Investigation on Chinese College Students’ English Expressiveness of Chinese Cultural Vocabulary in Independent College

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Keywords: Expressiveness, Cultural Vocabulary, Chinese, English, Independent College.

Abstract. Basing on Aphasia of Chinese culture in English teaching and learning, this paper investigated Chinese students’ expressiveness of Chinese cultural vocabulary in an independent college by vocabulary translation test. The results indicated that Chinese college students’ expressiveness of Chinese cultural vocabulary was far from satisfactory. After analyzing the reasons for their poor English expressiveness of Chinese words related to Chinese culture, suggestions were also proposed to improve students’ ability to express Chinese culture.

Introduction

In English teaching in China, there has been a common phenomenon that English teachers and learners always overemphasize the learning of English language and culture while ignore the due role of Chinese culture in English learning. This negligence of Chinese culture has brought about negative influence to English teaching and learning in China, which is reflected directly by the lack of Chinese culture input in English teaching materials [1], the English courses overstressing English culture [2] and so on. After decades of focusing on English culture learning and neglection of input of Chinese culture in English teaching and learning, the aphasia of Chinese culture appears among English learners in China[3], namely many young Chinese scholars excellent in English can’t express Chinese culture efficiently and profoundly in the process of communicating with westerners.

For college students’ lack of competence to express Chinese culture, many scholars and college English teachers proposed some suggestions to improve Chinese college students’ expressiveness of Chinese culture. Hua Ying pointed out that the key to improving English learners’ ability of expressing Chinese culture in China is to cultivating their cross-cultural awareness as well as heightening the excellent traditional Chinese culture[4]. Guo Lili put forward that improving the English teachers’ capability of accepting and digesting native culture and knowledge was beneficial to cultivate students’ communication ability [5]. Liu Xiaqing raised the methods to introduce Chinese culture in the second language acquisition to inspire students’ interest in English learning, their sense of pride and the awareness of globalization [6].

Despite the progress in the study of Chinese students’ ability of expressing Chinese culture in English, most of them mainly focused on the students in key universities and colleges, rare papers concentrated on the students in independent colleges in China. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct investigations among different participants to enrich the data on this issue. On the basis of phenomena of Chinese culture aphasia, this paper investigated the expressiveness of Chinese college students in an independent college, i.e. Xingzhi College of Xi’an University of Finance and Economics in China via a Chinese-English translation test on Chinese cultural vocabulary. Meanwhile, the reasons for status quo of students’ English expressiveness were also explored and suggestions to improve their English expressiveness of Chinese culture were also proposed.
Research Design

Participants

237 students in an independent college, i.e. Xingzhi College of Xi’an University of Finance and Economics were tested, including 48 English majors and 189 Non-English majors. Among them, there were 51 boys, accounting for 21.5% of the total, and 186 girls, with a percentage of 78.5%. 189 students were sophomores while 48 students were freshmen, accounting for 79.75% and 20.25% of all the students respectively.

Instrument

The test paper entitled Test Paper of the Chinese Students’ Expressiveness on Chinese Cultural Vocabulary in Independent College were designed on the basis of the test paper designed by Lan Jun [7]. According to the students’ real ability of expressing Chinese culture and the English books they used currently, it was adjusted by picking up the most common and frequently-translated Chinese words in the English textbook as well as those tested in CET-4 and CET-6. There were 49 words in total, one point for one with the total score were 49. According to the different aspects of Chinese culture, these words were also divided into five categories, namely (1) 9 words on traditional Chinese festivals, (2) 14 words on history and culture, (3) 12 words on geography, (4) 9 words on current events, and (5) 5 words on Chinese food.

Data Collection

Owing to the difference in class schedule among different majors and different classes, this test was conducted in class separately. In March, 2018, 48 participants from 2 English classes took part in the test, while the other 189 participants from 4 accounting classes participated in the test in June, 2018. 248 papers were handed out and 215 papers were handed in with the effective callback rate of 86.7%.

 Afterwards, the scores students got were input into the data statistics software SPSS 17.0, the sum, range, means, minimum, maximum, standard derivation (SD) and the ratio of average scores / full marks (RASFM) were calculated by SPSS 17.0 and the data was also analyzed.

Results and Discussions

Analysis of the Total Points of Each Participant Got in the Vocabulary Translation Test

According to table 1, the maximum of the total points of all the participants was 32, the maximum 2, with the range of 30, indicating the difference in students’ ability of expressing Chinese culture vocabulary. The average point was only 15.46 with a small ratio (31.55%) of means value (15.46)/ the total points (49), meaning that students’ poor performance in translating Chinese cultural vocabulary into English. The above analysis of the total points got by the participants demonstrated that generally college students in independent colleges showed poor expressiveness in Chinese cultural vocabulary, and there was a big gap in each student’s ability of expressing Chinese culture.

| Table 1. Total Points Got by Each Participant in the Translation Test. |
|-----------------|-------|-----------|-----------|----------|--------|--------|-------|
| Total points    | N     | Range     | Minimum   | Maximum  | Means  | RASFM  | SD    |
|                 | 216   | 30        | 2         | 32       | 15.46  | 31.55% | 5.556 |

