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The Cultivation of Intercultural Communication Competence in the Teaching of English Vocabulary of Junior High School

Min Yao

School of Foreign Language, Sichuan Normal University, Chengdu 610000, China

Abstract: Language and culture are closely interrelated. Vocabulary, as the most basic element of language, highlights the most important culture element in a certain culture inevitably. Therefore, vocabulary teaching seems a helpful way to cultivate the intercultural communication competence of junior high school students. Thus, the study investigates the impact of vocabulary teaching on the cultivation of intercultural communication competence in junior high school. It is based on the discussion about the meaning differences between English vocabulary and Chinese vocabulary and their reasons. And it reveals two strategies, etymology method and English-Chinese comparison method, aiming to cultivate intercultural communication competence of Junior High School in the teaching of English vocabulary.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication Competence; Vocabulary Teaching.

1. Introduction

Deardorff regarded the intercultural communication competence as the global competence, and it meant the ability to perform appropriately in certain communication context based on personal intercultural knowledge, intercultural skills and intercultural attitudes [1].

Culture is closely related to language. Language is a part of culture, and it is also the carrier of culture, which carries cultural meanings. Words, as the most active part of a language system, carry culture elements inevitably. And a word, as the smallest independent unit in a language, carries the most prominent culture information unique to a certain country or region. Hurst also claimed that vocabulary contains rich culture elements. For instance, the word "individualism" is mostly positive in the English context, but derogatory in the Chinese context [2]. Thus, people can develop deep understanding of national and foreign cultures and intercultural communication competence through vocabulary teaching.

2. The Difference between English Vocabulary and Chinese Vocabulary

There are some words that have same conceptual meanings and have rich associative meanings in a certain language but not in another. In other words, some words with rich meanings in one language may be just a literal symbol in another language. The words regarding plants are sound examples. Plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo, chrysanthemums have deep associative meanings in Chinese culture, which are often used to reflect the good qualities that a gentleman carries in Chinese. The plum blossom is a symbol of purity, the orchid symbolizes the worldly sage who is unscrupulous and ignorant, the bamboo symbolizes the humble gentleman with an unyielding backbone and a humble mind, and the chrysanthemum symbolizes the hermit who lives in seclusion in the mountains and forests. However, plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo and chrysanthemums are all just flowers in English and have no associative meaning. Daffodils in Chinese just refer to a type of flower, but in English, daffodils have a pleasant meaning and symbolize spring. British poet William Wordsworth used the image of daffodils in his masterpiece *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud* to show his affection for nature.

In addition to the first type words mentioned above, there are some words with same conceptual meanings but totally opposite associative meanings in Chinese and English. For instance, Chinese people always associate “red” with happiness and good luck. Red packets are given during the Spring Festival. Red clothes are required in Chinese wedding to wear, invitation cards should also be red, all the decoration of the room should be red. “Red” is associated with Chinese politics and patriotism as well. The national flag of China is the five-star Red flag. Chinese Army is called Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Red Army. “Red”, on the other hand, carries more negative meanings in English. The English-spoken people have always associated “red” with evil, violence and blood. That was the reason why David Hawkes, a British translator translated “Hong LouMeng” as *The Story of the Stones* rather than *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Besides words about color, some words related to animals carry opposite associative meanings. For example, “blue” has other symbolic meaning. Firstly, it conveys sad mood. Thus, “she looks blue today” means “she looks sad today”. Secondly, it refers people of noble blood. The aristocracy of Europe was called blue-blood. The sentence “They are blue-eyed boys” doesn’t mean boys with blue eye. It refers to people who are favored by the authority. Thirdly, it is also associated with pornography, such as blue movies, blue talk and so on. However, “blue” is just a literal symbol of color in Chinese without such associative meanings.

There are some Chinese words that can not be found in English and some English words don’t have equivalent words in Chinese. This common phenomenon is called lexical gap, which can reflect the differences between Chinese and English to the greatest extent. For example, “ke qi”, “guan xi” in Chinese are hard to be translated as English. Moreover, some Chinese words for traditional Chinese foods lack their counterparts in English, such as zongzi, tangyuan, double

ninth cake, Laba porridge. Furthermore, some words about Chinese medicine are also hard to find equivalents in English, such as “yin xu”, “yang kang” “xue wei”, “jing luo” and so on. And there are also some English words that lack counterparts in Chinese, such as hippie, punk and so on.

3. Reasons for the Differences

Differences between Chinese and English vocabulary are caused by a variety of factors. Due to the space limitations, this chapter mainly discuss two main factors, religious belief and thinking patterns.

3.1. The Reason of Religious Beliefs

Religion, as a major source of cultural values, is able to explain the differences between English and Chinese vocabulary. In western countries, the Christianity beliefs shared by certain group of adherents reflect in vocabulary. For example, number “six six six” is an inauspicious symbol in the West, referring to the devil, Satan. Because the Bible uses three "6s" to write in conjunction to represent the symbol of the devil, representing the evil forces led by Satan. In addition, six is imperfect in west countries because God created the world in seven days, according to the Bible. So, the number seven represents perfection and holiness in west countries. While six is considered an imperfect number, “six six six” repeats imperfection three times, symbolizing extreme imperfection. In New Mexico, USA, there was once a highway named 666, known as the "Devil's Highway", tourists were so frightened that the local government had to change its name. On the contrary, six is an auspicious number in China, which represents luck, auspiciousness, etc. What’s more, number thirteen is also a taboo word for western people because of the influence of Christianity. At the Last Supper, Jesus was betrayed by Judas, the thirteenth attendee of the dinner. Thus, number thirteen was associated with betrayal from then on. In China, Confucianism has played a principal role in the life of billions of Chinese for thousands of years. Many cultural expressions of Confucianism can’t find complete English equivalents because these words symbolize unique Confucianism culture. For example, “Ren”, “Li”, “Xiao”, “Ti”, “Zhong yong” don’t have complete equivalents in English.

