About Differences of English-Chinese Culture-loaded Words in Cross-cultural Communication for Chinese College Minority Preliminary Students

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Abstract. There are more than 55 minority groups in China, most of which live in some remote mountainous areas, and the students there are poor in English during middle and senior school study, especially, in cross-cultural communication. As to English-Chinese cross-cultural communication, besides the culture itself, attentions also need to be paid to differences of culture-loaded words. In this thesis, in order to cultivate college minority preliminary students’ ability of cross-cultural communication, we will analyze three kinds of culture-loaded words with cultural differences between Chinese and English, namely, numbers, animals and colors.

Introduction

Cross-cultural communication refers to bilingual or inter-lingual communication, on the other hand, refers to the communication between people under different educational background. Generally speaking, during the cross-cultural communication, we need to focus on the figures with cultural difference, apart from the language itself [6]. There exist various factors may interfere the cross-cultural communication. As for the language itself, words, tenses, voices and logic all value, while customs, religions, beliefs and opinions do count.

According to the official paper delivered by the Educational Department in March, 1984—Opinions About How To Improve the Study of Minority Students before College Entrance under the leadership of the CPC, college minority students are supposed to get an overall development during the college preliminary study period, including, fundamental knowledge, basic learning skills, and good habits and interests. As for English study, it’s very hard for the traditional teaching style to meet the challenge of this new century, because the college minority preliminary students are expected to enhance their basic skills of reading and writing, then, improve their ability of listening and speaking in certain specific situations [10]. However, due to the previous poor English study, some minority students are lack of the sense of cross-cultural communication, so they are always confused about differences of culture-loaded words, and make mistakes in the choice of these kinds of words from time to time. Based on these mistakes and misconceptions, it’s necessary to cultivate their ability in English-Chinese cross-cultural communication.

Origins of Cultural-loaded Words

Culture is featured for the nation it originates from and stands for the geography, biology, society, economy, history, custom, value of the nation [5]. Since culture is closely related to the language of it reflects, in the early of the 20th century, American linguist named E. Spair said that there is something behind the language, so language can’t live without its culture, from which, we can draw three important conclusions: 1) language is an important component of culture; 2) language reflects its culture as a mirror; 3) there are mutual interferes between language and its culture [6]. Therefore, the differences of language are represented by its cultural figures. During the English-Chinese communication, Chinese students always tend to make mistakes in choosing the proper English
words to convey their meanings, producing so many Chinese-English, such as, “good good study, day day up”; “give you some color to see”, etc. [5]. This kind of words are called Chinglish, and enjoy popularity among students, especially minority preliminary students, for their poor appreciation and level of Chinese caused by their previous school education, where most communicative language is local language instead of mandarin Chinese.

Comparison about Culture-loaded Words

Since there are differences between Chinese and English culture-loaded words, which has a negative effect on cross-cultural communication for Chinese minority preliminary students, in this paper, we will focus on three kinds of English-Chinese culture-loaded words that confuse the Chinese minority preliminary students most in their cross-cultural communication, namely, colors, numbers, and animals.

Colors

Colors can bring people different feelings, for bright colors give people warmth and pleasure, even comfort, while cold colors make people calm and relaxed. During the English-Chinese cross-cultural communication, attentions should be paid to those colors with cultural differences.

The time when we talk about color Green, the first impression for Chinese is energetic, but it differs in English, as “a green eye” means jealousy, and “a green hand” shows that a person who is inexperienced.

For most Chinese students, color Red is an auspicious symbol, represents happiness, fortune and good luck, whereas, in English, red is equivalent to violence, bleeding, so when people are angry, they tend to say: “I am red, now.” Once there even was a queen in Britain called Bloody Mary for her cold cruel reign.

Yellow is always adopted by the Chinese male adults to make fun of their friends at dinner, because it’s related to something pornographic, so there are Yellow films, and Yellow Books in China. But in English, yellow has nothing to do with the pornographic images, “a yellow liver” means a kid who is very timid and coward; “Yellow book” refers to a vital official paper delivered by the government.

White is considered as color of death according to the Chinese culture, so people choose to dress in white to attend a funeral ceremony as a kind of grief, while in English, white is chosen as the color of wedding to represents the purity of the love, that’s to say, white is auspicious color in English, so there are many idioms about white, likely, “white man” praises a man with courtesy; “a white lie” means the reason of lying is not to cheat but protect. However, everything has exception. Sometimes white isn’t regarded as purity. For example, “a white elephant” means something useless but expensive [2].

Though blue always reminds Chinese people of peace and silence, it contains various meanings, “blue music” refers to the music makes us sad and depressed; “blue movies” is equal to the pornographic movies, and “be born with blue blood” is the same as “be born with a silver spoon [3]; “be in blue” shows that someone who is so depressed.

