An Exploration of the Teaching Strategies for Culturally-loaded Words in College English

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Abstract: As a symbol of communication bearing national culture, languages vary greatly from each other. As one of the three basic elements of language, vocabulary reflects more of cultural differences. Culturally-loaded words especially show the characteristics of different cultures, they also bring trouble and confusion to English learners. From the perspective of college English teaching, it is necessary to study the special group of words and explore an efficient teaching strategy which helps learners to understand and remember easily. With the knowledge of foreign culture embedded in culturally-loaded words, English learners will be better able to achieve the goal of intercultural communication.

1. Introduction

With an increasing importance of English in the whole process of college study, the requirements for students to have the four basic English skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing are becoming more and more balanced. Although teachers constantly strengthen the practical use of English, the result is not very ideal. In fact, after having mastered a considerable amount of vocabulary and grammar, many students are still unable to communicate freely and fluently in English. It is not entirely caused by their lack of listening or speaking ability, but because they often cannot find the corresponding English words to express their ideas. For example, the Chinese word "Qi" cannot be simply expressed by the English word "air", "gas" or even "angry". In traditional Chinese medicine, it is a very complicated concept relating to breath and body. So, "breath power" or "breath energy" can be understood. In recent years, its Chinese pinyin "Qi" is so popular that it has become a borrowing word in English. This is also a good example of culturally-loaded words. There is no denying that this group of words in English and Chinese has become one of the barriers that affect students' intercultural communication. So, a study on culturally-loaded words is not only of theoretical significance, but also of practical value to college English teaching. This paper will analyze the definition, classification and causes of the words from the perspective of culture, and try to draw some enlightenment to college English teaching strategies.

2. Definition and classification of culturally-loaded words

2.1 Definition

A mature language is always deeply or lightly marked by culture. According to an outstanding American linguist Lado, the way we turn life experience into language and add meaning to it is restricted and influenced by culture, and languages are different from each other because of different cultures (Tan Zaixi, 2000). Some meanings of words exist in one language but not in another. That is to say, the differences of national cultures directly result in the different lexical systems and meanings of expression. For example, Chinese words such as "Peking Opera", "matchmaker" and "spring rolls" reflect Chinese cultural characteristics, but there are no corresponding words in English. In China, peony is often used to symbolize prosperity and auspiciousness, while the English word peony is just a name for a plant with no other connotation attached. Therefore, culturally-loaded words can be defined as: words or phrases, with specific cultural information, are the direct or indirect reflection of national culture in a language (Hu Wenzhong, 1999). Different from general words, which are used

to express cultural commonality, culturally-loaded words are the direct reflection of the uniqueness of culture.

2.2 Classification

Geoffrey Leech proposed in his book *Semantics* that word meanings can be mainly divided into seven types, namely conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, stylistic meaning, affective meaning, reflected meaning, collocative meaning and thematic meaning (Leech, 1974). Combined with his classification, the culturally-loaded words in English and Chinese can be classified into three categories --- the inconsistent meanings of the cultural words in the two languages in terms of conceptual meaning, connotative meaning and reflected meaning.

Conceptual meaning, also being called denotative meaning or cognitive meaning, is the most basic meaning expressed in language communication (Wu Qianguang, 1988). Without it, language communication cannot be carried out. Due to the differences between Chinese and English cultures, the nonequivalence of vocabulary in conceptual meaning is quite common, which is usually known as the phenomenon of "lexical gap". In ancient China, "Zhuangyuan" was the product of the imperial examination system at that time, and there is no equivalent word in English. Similarly, "hippie", emerged in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, has no corresponding words in Chinese with its special concept. Obviously, the former one belongs to the culturally-loaded words of Chinese culture, while the latter is derived from English culture.

Different from the conceptual meaning, the meaning (or communicative value) attached to the conceptual meaning of a word due to its reference is called the connotative meaning (Zhu Yafu, 2005). The nonequivalence of connotative meaning of culturally-loaded words is most common, such as peacock is a symbol of auspiciousness in Chinese culture. But in English, peacock means proud, ostentatious, or triumphant. In Chinese, the word "doll" can be used to compliment a pretty girl, however, that will not be received according to the expression habit of English. A doll often refers to a person who has nothing but appearance. Thus, the connotative meaning shows the precipitation of Chinese and English culture in a deeper level. In the two languages, the color words "Hong" and "red" refer to one color conceptually. But in China, red is the basic color admired by the Chinese, which reflects their pursuit of material and spiritual values. On Spring Festival, red couplets and red lanterns are hung. A traditional Chinese wedding is pasted with a red happiness character. The bride wears a red dress and has a red head covering. Reflected in the application of language, words using "red" as a morpheme generally contain meanings of prosperity, development, smoothness, completeness, and popularity, such as hong yun (good luck), hong bao (lucky money), kai men hong (a good start) and so on. In addition to the traditional meaning of happiness and auspiciousness, "red" was also used to symbolize the just revolution in modern China, such as the Red Army, the Red Base Area, and the Red Detachment of Women. But in English-speaking countries, "red" does not have the cultural connotations that its Chinese counterpart implies. In the phrase "running a business in the red", red stands for deficit. What's more, red flags usually don't mean red flags for revolutions, but they mean situations that call for heightened vigilance (Chang Jingyu, 1995).