3.2. The Reason of Thinking Patterns

Language and thinking are interrelated [3]. Thus, the differences of thinking patterns can give casual explanations for differences on vocabulary. Different geographical environments, historical origins, and cultural traditions can lead to great differences in thinking. Researches shows English is abstract thinking while Chinese is concrete thinking [4]. This difference can be reflected on their vocabulary. For example, there are a large number of abstract nouns in English, which are formed by abstract ways, such as conversion, compounding, derivation, etc. And prepositions in English also contain rich meanings. On the contrary, Chinese words are concrete. Their literal signs bear close relationship to their meanings. Therefore, Chinese characters are very intuitive. “yu”, “ri”, “yue”, “ren” are reasonable examples whose literal forms can reflect their meanings intuitively. Moreover, the meanings of Chinese vocabulary are more general, while the meanings of English vocabulary are more specific [5]. This is why some Chinese words can’t find complete equivalents in English. For example, there is no equivalent to Chinese word “niu”.

4. Strategies to Cultivate Intercultural Communication Competence in Vocabulary Teaching of Junior High School

In view of the difference between Chinese and English vocabulary and its reasons, the author proposed two strategies to cultivate intercultural communication competence in vocabulary teaching of junior high school and give some concrete examples. They are etymology method and English-Chinese comparison method.

4.1. Etymology Method

Etymology is a study of investigating the origin and the development history of a certain word or phrase [6]. Over 70% of modern English vocabulary are borrowed from other languages, such as Latin, Greek, French, etc. Others are derived from ancient Greco-Roman mythology, religious beliefs, literary stories, etc. Etymology method refers to explanations of etymology stories behind words so as to incorporate relevant cultural background knowledge in vocabulary teaching. For example, students of first-year junior high school often be confused with twelve months in English, which are not easy for them to memorize. One way worth trying is to explain etymology stories explicitly behind them. January is associated with a patron saint named Janus who has two faces, one forward, one backward, one looking back at the past and the other looking into the future in Roman mythology. Thus, his name is regarded as the first month of a year. February is derived from Februarius, a festival in ancient Rome, in which people kill animals and drink to make a confession. The remaining months in English also have related etymology stories. Explanation of the etymology stories behind English words is beneficial to students’ vocabulary learning. It not only helps students remember words more easily, but also increases the interest of vocabulary learning. More importantly, students can be exposed to foreign language cultures, ensuring the acquisition of culture knowledge, which is necessary to develop their intercultural communication competence.

4.2. English-Chinese Comparison Method

English-Chinese comparison method is not new in the field of foreign language teaching. Many scholars abroad and at home have discussed it. Lado proposed culture comparison method in 1957, which emphasized the comparison of different cultures [7]. Zhang Hua, a domestic scholar, also pointed out that English-Chinese comparison method can help learners learn culturally loaded words and he advocated the comparison between vocabulary with the same conceptual meanings but different associative meanings [8]. Teachers can consciously compare these words in the process of vocabulary teaching, so that students can grasp the meaning of vocabulary more deeply and understand the cultural differences between China and the West. For example, dog in English is a word with positive meanings. There are many phrases and idioms related to dog, such as “Love me, love my dog”, “You, lucky dog”, “Every dog has his day” and so on. On the contrary, dog in Chines is a word that usually has negative meanings. There are many phrases and idiom related to dog in Chinese, such as “zou gou”, “gou yan kan ren di”, which are derogatory. In sum, Students can perceive the similarities and differences in the language structure and culture between their mother tongue and the target language.

And it also develops students' sensitivity and awareness of intercultural communication, which is conducive to cultivate their intercultural communication competence.

5. Conclusion

Intercultural communication competence, as an objective in English Curriculum Standard, plays a critical role in the students' life-long learning. At the same time, vocabulary teaching is a core element of classroom English teaching. Thus, teachers can incorporate intercultural communication competence into vocabulary teaching, so as to cultivate students' intercultural communication competence in the process of vocabulary teaching. Etymology method and English-Chinese comparison method prove helpful in cultivating students' intercultural communication competence. Teachers can employ these methods in the vocabulary teaching, which help students differentiate the differences between Chinese and English vocabulary, explain culture information behind vocabulary and cultivate their intercultural communication competence. However, there are some problems in the cultivation of intercultural communication competence due to the interference of the mother tongue, the limited class period and the lack of teachers' attention. In order to solve these problems, teachers need to make extra efforts. Firstly, teachers need to build an awareness of intercultural communication so as to infiltrate Chinese and Western cultures into different teaching segments. Secondly, teachers should improve their professional qualities. The premise of cultivating students' intercultural communication competence is that teachers have relevant intercultural communication. Therefore, teachers should continuously improve their professional level and understand the connotations and differences between Chinese and Western cultures.

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