

Vocabulary Learning Based on Cultural Connotation in College English

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Abstract—With the development of technology and transportation, intercultural communication is necessary as well as inevitable. College English teaching undertakes the important historical mission of cultivating students' language competence as well as rebuilding confidence in Chinese culture. In this paper the author choice Chinese and English vocabulary's cultural connotation as the main entry point to study the path of cultural awareness cultivation. English vocabulary is from myth, religious culture, classic works, and special local geography. Teachers can use direct interpretation, comparison of Chinese and English culture, case analysis, role-playing, original English video and films to cultivate students' intercultural awareness and competence. The comparison between the native culture and the target Language culture is a good way to cultivate intercultural awareness.

Keywords—college English teaching; cultural connotation; vocabulary; intercultural communication

I. INTRODUCTION

With the fast development of modernization in China and the great leaps in the economic development, chances of contact between Chinese and foreigners have been growing gradually. Developments in communication technology and globalization of the economy have made intercultural communication necessary as well as inevitable. However a large number of college students, even they have a lot of knowledge of grammar and vocabulary in English, often find that they are hard to understand the meaning of the whole passage, hard to realize their communicative intention in their cross-cultural communication. The reason is that learners only understand the literal meanings of the words, but can't understand the very rich cultural meanings implied or loaded by the words profoundly.

In China, the new requirement for cultivating college students' cultural awareness in new curriculum syllabus was mentioned to cultivate not only master target language, but also know target culture well. So college students should have international horizon, excel in business knowledge and intercultural communicative competence. College English, as the most class hours in college curricular and the compulsory course which most people have gotten, will undertake the important historical mission of cultivating students' language competence as well as rebuilding confidence in Chinese culture. Improving college students' intercultural communicative competence is the important approach to realizing this historical mission. It has been widely recognized that language and culture are inseparable. Language is the production and

carrier of culture and it reflects contents of culture. And vocabulary as the main carrier of language is much more sensitive than grammar and syntax, which is the most direct embodiment of traditional national culture. Vocabulary carries culture, mirrors culture, spreads culture and helps develop culture. So in this paper I choose Chinese and English vocabulary's cultural connotation as the main entry point to study the path of cultural awareness cultivation.

II. THE DEFINITION OF CULTURE

What is culture? Culture is everything and everywhere. Culture plays a dominant role in our lives. Since the notion of culture was first defined by anthropologist, E.B. Tylor in 1871, more than 450 different definitions have been found, but up to date no consensus has emerged on. (Trifonovitch, 1980 quoted in Cheng, 1999:152)[1]. Culture is a way of life. It is the context in which we exist, think, feel, and relate to others. It is the "glue" that binds a group of people together. From the definition we can see culture is everywhere in our life. It is a system of integrated patterns of ideas, customs, skills and arts that characterize a given group of people. Even clothes, flowers, colors and architecture convey information about culture. But culture is more than the sum of its parts[2]. So our purpose in learning a language and their relative culture is to use this language as a communicative tool.

III. THE SOURCE OF ENGLISH VOCABULARY

A. From Myth

Fairy stories especially Greek Mythology have a great influence on the development of English words. For example, in Greek Mythology Helen is the daughter of Leda and Zeus who turned into swan. Helen is as beautiful as flowers and lots of Greek heroes adore her and make a proposal, so the idiom "as fair as Helen" means "a most beautiful woman", another example, "Achilles' heel" means "soft spot and fatal weakness". "the Herculean efforts" means "make tremendous efforts"[3]. These English idioms come from myths.

B. From Religious Culture

The Bible plays an important role in forming western culture and world view, the characters and stories in *the bible* become the source of English words. So western culture has a strong religious color. For example, do you know the meaning of "Hercules' choice"? If we only understand from literal meaning, we can't know the real meaning. It is from the story of *the bible*, Hercules fell into temptation of Goddess of Pleasure and Goddess of Virtue when he was in his childhood,

Goddess of Pleasure promised him material enjoyment while Goddess of Virtue promised him immortality, Hercules chose immortality, and finally he became the immortal god after having experienced a lot of difficulties. So “Hercules’ choice” means to give up comforts, go after justice and get rewards. Another example, the name of “Cane” means “people who murder kinsfolk” or “rebell”. “land of promise” means “something inaccessible and unapproachable”[3], from these examples we can see if only understanding from literal meaning, we can’t know the real meaning because these words are rich in cultural connotation.

