

A Brief Analysis of the Teaching Strategies of Cultural Words in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

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Based on the definition and classification of modern Chinese cultural words, this paper expounds the necessity of paying attention to the teaching of cultural words in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Then, the teaching strategies of cultural words are discussed from four aspects: vocabulary teaching, classification teaching, association teaching, and online teaching, in order to provide a reference for the actual teaching of teachers of Chinese as a foreign language.

Keywords: teaching Chinese as a foreign language, cultural words, teaching strategies

Introduction

Cultural words are a special type of words in the modern Chinese vocabulary system. The academic community has noticed the particularity and importance of this type of words in the practice of teaching Chinese vocabulary to foreigners. For example, Cai & Shi (2020) set up a separate chapter in *Basic Chinese Knowledge (Vocabulary)*, one of the standard books for international Chinese teachers, to give a special introduction to “Cultural Words and Their Teaching” in order to provide guidance for Chinese teachers as a foreign language. The book defines cultural words as “words that carry cultural significance and have cultural characteristics”, and divides cultural words into two categories: “national folk words” and “words with specific cultural additional meanings” (Cai & Shi, 2020, pp. 216-217). However, the definitions of the concepts involved, such as “cultural significance”, “cultural characteristics”, “national folk words”, and “specific cultural additional meanings”, are not clear. In fact, the concept of “national folk words” was first proposed by Wang (1990). The “national folk words” in *Basic Chinese Knowledge (Vocabulary)* are not the same as the “national folk words” proposed by Wang (1990). We need to explore the definition and classification of cultural words from the perspective of teaching Chinese as a foreign language, and on this basis, propose teaching strategies for cultural words in Chinese as a foreign language. In addition, we also combine the current situation of online teaching and propose teaching strategies for cultural words that adapt to the development of the new situation.

Definition and Classification of Cultural Words

There is definitely a certain relationship between culture and vocabulary, but as a product of the combination of culture and vocabulary, “cultural words” cannot be simply defined as “words that carry cultural

significance and have cultural characteristics” as mentioned above. What is “cultural significance” and “cultural characteristics”? Language is part of culture. If this is the case, then all modern Chinese words can be defined as “cultural words”. But in fact, cultural words are a special type of words. The academic community has other different names for “cultural words”. For example, Wang (1990) called them “national folk words”, Mei (1993) called “national folk words” “non-equivalent words”, and Zhou (1996) mentioned “non-equivalent words and incompletely equivalent words”. The definitions of cultural words are not exactly the same among scholars, and the vocabulary range covered by cultural words is not exactly the same.

Zhao (2016) sorted out various viewpoints in the academic community and conducted a systematic study of cultural words from the perspective of teaching Chinese as a foreign language. We believe that his definition and classification of cultural words are relatively comprehensive and clear, so the following discussion on cultural words adopts this definition and classification.

Zhao (2016) pointed out that the influence of culture on vocabulary is reflected in five aspects: word structure, word origin, pragmatics, word meaning, and encoding degree and cultural words are only a special part of the influence of culture on vocabulary, which is reflected in word meaning (p. 62). He clarified the relationship between culture and vocabulary, and placed the definition of cultural words in the perspective of word meaning. The cultural meaning of cultural words includes two types, namely, “conceptual vacant meaning” and “special cultural meaning”. The conceptual vacant meaning of a word refers to the fact that a word in a language is a concept unique to that language, and it is often difficult to find a corresponding concept or counterpart in a foreign language (Zhao, 2016, p. 84). The special cultural meaning of a word refers to the fact that although a word in one language has a corresponding concept in another language, the connotation is quite different (Zhao, 2016, p. 86). Therefore, cultural words also have two types, “conceptual vacant words” and “special cultural words”. “Special cultural words” are divided into two categories: one is “same conceptual meaning, opposite or quite different cultural meaning” (Zhao, 2016, p. 127); the other is “same conceptual meaning, cultural meaning in Chinese but not in foreign languages (Or cultural meaning in foreign languages but not in Chinese)” (Zhao, 2016, p. 133).

It is important to distinguish between “special cultural meanings” and “general cognitive meanings”. “The cognitive meaning of a word has a metaphorical and metonymic relationship with its literal meaning and is related to culture, but not all of it is subject to the influence of a unique culture” (Zhao, 2016, p. 77). For example, for the three words of the adjective-noun combination of “green + noun” - “green”, “green light” and “green hat”, only “green hat” has cultural meaning, while “green” and “green light” do not have cultural meanings, because the second meaning of “green” “meeting environmental protection requirements, harmless and pollution-free” and the second meaning of “green light” “a metaphor for allowing something to be done” are not affected by unique national culture, but are common cognitions and also have this meaning in English (Zhao, 2016, pp. 77-79). Based on this, when Cai & Shi (2020) discussed “color words” in *Basic Chinese Knowledge (Vocabulary)*, they classified “turn on the green light” (a metaphor for allowing something to be done) and “green” (harmless and pollution-free, such as “green food”) as cultural words, which is inappropriate.

