



Cultural Awareness of English Words: A Case Study of EFL Learners in China

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Abstract

Reinforcing the cultural connotation of a word plays an important role in the development of learners' linguistic competence. Chinese EFL students are accustomed to the conceptual meaning of English words and pay little attention to the cultural connotation. Therefore, they have little understanding of cultural background knowledge of the target language. When reading a text, cultural failure at the lexical level often causes the distortion of texts. Therefore, teachers should strengthen students' cultural awareness of English words and promote their sensitivity to culture-loaded meanings.

Key words: Culture-loaded words; Text understanding; Cultural awareness

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INTRODUCTION

A word has the conceptual meaning, metaphorical meaning and associative meaning. As a result, in vocabulary teaching and learning, teachers and learners should see through the conceptual meaning and penetrate the cultural meaning in the target language. Although teachers have had the consensus that culture-loaded words affect text understanding, few experimental studies so far are conducted in this field to provide sufficient evidence to support the above statement in EFL (English

as a Foreign Language) context. This study is intended to investigate the effect of strengthening cultural awareness of English words on text understanding with Chinese EFL learners.

Understanding a word's cultural connotation is rather important, though difficult, and it is an essential part of what Read calls "depth" of vocabulary knowledge. According to Read (1993, p.357), more emphasis should be paid to L2 vocabulary learning and assessment to students' depth of knowledge (how well they know particular words) and David D.Qian's (1998) finding produced empirical evidence that depth of vocabulary knowledge made a unique contribution to the prediction of reading comprehension scores. However, Liu&Zhong, (1999, p.178) indicated that traditional educators have focused mostly on learners' breath of knowledge (how many words students know).

To compare the cultural features of English and Chinese, the researcher here makes reference to the classification of Russian linguist Koctomapob (Zhao, 2003). In his work *National cultural semantics* (translated by Wang, 2002), Koctomapob concentrates on the study of the cultural background of vocabulary. He points out three functions in the social traits: i) communicative function; ii) culture-loaded function; iii) directive function. Culture-loaded function is the theoretical framework of *National cultural semantics*.

Koctomapob emphasizes the cultural meaning of the word and categorized three types of culture-loaded words. i) Equivalent word: words with the same denotation and connotation; ii) Non-equivalent word: we usually name it lexical gap which only exist in one language; iii) Partly equivalent word: words with the same denotation but partially equivalent connotation, opposite connotation, or connotation vacancy. Zhang and Yang (2003) classify imperfectly equivalent words into three subcategories: a) associative overlapping, words with the same denotation and partially same connotation; b) associative conflict,

words with same denotation and contrary connotative meaning; c) associative vacancy, words with the same denotation and absent connotation in one language.

In this thesis, exploration into the relation of text understanding and culture-loaded words is not based on the ordinary text, but “the specific text” in which culture-loaded words determine the entire meaning of the text. In other words, if the specialized text is laden with culture-loaded words, the students will require the background knowledge of the culture-loaded words to help them uncover the overall meaning of the text. Although the cultural implication of culture-loaded words is not decisive for students’ development of linguistic competence, it, to some degree, can affect their socio-lingual competence, thus affect their text understanding specifically.

1. SUBJECTS

54 non-English majors participating in the present study were chosen from two regular classes in Oil Engineering Department of a provincial university of China, including 27 subjects selected from two classes by random sampling, respectively with one as the experiment group and the other class as the control group. They had studied English as a foreign language for about seven years. The students’ scores in the previous term examination indicate that the two groups have the same English proficiency. They are freshmen in the second term. Six subjects were chosen from the two groups respectively for interviews based on their scores of the previous term examination.

2. INSTRUMENTATION

The data were collected mainly by means of the following two aspects: test papers and structured interview. The test papers in the experiment included three parts. The first part was sentence translation. Twelve sentences were selected and written in such a way that culture-loaded words were fully embedded. The second part, multiple choices, aimed to affirm whether the students understand the cultural meaning of culture-loaded words. The researcher could find the evidence from both sections which had the same content. A good answer in the multiple choices could not decide whether the subject had comprehended the connotation of words. In fact, the combination of two sections was the best way to measure the extent the subjects grasp culture-loaded words. The two sections were interwoven and dependent on each other to evaluate the reliability of the response. In other words, if the two sections were not consistent, the responses the researcher received were unacceptable. Even if some students choose a right option in multiple choices, they did not understand the connotation of this

word, if they did not provide correct translations. The third part was passage translation, which aimed to examine, to what extent, the culture-loaded words would impact the comprehension of the general meaning in each passage.

3. TREATMENTS

From 10 September to 24 December 2012, all experiments were conducted in the experiment group and the control group. There were four periods for instructions in the two groups (45 minutes each) every week. Before the experiment, a pretest was designed to test to what extent the subjects in the two groups could apprehend culture-loaded words and the impact of these words on text understanding. After the treatment, a posttest was implemented with the same method to testify questions and hypotheses of the study. Meanwhile, one interview was conducted after each test to make clear how the subjects comprehend the meaning of culture-loaded words.