In addition to the above two cases, a small number of culturally-loaded words in English and Chinese are caused by the nonequivalence of reflected meaning. Some words in language have the characteristic that when you hear or read them, you always think of something else. The characteristic of words which can cause language users to have some associative thinking is the reflected meaning of words. For example, the numbers six, eight and ten in Chinese will make people think of smooth, rich, and perfect, while the number four represents death and misfortune. The lucky number in English-speaking countries is seven.

3. Causes of culturally-loaded words and its teaching strategies

Every language is deeply rooted in its own national culture and gradually enriched with the development and evolution of different times. After a long period of social changes, people of different ethnic groups have created and developed their own cultures, including modes of production,

lifestyles, social systems, ideologies, traditions, religious beliefs, psychological states, values and so on (Yang Rong, 2016). The fundamental cause of culturally-loaded words lie in the differences among cultures of different nations, and the differences in all aspects of culture are the concrete causes of this group of words. In addition, with the increasingly frequent international exchanges, culturally-loaded words have been integrated into various languages, thus forming a lot of "borrowing words". In fact, in the process of learning English vocabulary in college, culturally-loaded words have always been regarded as a difficulty, because students need to know more about the cultural backgrounds in order to understand them well. To solve this problem, teachers should pay attention to three aspects when they're teaching in class: culturally-loaded words in English, borrowing words derived from English and English proper names. While teaching, various means can be tried to impart English cultural knowledge. Integrating cultural teaching into English teaching helps students deeply understand what they are learning and improve their ability to use the language.

3.1 Make full use of the cultural background in the textbook

Because of the close relationship between words and culture, to master the culturally-loaded words in English, the key is to understand the corresponding cultural background information. English textbooks provide this background very well, so it is worth full use. Take an example, the text *Marriage Across the Nations* gives us a vivid picture of life derived from racial discrimination. This phenomenon has had an impact on language. More often, the white people take the dominant position in English countries. Therefore, the word white in English is often used to express the meaning of beauty, something innocent, pure, clean, and so on. Black, on the other hand, is associated with evil, sin and dirt. A reckless and unprincipled reprobate is called black sheep, a sinister lie is black lie. In contrast, an unimportant lie especially one told to be tactful or polite is called white lie. Whether consciously or not, these words show racial prejudice against black people. For students, it is much easier to remember them with cultural background information.

3.2 Discuss borrowing words from English in class

The conceptual meaning of words in one language is reflected in another language culture as the lack of words, this phenomenon is lexical gap. To make up the gap for intercultural communication, the existence of borrowing words has become an inevitable result. In Chinese, there are many borrowing words from English closely relating to our daily life. Helping students learn these words is also a good way to learn English and understand English culture. Students were once invited to participate in a discussion in class on the topics of "The development of the information age", "The influence of the internet on you" and "The words in the new era" when they were learning the texts of *The Information Superhighway* and *Privacy in the Information Age*. The students enumerated the new terms brought by high technology and intercultural communication in different fields, such as living habits (milkshake, sauna), values (white collar, blue collar), sports (bowling, golf), daily necessities (shampoo, sofa), information networks (modem, hacker) and telecommunications (E-mail, app). In their discussion, some students even mentioned Shakespeare's contribution to the English vocabulary. From the effect, this classroom activity not only enlivens the atmosphere, but also improves students' enthusiasm and participation. They pool their wisdom and fully summarize the borrowing words encountered in life, making up for the shortcomings of teachers' leading mode in class.

3.3 Use multimedia to improve the teaching effect of English proper names

Proper names are a special kind of cultural words existing in every language, which can reflect the characteristics of a nation and a culture. But they also cause students a lot of trouble in learning English. A study by Ying Wang of the University of Southern Mississippi shows that there are two main barriers to listening comprehension among Chinese students abroad, namely, the names of people and specific words (Ying Wang, 2002). Due to different naming habits, people and place names in English are generally longer and sometimes even use several words to express. These names tend to cause more confusion when they appear in conversation. Students admitted that if they were

not familiar with the names, they would get nervous and eventually misunderstand the whole sentence.

While, for years, it has been common to emphasize the teaching of verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions neglecting the interpretation of such culturally-loaded words. In fact, according to statistics, there will be as many as 96 proper names in an intensive reading textbook. While teaching, the use of multimedia provides a very good way for the explanation of this kind of words. For example: when the Louvre, the Grand Banks and the Statue of Liberty are mentioned in the texts, their images can be displayed on the screen to impress students through visual sense. Even Beethoven's *to Alice*, movie clips from *Hamlet* and *Beauty and the Beast* can be played by multimedia in order to give students a direct perception. At the same time, it would be better to organize a discussion about the details of the images and related stories that students know. Obviously, this teaching method makes the learning of these abstract names become no longer boring and tedious, it helps students understand and remember them more easily.

4. Conclusion

Enough attention should be paid to culturally-loaded words in college English. In teaching activities, teachers should strive to integrate vocabulary teaching with cultural teaching to enable students to understand not only the literal meanings of the words, but to deeply understand their cultural connotations. Meanwhile, it is necessary for teachers to adopt some effective teaching strategies, create a pleasant classroom atmosphere, as well as cultivate students' foreign cultural awareness. To ensure the realization of intercultural communication, the obstacles to the understanding of word meanings need to be reduced.

5. Acknowledgements

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