It should also be noted that our definition of cultural words is based on the scope of the modern Chinese vocabulary system proposed by Ge (2001), which includes words and fixed structures that function as words.

The Necessity of Paying Attention to the Teaching of Cultural Words

Vocabulary is the building block of language, and mastering vocabulary is crucial for second language learners. For beginners, when they cannot speak complete sentences correctly, being able to correctly use the corresponding Chinese words can also achieve a certain communication effect. For advanced students, the understanding and application of vocabulary is even more important. They have mastered grammar to a certain level, and the improvement of their Chinese level depends on expanding their vocabulary. A sufficient vocabulary is the embodiment of Chinese level. Otherwise, the Chinese level will reach a bottleneck and cannot continue to improve.

Cultural words are the type of words that are most closely integrated with vocabulary and culture. Paying attention to the teaching of cultural words can not only improve the efficiency of vocabulary teaching and learning, but also deepen students' understanding of Chinese culture.

In terms of vocabulary, cultural words are very special and unique in the Chinese vocabulary system. Translation method is a traditional second language teaching method, but there are many words in Chinese that cannot be matched one to one through simple translation. Many scholars have noticed the particularity of this type of words and defined them as “non-equivalent words”. For example, Mei (1993) believes that the so-called national folk words are words that cannot be translated into other words, or in other words, it is difficult to find a completely corresponding “non-equivalent words” in other languages (p. 33). Explaining these “non-equivalent words” to students is a challenge for Chinese teachers. In fact, according to our definition and classification of cultural words above, the “non-equivalent words” here refer to “conceptual vacant words”, which is just one type of cultural words. In addition to “conceptual vacant words”, there is also a type of “special cultural words”. Teachers of Chinese as a foreign language are native speakers and are often accustomed to these “special cultural words”. Teachers cannot understand the particularity of these words from the learners' perspective, and explanations of these words in teaching are not accurate and comprehensive enough. We need to pay special attention to this. Therefore, Chinese teachers who teach Chinese as a foreign language need to clearly define and classify cultural words, understand all their types, and then predict the different errors that students will make when learning these words, avoid them in advance during teaching, and greatly improve teaching efficiency.

In terms of culture, attaching importance to the teaching of cultural words and taking them as the key and difficult points of teaching is conducive to improving students' cultural literacy. Among the four elements of language, vocabulary is the element that is most likely to change and the most likely to reflect the characteristics of the times. It directly reflects people's daily life and way of thinking. The process of second language learners learning Chinese is a cultural journey to experience Chinese culture. If students cannot fully understand the cultural significance of cultural words, they will misunderstand Chinese culture and hinder the further improvement of Chinese.

Teaching Strategies for Cultural Words

Vocabulary Teaching

For vocabulary teaching, the most commonly used model at present is text-based teaching. The complete set of Chinese teaching materials compiled according to the level of Chinese proficiency takes into account the elements of phonetics, vocabulary and grammar, which is convenient for simultaneous teaching. Students learn

the vocabulary that appears by following the text. Vocabulary teaching under this teaching model lacks systematicness, especially for advanced students, and cannot meet their vocabulary needs. Li (2017) generally divides vocabulary teaching models into two types. He calls the teaching model mentioned above the “context teaching model” and the other the “vocabulary teaching model” (Li, 2017, pp. 37-38). As the name implies, the vocabulary teaching model is to conduct concentrated teaching based on the compiled vocabulary list. Vocabulary teaching is not the mechanical memorization of vocabulary, but also introduces the context, provides corresponding examples, paragraphs, texts, etc., because we should focus on the application of vocabulary, pragmatic explanation and practice. However, the presentation of examples, paragraphs and texts are all for vocabulary teaching, and they must follow the order of the vocabulary list. This teaching model is a special teaching for vocabulary, which greatly promotes the expansion of students’ vocabulary. The difference between vocabulary teaching and context teaching lies in the different ways of vocabulary presentation. This is the first problem faced in vocabulary teaching, the overall teaching guideline, and the overall conception.

We can consider establishing a vocabulary class that specifically teaches cultural words, and separate this class from other types of Chinese classes for centralized teaching. The presentation of vocabulary must be based on a vocabulary list, because it is impossible to present a large number of cultural words in one text. This will help teachers and students further understand the particularity and importance of cultural words.

Classification Teaching

After establishing the overall concept of the vocabulary teaching model, the next question is how to formulate the vocabulary. We cannot list all cultural words for teaching, but need to classify them. There are many classification standards. We can refer to the classification method of cultural words mentioned above by Zhao (2016). We can first divide them into two major categories: “conceptual vacant words” and “special cultural words”. “conceptual vacant words” can be further divided into four subcategories according to the “Theory of Four Levels of Culture” mentioned by Zhang & Fang (2004), namely “physical culture”, “institutional culture”, “behavioral culture”, and “mental culture” (p. 4). Compared with “special cultural words”, “conceptual vacant words” are actually easier for students to master, because these concepts do not exist in students’ native language. Teachers only need to explain them clearly in an appropriate way, and can use intuitive and vivid forms such as pictures, videos, and stories to explain and practice. However, it is more difficult to explain “special cultural words”, because students have similar concepts in their native language, but their extended meanings are different, which can easily lead to errors. Teachers should use the comparison method to clearly distinguish between them and their native language. “Special cultural words” can also be divided into many small categories, such as color words, animal words, plant words, etc. For different small categories, we can also adopt different teaching methods.