Animals

During the history of human civilization, animals always company with people, and some of them are playing a more and more important role in people’s life. In Chinese minority groups, some animal are usually respected as some kind of natural mysterious powerful symbol of spirit, which is worshiped by the whole nation and its people generation by generation, decades by decades, and the so-called symbol of spirit is written as totem, in Chinese, Tuteng into the heart of minorities. Besides showing respect to their totem animals, teachers also need to be careful about other animals to avoid their cultural taboos. Among the 55 minority groups, some are Moslems, to whom, pig or swine is a taboo, for according to the Koran, dirty both in body and mind, pig will stain the soul of
the people who eat it, which can be traced back to their ancestors about hundreds of years ago [7]. So in the cross-cultural communication, teachers should try to avoid talk about these taboos of animals to show respect to the students themselves and their belief.

Chinese always look down upon dog, although they also count on dog in door keeping, and they condemn the despicable guys as dogs. Oppositely, in English, dog enjoys the most popularity as a pet for its loyalty, so there are so many idioms about dog, for example, “Love me, love my dog.” [4] “a lucky dog” “Every dog has its day.”

Compared with dogs, cats win the hearts of Chinese and gain more popularity in China, for cats are closely related to money, let alone its lovely appearance. The same as the Chinese, westerners also call their lovers kitties, but, they still prefer dogs to cats. “Like a cat on hot bricks” reveal a person who is curious and worried; “Let the cat out of the bag” [3] vividly depicts someone tells the secrets when talking big.

Dragon is considered as a noble powerful animal figure in Chinese culture, and it influences the whole history of Chinese civilization, for emperors of different dynasties chose dragon as the symbol of themselves. Whereas, dragon is believed as an evil monster which brings disaster, misery and suffering in English speaking countries [9]. For instance, “She is a bit of dragon in the neighborhood.” may reveal that she never cares about the feelings and life of her neighbors, but selfish and mean to everybody in the neighborhood.

Numbers

When we talk about culture-loaded words, the first kind of words appearing to mind are numbers, for they are widely used in our daily life by accountants, engineers, mathematicians, students and architectures. The culture of numbers is featured for number worships and number taboos [8]. During the English-Chinese cross-cultural communication, to make clear about the specific meaning differences of English-Chinese numbers, Chinese minority preliminary students have to understand the Chinese cultural images of some basic numbers.

The most favorite number for Chinese is Five, for it means nobility and harmony, and lots of proverbs are about number Five. But in English, sometimes five means unlucky. For instance, “five-finger” refers to thieves [2]; “a man with five o’clock shadow” refers to a man who has mustaches and looks sloppy and listlessly.

Number Four is avoided by most Chinese businessmen, for its Chinese pronunciation is “si” the same as the pronunciation of word “die” in Chinese, so it hardly appears in Chinese people’s telephone numbers or license numbers. However, number Four sometimes carries a negative meaning in English, like “forty-four” refers to prostitutes; “four-letter words” refers to dirty words [1]. Number four for Chinese is the same as number Thirteen for westerners, because it is written in the bible story that Jesus once was betrayed by one of his twelve disciples maned Judas for thirteen silver coins on the 13th day. So there is no ward or floor named thirteen in western countries.

Number Six is the most auspicious number in Chinese, for it means success and good luck, so it is widely used in telephone and license numbers. As it writes in the Bible, God creates humans in the sixth day, only to find that all the humans have lots of shortcomings, so number Six is condemned in English [9]. For example, “six penny” means valueless; “hit somebody for six” means to give somebody a destructive hit [2]; “at sixes and sevens” is equal to ups and downs.

Since number Seven is connected with death, it always expresses sadness and sorrow in Chinese, which differs in English. As “seven” is similar to “heaven” in pronunciation, so westerners prefer number Seven to any other numbers [1]. Therefore, they create many advertisements with number Seven, namely, “mild seven” a kind of cigarette; “Seven Up” a kind of beverage. Especially, the Boeing company is fond of name all of it planes with number seven, like, “Boeing 777”; “Boeing 737”; “Boeing 767” and so on.

Conclusion

Language originates from and embodies culture during the cross-cultural communication.
Attentions should be paid to the cultural differences between Chinese and English to avoid the cultural taboos of the listener [9], thus, in the English teaching for Chinese minority preliminary students, how to help students understand figures with cultural differences enjoys top priority; how to cross cultural barriers is something that should be taken into consideration for both teachers and students. Meanwhile, as a kind of bilingual communication, a successful English-Chinese cross-cultural communication only proceeds with a good appreciation and accumulation of both Chinese and English. As it’s said that Rome was not built in a day, to improve the communicative ability of Chinese minority preliminary students, attention should be paid to their national characteristics from teachers and families, as well as the whole societies for a quite long time.

References


