

Cultural Connotation in English Vocabulary Teaching

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Abstract:

This paper expresses the importance and the relationship between cultural connotation and English vocabulary teaching. It also points out some differences and problems in vocabulary instruction in China and introduces some techniques for teaching culture.

Key Word: vocabulary teaching cultural connotation techniques

I. Cultural Connotation and Vocabulary

1.1 . The role of vocabulary

Vocabulary was treated as incidental to language teaching and both language teachers and researchers only paid attention to the studying of grammatical knowledge about the language for many years. Recently lexis and lexical phrases have come to play a very important role in language teaching and learning. Lexis has become more important than structures – teachers have noticed that if a person does not know certain words and expressions he/she will find it very difficult to express what he/she wishes to say. Many researchers agree that lexis is at least as important as structure, because it is using wrong words and not wrong grammar that usually breaks down communication. Mistakes in lexis much more often lead to misunderstanding and may be less generously tolerated outside classroom than mistakes in syntax. (Carter 1987:145).

A significant role of vocabulary in both teaching and learning processes, first stated by Stephen Krashen (1985:155) in *The Natural Approach* is like this:

“Vocabulary is basic for communication. If acquirers do not recognize the meaning of the key words used by those who address them they will be unable to participate in the conversation. If they wish to express some idea or ask for information they must be able to produce lexical items to convey their meaning. ”

Taylor (1990:1) also emphasized the essentiality of vocabulary knowledge:

“In order to live in the world, we must name it. Names are essential for the construction of reality for without a name it is difficult to accept the existence of an object, an event, a feeling.”

Words are basic tools in human communication, therefore they determine the main part of people’s life – relationships between people and associations with the surrounding world that people live in. *“Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.”* (Wilkins 1976, after Lewis 1993:115). The larger one’s vocabulary, the easier it is to express one’s thoughts and feelings. A language learner with a poor vocabulary may find it difficult to read and write well, hard to understand what others speak and fail to speak correctly and idiomatically. This, in turn, may cause many misunderstandings in the real communication and be wrongly interpreted by the receiver of the message.

The learners’ knowledge of words is also very important in developing and improving their reading ability, in promoting and fostering listening comprehension, and in enhancing their communicative skills. This knowledge helps students to be more fluent and proficient in the four basic linguistic skills. So, learners should enrich and expand their knowledge of words as much as possible in order to communicate effectively in a foreign language.

1.2. The nature of culture

According to Brooks (1975), out of numerous definitions of culture, two are of the biggest importance for people interested in teaching language in context: *“culture as everything in human life”* and *“culture as the best in human life.”*

Rivers (1981:316) expresses his idea of the word culture as:

“Children growing up in a social group learn ways of doing things, ways of expressing themselves, ways of looking at things, what things they should value and what things they should despise or avoid, what is expected to them and what they may have expected of others. These attitudes, reactions, and unspoken assumptions become part of their way of life without their being conscious of them. Yet culturally determined features may be recognized in their

actions, social relationships, moral convictions, attractions and revulsions; through the institutions their social group establishes and conserves; and in the art and literature which the members of the group produce and appreciate.”

Goodenough's (1997:675) widely cited definition of culture defines the term in the following way:

“A society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members. Culture is not a natural phenomenon; it does not consist of things, people's behaviour or emotions. It is rather an organisation of these things. It is the form of things that people have in mind, their models of perceiving, relating and interpreting them.”

Culture, in this sense, is knowledge, which is shared and linked with people. And culture refers to all aspects of a shared life within a certain society. It is a set of rules and behaviour patterns of the people who live in one nation, which consist of the basis of a model of life and the society. Language, seen as a container and creator of meaning, is an important aspect of the anthropological phrase of culture and the two aspects of language and culture can never be separated.

1.3. The relationship between language and culture

Language is not an abstraction existing in a vacuum, but a described verbal reaction in a given cultural framework, the purpose of which is to communicate with another human being. If you want to communicate with the people from other cultures, the first necessary is to learn and understand the cultural influence on their behaviours and also on their activities and the forms of linguistic expressions.