In addition, there are two aspects of classified teaching. The first is the classification of teaching content mentioned above, that is, to classify the cultural words taught in the form of a vocabulary list. The second is to classify students, that is, nationalized teaching, because cultural words are based on the comparison of two languages, so there must be awareness of nationalized teaching. Even in a comprehensive large class, students come from different countries. When explaining cultural words, teachers must have a full understanding of the students’ countries and try to take into account students from all countries when giving examples.

Association Teaching

Yan (2006) pointed out that the vocabulary mastered by students was lower than the theoretical requirement, and their vocabulary application was also very limited, and they only understood the surface meaning of words (p. 96). For this reason, he proposed the “limited radiation” strategy of teaching Chinese vocabulary to foreigners. What teachers impart to students in class is not only the content, but more importantly the method. Because it is impossible for teachers to teach all cultural words exhaustively. Students learn the method of association, and can use this method to achieve self-study outside of class, which also improves students’ initiative and sense of achievement.

Association is divided into multiple dimensions. The first is the dimension of category association. From a macro perspective, students can associate and memorize words in each category according to the type of cultural words, and associate one word with words in the same category.

The second is “radiation of word meaning” (Yan, 2006, p. 100). For the different meanings of a word, teachers can use the strategy of “radiation of word meaning” to conduct centralized teaching of multiple meanings of a word, so that students can concentrate on memorizing the meaning of the word. For example, still using color words as an example, “red” has many meanings, and we can explain the multiple meanings of “red” together. Teachers cannot be satisfied with just letting students know the meaning of concepts, but also need to supplement the special cultural knowledge about China, let students become familiar with the Chinese way of thinking, and help students establish an association mechanism from conceptual meaning to cultural meaning. For example, it is necessary to explain to students why “red” has the meaning of “symbolizing joy and good fortune” in China. The process of tracing the origin of culture is the process of establishing an association mechanism. After understanding the culture behind it, students will be more successful in making associations. Color words are learned at the elementary level, so it is far from enough to only input cultural meanings at the advanced level. Cultural awareness should be instilled into students at the elementary level so that they can experience the fun of Chinese. It should be noted that teachers should define each meaning based on the definitions of “conceptual vacanct meaning” and “special cultural meaning” to determine whether it belongs to cultural meaning, so as to predict the degree of students’ learning.

In addition, there is “morpheme co-nucleus radiation” (Yan, 2006, p. 100). For example, “green” has many meanings, and each meaning can form many words containing “green”. These words can be put together for centralized teaching. When conducting morpheme association, we should also pay attention to distinguishing between words with special cultural meanings and words with general cognitive meanings. For example, the words “green”, “green light” and “green hat” mentioned above, the extended meanings of “green” and “green light” can be associated through common cognition, and the meanings that can be extended through common cognition are not cultural meanings, so they do not belong to the category of cultural words. However, we can teach general words and cultural words together to enrich the vocabulary network in students’ minds. Students do not necessarily have to understand whether “green” is a cultural word, but Chinese teachers for foreigners should make it clear that the difficulty of understanding general words and cultural words in terms of meaning is different for students. The former only requires common cognition, while the latter requires special cultural knowledge.

The purpose of associative teaching is not to let students understand all types of cultural words and all members of each cultural word, but to let students establish associative awareness and have a holistic understanding of cultural words. This will help students activate their vocabulary faster and more accurately when using the language, enrich the semantic network, and thus solve the problems encountered in the process of learning Chinese vocabulary and improve students' self-learning ability.

Online Teaching

Nowadays, online teaching is developing rapidly. We can make good use of the Internet to enrich online teaching forms, create online real-life classrooms to show real scenic spots, food culture, etc., introduce historical stories through animation, etc., and promote students' understanding of Chinese culture in a more vivid way, thereby further promoting the teaching of cultural words. In addition, considering the ubiquity of online learning, short videos can be recorded around a cultural word or a category of cultural words to provide students with learning materials and help them improve their cultural word system.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper, through the sorting out of the definition and classification of cultural words, puts forward some opinions on the teaching strategies of cultural words in Chinese as a foreign language, in order to provide some reference for actual vocabulary teaching. In order to improve the systematicness of students' vocabulary learning and enhance the interest of teaching, we believe that the overall teaching strategy of cultural words should be classified and concentrated teaching, while paying attention to association and application, and also adapting to the development of online teaching. Due to limited conditions, this paper only consults the literature and combines its own thinking to make application assumptions, and no further empirical research is conducted. It is hoped that empirical research will be conducted in future teaching practice to test the effectiveness of cultural word teaching strategies.

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