.A., associate professor, School of Foreign Languages, Zhoukou Normal University, China; research field: English teaching studies.