C. From Classic Works

There are many famous writers and poems whose works are wildly known and have a great influence on people’s lives, plenty of English words and idioms are derived from their classic masterpieces. For example, the American writer F.S. Fitzgerald wrote a well-known novel *the Great Gatsby* (1925) which described a “millionaire to coin money overnight” by selling hooch and other illegality. So “Gatsby” means a kind of people who have unexplained wealth and extravagant in life. For another example, “green-eyed monster” means “those who are jealous of others”, “the last straw” means “somebody’s patience reached its limit”[3]. The list goes on.

D. From the Special Local Geography

The Great Britain is an island surrounded by sea, no point in the country is more than 120 kilometers from the sea. The temperate maritime climate of the Great Britain formed a lot of words related to ocean which is called marine culture. For example, “between the devil and the deep sea” On the one side there is a devil, another side is deep sea, which one will you choose? Of course both of them are dangerous, so “between the devil and the deep sea” means “be in a dilemma”, “in the same boat” means “solidarity”, “when the ship comes home” means “when fortune knocks”, there are a number of idioms related to sea, wind, boat, fish and so on in English[3].

IV. CULTIVATION OF INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS BY COMPARING CHINESE AND ENGLISH CULTURES

A. It is an Inevitable Requirement of the Times to Promote the Development of Chinese Traditional Culture

Nowadays, with the development of economic globalization, both officials and non-government exchanges are increasingly close, culture diversity has been become an indisputable fact. It is an important part of intercultural consciousness and intercultural teaching to let Chinese culture go into the world and let the world know China well.

The national college English examination committee meet the requirements of the times, change the examination subject of CET 6 and CET 4 into paragraph Chinese-English translation, the content of Chinese-English translation is to introduce Chinese traditional culture and comparison between Chinese and western cultures. For example, in December 2017 of CET 4, the content of translation is to introduce the Huang Mount and Hua Mount unique landscape and humanities. In June 2017, is to introduce the Yangtze river basin, the Yellow river basin and the Pearl river basin. In December 2016, the content of translation is to introduce the connotation of yellow,

red and white in Chinese culture. In June 2016 is to introduce the origin of kites, Chinese kongfu, and the historic town of Wuzhen. In June 2017 of CET 6, the content of translation is to introduce the history of Song Dynasty, Tang Dynasty and Ming Dynasty, in December 2016 is to introduce the changes in China’s tourism and agriculture. In June 2016 is to introduce Chinese-styled long gown, in June 2015 is to introduce Chinese food culture, the history of Han Dynasty. There are three sets of test questions in the preliminary and final exams of the national college competition examined Chinese traditional culture from 2014 to 2018. The propose is to call Chinese people to pay attention to Chinese traditional culture, promote Chinese and English two-way communication and intercultural awareness in college English teaching.

B. The Comparison between the Native Culture and the Target Language Culture is a Good Way to Cultivate Intercultural Awareness

Intercultural communication should be two-way communication between Chinese culture and foreign culture, we are not supposed to pay attention to strengthen the awareness of foreign culture and ignore Chinese culture. If we only focus on the cultivation and input of foreign culture awareness, it is difficult to get through “conception and governor vessels”, and lead to one-sided narrow understanding and literal understanding but can’t understand the real meaning profoundly.

V. THE PATH OF INTERCULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS CULTIVATION

A. Direct Interpretation

There are many words in college English vocabulary belong to vacant words and semi-vacant words which don’t exist in another language culture. The teacher can directly explain the words and presents material object through PPT. Direct interpretation is very useful for learning vacant words and semi-vacant words. For example, the words such as *streamed bread, red couplets, temple fairs, flaming pudding, and milk curd pie* are unique in Chinese and western culture.