4. RESULTS OF THE POSTTEST

Both the experiment group and the control group take part in the posttest after the completion of the treatment. In order to detect what effectiveness the culture-loaded words exert on the text understanding of the experiment group, and what improvement they get by comparing with the control group, the result of the posttest is analyzed by one way ANOVA. Finally, it shows a significant difference between the two groups.

Table 1
Results of One Way ANOVA in Total Score between EG and CG

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	146.685	1	146.685	13.370	.001
Within Groups	570.519	52	10.972		
Total	717.204	53			

P < 0.05 (EG = experiment group; CG = control group)

From Table 5, the result indicates a significant difference between the experiment group and the control group. Most importantly, the result positively confirms the hypothesis: text understanding of culture-loaded words by the experiment group differs significantly from that by the control group. At the beginning of the experiment, there is not any significance between the experiment group and the control group in terms of understanding the text with culture-loaded words. After the experiment, the total score in the experiment group is significantly higher than that in the control group.

Table 2
Result of One Way ANOVA in Sentence Translation between EG and CG

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	26.741	1	26.741	6.912	.011
Within Groups	201.185	52	3.869		
Total	227.926	53			

P<0.05

The item “tell a white lie” shows a significant difference between the two groups. In the western culture, “white” often arouses commendatory associations, such as luck, safety and honesty. In this case, “white-handed” has a similar meaning with “integrity” and “white spirit” suggesting “innocent heart”. The control group knows little about the cultural connotation of the color word “white”. Some Students in the control group can hardly translate this word. Even, there are some students who explain this item to be “tell me a downright lie”.

The item “lions” also demonstrates a significant difference between the experiment group and the control group. British people think highly of lion, and lion symbolizes the Great Britain. Likely, the idioms “regal as a lion” and “majestic as a lion” both reflect the admiration for the lion. The translations of the experiment in the posttest such as “VIP”, “leading role”, “honorable guest” and “celebrity” are all acceptable. It is evident that the treatment has come into effect.

Table 3
Result of One Way ANOVA in Multiple Choices between EG and CG

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	26.741	1	26.741	7.165	.010
Within Groups	194.074	52	3.732		
Total	220.815	53			

P < 0.05

The significant difference gives rise to the item “sour grapes” between the experiment group and the control group. Most of the subjects in the experiment group understand the connotative meaning and give the correct responses. Observed from sentence translation, the results in the experiment group are various, such as “self comfort”, “excuse” and “pretense”. In the control group, only one subject fully understands the true meaning of “sour grapes”. Besides, there are two subjects who respond right in translation section but choose the wrong answer “to think in one way and behave in another in multiple choices. In addition, one subject mistakes “sour

grapes” for “jealousy”. Apparently, she is still frustrated in understanding “sour grapes”.

Table 4
Result of One Way ANOVA in Passage Translation between EG and CG

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	3.130	1	3.130	6.698	.012
Within Groups	24.296	52	.467		
Total	27.426	53			

P<0.05

The item “blind date” refers to the first meeting arranged by some “match-maker” for a man and a woman, without knowing each other. Most of the subjects in the experiment group succeed in acquiring the overall meaning of this passage on the basis of a good understanding of “blind date”. However, most subjects in the control group just give the conceptual meaning of the word “blind”, and some students translate “blind date” as “a blind wife” or “insomnia”.

From the above results, the researcher finds that the students in the control group are deficient in the understanding of the cultural connotation of words. Meanwhile, it deserves to mention, a good linguistic proficiency the interviewees have possessed cannot support them to understand the culture-loaded words. In other words, a better linguistic proficiency cannot guarantee the bicultural ability.

At the end of the interview, the interviewer inquired the subjects in the experiment group of how they felt after learning the culture-loaded words. The interviewer designs four questions:

- Is it necessary that the students be provided with background knowledge of culture-loaded words in vocabulary teaching? The interviewees showed a positive attitude: the teacher should make efforts to introduce the culture-loaded words. The students reaped more benefits from it, in that it not only helped them know more rich and colorful cultural background but also initiated their interests in learning English.

- Is it important to learn culture-loaded words? They declared that they did not understand the text adequately unless they had a good command of the cultural connotation of words. At the same time, they expressed their heartfelt thanks to the researcher who provided the opportunity for them to apprehend the culture-loaded words.

- Have the students improved the cultural awareness during over three months’ study? They state that cultural awareness had been a little improved. However, improvement was not significant, which implied that it was a long process for the cultivation of the cultural awareness.

CONCLUSION

The overall finding is that the treatment has a significant effect on text understanding. That is, the culture-loaded words can facilitate text comprehension significantly. The researcher found that the subjects elaborated on the story with culture-loaded words from the perspective of the native culture. On the contrary, they distorted the story with culture-loaded words of foreign cultural background because of little knowledge of the foreign culture.

Therefore, the consciousness of culture-loaded words is of great importance in the interpretation of literature texts. Those culture-loaded words labeled as lexical gap may enrich the source language through cross-cultural communication. However, the role of culture-loaded words in teaching practice should not be exaggerated. It can be treated as an important complement to vocabulary teaching in the sense that it may arouse students' awareness of words' connotative meaning, with which the learners may, to some extent, develop their language learning systematically.

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