Note: RASFM: the ratio of average scores / full marks
SD: standard derivation
Analysis of the Points Got by Participants in Different Cultural Aspects

Table 2 showed students’ scores in different aspects of Chinese culture. Since the total points of each aspect were different, it was difficult to make comparison of the scores of each aspect. For the convenience of comparison, the ratio of means and total (RMTP) points was introduced. According to the data in Table 2, the highest RMTP was only 44.21%, and the lowest 20.09%, indicating it was common for students to perform poorly in expressing Chinese cultural vocabulary. Meanwhile, the difference in RMTP also presented differences in students’ ability of translating vocabulary about different Chinese cultural aspects.

Specifically, the RASFM of Chinese geographical vocabulary was highest, specially the words about the names of cities and provinces. This could be attributed to the settled rules to translate place names, namely when translating such kind of words, it is necessary to obey the rule of combination of two methods, i.e. transliteration and free translation. Generally, translation of proper names adopts pinyin of Chinese characters, and the general name is translated freely. However, the translation of the name of rivers and mountains was far from satisfactory because the English expressions of some of them have been settled and accepted by most Chinese people. For example, the English expression of Huang He is The Yellow River, but some students still translated it into The Huang River.

Some mistranslation of place names directly exhibited the students’ carelessness and misunderstanding of Chinese words. For instance, there were students translating Shanbei (the north part of Shaanxi Province) into Chinese pinyin Shanbei, and Shaanxi into Shanxi (another province next to Shaanxi).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Festaials</th>
<th>Culture and history</th>
<th>Geography</th>
<th>Current events</th>
<th>food</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>5.31</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RASFM</td>
<td>39.15%</td>
<td>26.42%</td>
<td>44.21%</td>
<td>21.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.858</td>
<td>1.923</td>
<td>2.154</td>
<td>1.255</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The RASFM of traditional Chinese festival was 39.15%, only lower than that of geographical vocabulary, which might result from these Chinese proper nouns were quite common and high-frequently used words in English learning. Some of them have been exposed to students as early as primary school or middle school. What’s more, for the translation of these words, there was also easy method to follow. For example, the traditional Chinese jie on Chinese lunar calendar is typically translated into “festival”, such as chunjie for Spring Festival while “jie” on solar calendar is always translated to “Day”. For example, jiaoshijie in September 10th on solar calendar was usually translated into “Teacher’s Day”. Another reason for students relatively high RASFM was students’ increasing exposure to these words. With the development of Internet technology and the fast pace of globalization, Chinese culture is also transmitted to the other countries bilingually, usually in Chinese and English. As the dominant force of the network, it is more likely for young people to be exposed to such words. The high-frequent contact with the English expression of traditional Chinese festivals increases the possibility of mastering them.

For the vocabulary related to historical culture and current events, their RASFM were 26.42% and 21.40% respectively, far lower than the first two categories, which showed students’ lack of competence in understanding and expressing them. It was mainly caused by students’ misunderstanding of them. Take he xie shehui (harmonious society) for an example, some students translated it into “peaceful society” instead of harmonious society because of their incompetence in understanding hexie. The fact that no students translated nvhong correctly further presented students’ incompetence in understanding the exact meaning of some Chinese words, which also demonstrated that appropriate translation needs students to understand or interpret the cultural connation of Chinese words.
Among the five categories of vocabulary related to Chinese culture, RASFM of Chinese food was the lowest, only 20.09%. 31% participants got zero point. Some students could not understand the meaning of Chinese expression *zhongcan* correctly, leading to loss of points. Most students regarded *jiaozi* in Chinese as the equivalent of dumpling in English although there were big difference between them for *Jiaozi* is a kind of food with Chinese characteristics. However, it is surprising to find that several students could translate the name of a very well-known Chinese dish *tangculiji* into English, which could be attributed to students’ correct understanding of it. When asked the reason, students acknowledged that their English teacher explained the meaning of the dish name in a very depressive way, and afterwards, their teacher mentioned the English expression of *Tangcu liji* many times in class.

**Summary**

From the above analysis of students’ total scores as well as the mean points they got in translating Chinese vocabulary in different aspects of Chinese culture, students’ competence in translation Chinese cultural vocabulary is far from satisfactory on the whole. For the words related to different Chinese cultural aspects, students’ translation exhibited their different abilities. For those words frequently contacted by students, they could understand and translated them better, while for those words with deep cultural connotation, they performed poorly relatively.

Therefore, in order to improve students’ expressiveness in translating Chinese cultural vocabulary, it is necessary for teachers, especially English teachers to help cultivate students’ ability of understanding the cultural connation of Chinese words. Meanwhile, students should pay more attention to the rules and methods of translation different kinds of materials related to Chinese culture. Only by mastering these translation rules and methods could they translate Chinese cultural words easily and correctly. Furthermore, students also need to be exposed more to the English expressions of Chinese culture, because frequent contact with the English expression can help keep them in their minds.

**References**