B. Comparison

Comparison is a good way to learn different culture. Through comparison and contrast, students will understand the differences of patterns of ideas, customs, and lifestyles. For example, festivals reflect one country’s history, customs and value. Take Qixi and Valentines’s Day as a comparison, Qixi is the seventh day of the seventh lunar months, there is a beautiful legend, Niu Lang and Zhi Nv will meet on a bridge of magpies across the Milky Way on that evening. It’s quite different from the western one! Valentines’s Day will date back to the ancient Roman festival of Luercalia, a fertility celebration commemorated annually on February 15. Pope Gelasius I recast this pagan festival as a Christian feast day in the year 496A.D., declaring February 14 to be St. Valentine’s Day. Western people often send chocolate, rose and cards to their lovers, however Chinese girls will prepare fruits and incense as offerings to Zhi Nv, praying to find their ideal husbands[4].

C. Case Analysis

Case analysis refers to illustrate a cultural word by a real case. For instance, when teaching politeness and hospitality, we can pay more attention to explaining the cultural connotation of this word, we may tell a funny story: Li Hongzhang, a senior official in Qing Dynasty, visited England. He made a speech. In his speech, he modestly said that the dinner was not sumptuous and asked the guests to excuse him. The foreign guests were surprised at his words. The next day, his speech was published in a newspaper. The boss of the hotel was very angry. Li was accused of defaming. From this case we can see the connotation of politeness and hospitality in British and Chinese are quite different. Chinese will be more modest and low profile in compliment. Through case analysis, the students not only know the literal meaning, but also have a better understanding of the culture related to the word. It is effective for learners to cultivate their intercultural communicative competence.

D. Role-playing

Teachers can direct students to make English videos and play English dramas. In second-class, students perform English dramas such as *White Snow and Seven Dwarfs*, *Three Little Pigs*. Using role-play enables students to utilize native language they have learned, to share various information, to act out difficult situations, to solve problems, and to communicate opinions in a relatively authentic environment. Furthermore, role-playing can help understand the occasions on which the cultural differences exist.

E. Original English Video and Films

These original English videos and films are almost acted by English native speakers in their hometown and consequently the scene is real, moving and active. It's a vivid and interesting supplement to classroom teaching. For example, in second-class of this term, students watch "Gone with the wind", "Jane Eyre", "Sons and lovers", "The Adventure of Tom Sawyer" and so on. Through watching original English videos, films, news and events, we can not only appreciate the vivid usage of native language, but also know the setting of the story or news, the setting includes English-speaking countries' lifestyle, geography, history, economic, political system and their world view.

VI. CONCLUSION

Firstly, the problem we should avoid during the process of cultivating intercultural awareness. In the process of cultivating intercultural awareness, we should avoid negative transfer of mother tongue culture. In learning foreign language, due to the cultural inequivalence of Chinese and English words, learners have insufficient understanding of the culture of the target

language, so learners often use mother language culture knowledge to understand target language and result in misreading and misunderstanding, it is the culture negative transfer. The culture inequivalence comes from the non-correspondence and even zero correspondence of culture. For example, "Zhou zhuang dreams butterfly" in Chinese, "Shylock, Waterloo" in English, have some historical allusions and unique meaning, if we don't know the allusions of special cultural connotations, it is impossible to have a deep understanding of their own language. For another example, "cat" in western culture is the embodiment of the devil "Satan", means "vicious people", but in China, "cat" means "lovely and smart people", "kitten" is often used as a nickname between lovers or parents call their own child. The same words "she is a cat." in western culture will be understood "she is a vicious woman.", but Chinese will understand "She is a lovely woman." So negative transfer of mother tongue culture is one of the main reasons to cause the misreading and misunderstanding in intercultural communication.

Secondly, economic globalization makes collision and fusion of diverse cultures feasible and inevitable nowadays. In the process of collision and fusion, strong cultures which based on economic power monopolize main-stream speaking right and squeeze weak culture in underdeveloped countries, this unfair relationship makes weak culture encounter unprecedented challenges. At the same time, if any nation wants to develop its own culture, it can not exclude the excellent elements of foreign cultures. Native culture will develop healthy only if native culture can draw inspiration from foreign cultures. Therefore, while fighting against the cultural hegemony, we should maintain the right to survival of the weak cultures, which is the necessary requirement of multicultural harmonious coexistence.

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