A language does not exist on its own but is embedded in the culture of a people and reflects the beliefs and sentiments of the speech community. Malinowski (1946:44) has argued that *“language is essentially rooted in the reality of the culture, the tribal life and customs of the people, and ... it cannot be explained without constant reference to these broader concepts of verbal utterance.”*

Every language has specific vocabulary items, the concepts of which are totally different in another language.

The meaning of a word is not absolute in any language. It is strongly influenced by social conventions. According to Sapir (Mandelbaum 1958:12), language is “*perfect symbolism of experience*”. The full meaning of a typical individual word is the result of experience that he has with that word in the cultural setting in which he has grown up. Because of this interrelationship between language and culture it is difficult to establish exact equivalent between words and expressions in two languages. Even if the words sometimes correspond in denotation, they may vary in connotation, or the emotional associations they arouse.

For example, *white*, denoting a colour, it often associates with “pure, noble and moral goodness”, and the bride is dressed in white during the wedding in most western countries. In China, the bride must wear red in the traditional wedding, definitely not white. Because *Red* means “happiness, good luck, flourishing and prosperous” in the future, and people only wear white in funerals when one’s family member or relative is dead. *White* in China, it associated with “pale, weak and without vitality”. Thus, learning a language implies not only the knowledge of its grammar rules and the denotative meanings of words but it involves much more, such as the culture phenomena, the way of life, habits and customs, history and everything that is contained of culture.

Since language and culture are deeply embedded and they can not be broken off. As Vera Simone (1987:37) puts it “*language is culture*”. When we learn a language we do not simply learn words, we also should learn the ways of thinking, ordering the universe and finding one’s way in it. Since every language is deeply rooted in its culture, teaching culture cannot be neglected. Cultural instruction is extremely crucial in the teaching/learning process since it can help the learners grasp the subtleties and different shadows of a foreign language.

1.4. The importance of culture in language and vocabulary teaching

The study of another culture has a great effect on the students’ motivation to learn a

second language and encourage them to develop tolerance of other viewpoint and various ways of behaviour. For the last 20 years, China has been carrying out “open-door policy” to the outside world, the world political, economic, social and technological developments have become more inevitable than ever before. Most students who study English language in China often suffer from “culture shock” when they find that there are many ways of looking at things, many ways of doing and expressing things, which are completely different from their own native forms.

In order to reduce culture shock, the students should learn by comparison and contrast a lot of their culture as they try to understand the culture of the target language. A cross-cultural learning experience leads to self-awareness and personal growth. That shows a definitely idea that

teaching culture should not be neglected and at same time it contributes considerably to general cultural awareness as well as self-awareness.

II. Teaching vocabulary and teaching culture

Language teachers and students should understand that there is a big difference in the connotative meanings of vocabulary of the target language. Everybody should recognize that people in the world are not the same. Students should not only learn the language, but also learn how to respect, value or appreciate the personhood of every human being. So language teachers are very important in the target language instruction.

2.1 The role of the teacher

Since the primary task of a language teacher is to teach language, he/she should, at the same time introduce the cultural knowledge to the process of language learning. The teaching of cultural knowledge should be integrated with the teaching of language patterns and lexicon. Otherwise, learners will go adrift from the basic task of language learning.

In classroom instruction of English, many language teachers have done a great deal to teach cultural contents, some present culture in terms of fine arts, geography and history,

some focus on sociological behaviour and others emphasize patterns of verbal and non-verbal communication. Still others focus on values and attitude. No matter in what way the language teachers practise in their classroom, the learners still have difficulties in dealing with situation of different cultural background. So both the teachers and learners should realize that the emphasis must put on the development of the learners' cultural awareness skills rather than on the transmission of cultural facts.

No culture is static. Patterns of behaviour and other cultural aspects of a society continue to change as the world is changing and they evolve under the impacts of events and contact with other cultures. So, the most important task of language teachers is not only to teach the target cultural contents but also teach skills that enable learners to sort out cultural facts for themselves and deal with the cross-cultural situations they are encountering in the real communication.

Since many teachers don't live and study in the foreign language and cultural environment, they should make up for this lack of cultural knowledge study. Firstly, literature works offer a lot of information about the life of the people whose language is being studied --- what they eat, how they dress, how their political systems work, what sports they take part in, and so on. Through this literature we can achieve the goal of giving the students insights into different ways of life. So, in teaching culture in the classroom, teacher is the crucial factor and teacher himself/herself not only understands its importance of culture in language and vocabulary learning, and at the same time, teacher also needs to learn various of techniques for teaching the cultural knowledge to the students.

2.2. Some techniques of teaching culture

Teaching the knowledge of English language is not the only requirement for teachers, they also have the responsibilities for teaching something about the target culture and for developing the students' communicative competence as well as linguistic competence. That is because the language teacher's task is not only to teach students to be able to produce correct grammatical sentences, but also teach them to use these sentences contextually appropriate in real communication.

Language teachers have a better understanding of their responsibilities in teaching target culture, then, choosing to use effective and practical techniques to teach culture and bring cultural facts into foreign language classroom is also very important. Here are some techniques for introducing cultural elements while teaching a language in the classroom.

The most frequently used method, as suggested by W. Rivers (1981), is “**exposition and explanation**”. It is based on “teachers’ talk” and speech about culture. In language classroom, teachers give talks and speeches to the students in class, introducing plenty of information about geographical knowledge, the historical events of countries and people, their special literary or artistic achievements, their different customs and festivals and even the procedures of everyday life of ordinary people. The crucial factor to the success of cultural teaching is to choose suitable cultural materials for language learners at different age groups.

Dialogue: For beginners, dialogue is usually considered an excellent tool for introducing and conveying cultural items and patterns of a certain behaviour. Both the language and cultural items expressed in the dialogue should be natural and easy to be understood by the learners. The teachers should select the materials according to the different levels, the age and interests of the language learners. Similarities and differences between the native and non-native cultural items should be included in the dialogues carefully chosen by the teachers. First, the learners are required to learn and memorize the dialogue and then try to act it out with the guidance of the teachers. They should practice through role-playing and will be able to identify with the speakers of the dialogue. In this way they can gain a lot information and insight to the target culture. Practising dialogues can offer a lot of opportunities for the learners to improve their skills needed in the real communication. The learners can learn the skills to express their emotions and to behave properly in a particular situation. Through these activities, teachers try to focus on particular aspects of conversational style in English.

Pictures and films: another useful way of providing cultural knowledge is to use pictures and films to show the life of the people of the given country. The teacher

should carefully select the pictures and films in which should illustrate at least one particular aspect of cultural behaviour, and show the way of life as people lived at the past and present time. Teachers should help the learners to enjoy the stories and explain the living experience of the foreign culture and analyse the cultural contents presented through the pictures and films, for observation alone can be misleading to learners.

Songs and dances: songs and dances is another easy and common way to introduce culture. Many traditional dances and songs full of the information about culture can be taught to the learners both inside and outside of the classroom. They learn to sing and dance and at same time they can get the better understanding what the native speakers want to express through them, whether happiness or depression. Songs and dances are usually real records of what happened in particular time and places. It is also very important to choose the appropriate songs and dances for different ages, different levels and interests of the language learners.

Course books and reading materials: according to W. Rivers (1981) a very useful way of teaching culture is through textbooks and readings in which provide learners with the knowledge about the foreign culture. Short stories, poems, scenes from plays, and articles from leading newspapers and magazines all can be adopted in course book and they have been treated as wonderful contents for classroom instruction. Reading materials should be representative of contemporary attitudes and situations in the modern language. The learners can choose the interesting articles and with the help of the teacher, discuss them and compare the native culture with the foreign one.

At the advanced level the students will get most of their cultural understanding from the study of **literature**. Literature, as we all know, reflects the life and culture of a person and a nation. The study of a foreign literature therefore enables learners to experience the target culture through artistic means.

In addition to the techniques mentioned above, there are still some other useful methods of teaching culture. Weather they are appropriate and practical or not should be judged by the teachers according to their own situations and the learners' necessities.

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