

This Paper Analyzes the Learning Strategies of Chinese Cultural Words in Second Language Teaching

Jianan Gong

Xi'an Shiyong University, Xi'an, 710065, Shaanxi, China

Abstract: The true mastery of language is often inseparable from cultural understanding, with vocabulary being the most closely and directly linked to culture. Particularly in intermediate and advanced stages of learning, the acquisition of cultural terms has gradually become a key challenge in teaching. Chinese cultural terms, diverse in variety and rich in connotation, constitute a vital component of the Chinese lexicon. In international Chinese education, these cultural terms serve as bridges for cross-cultural communication, helping second language learners better comprehend both the Chinese language and its cultural heritage while improving their linguistic proficiency. This paper analyzes potential errors learners may encounter in second language acquisition through an examination of cultural lexical ontology and internal factors of language acquisition. It further proposes learning strategies to enhance acquisition. We hope this study will provide valuable references for future research on Chinese cultural term acquisition and pedagogy, thereby improving teaching efficiency among international Chinese language instructors, strengthening cultural exchange and input, and ultimately elevating overall educational quality and effectiveness.

Keywords: Second Language, Acquisition Strategies, Cultural Words.

1. Introduction

Language is humanity's unique symbolic system for conveying information and emotions. While its primary function lies in meaning expression, linguistic connotations are not universal but are shaped by cultural and contextual factors. Among language elements, the relationship between vocabulary and culture proves particularly close and direct. In cross-cultural communication, misunderstandings caused by word variations frequently lead to communication barriers among people of different languages. The underlying cause lies in how cultural differences and cognitive patterns imbue words with distinct nuances and special meanings.

With China's growing global influence and the sustained rise of global Chinese language enthusiasm, an increasing number of learners are no longer content with merely acquiring linguistic skills as their primary goal. They also show profound interest in China's rich traditional culture. However, current second language education predominantly focuses on grammar instruction while paying insufficient attention to cultural factors influencing language acquisition. This presents both new opportunities and challenges for international Chinese language education. This paper explores learning strategies for Chinese cultural terms within the context of second language teaching. Through analyzing learners' errors, it identifies that different learning strategies significantly impact acquisition effectiveness, thereby offering practical recommendations for improving the teaching of Chinese cultural vocabulary.

2. Research on the Ontology of Cultural Words

Language itself is a unique cultural phenomenon and a carrier of culture, with their relationship being inseparable. In the fundamentals of language studies, while four linguistic elements and culture are closely intertwined, vocabulary stands out as the most characteristic of its era. It reflects the historical evolution of a nation and society, carries specific

cultural connotations, and embodies distinct ways of thinking and social customs. The definition of Chinese cultural terms has long been debated. British linguist Newmar first proposed the concept of "cultural words," suggesting that terms creating translation barriers due to cultural overlap constitute cultural terms. However, domestic scholars hold differing views: Mr. Wang Guo 'an argues that cultural terms should reflect China's unique material, spiritual, and folk cultures. Scholars Bi Jiwan and Zhang Zhanyi contend that Chinese cultural terms are "the most sensitive areas with target language cultural characteristics that may easily trigger misunderstandings and conflicts in cross-cultural communication."

2.1. According to the Relationship between Word Connotation and Culture

There are many classifications of Chinese cultural words, which convey the unique message of Chinese national culture[1]and including traditional consciousness, moral principles, value systems, philosophical concepts, and religious beliefs. For instance, "filial piety" and "benevolence" reflect traditional Chinese values, while "social relationships" and "face" illustrate unique social phenomena. Terms like "Dragon Boat Festival" and "Spring Festival" exemplify traditional holidays. The most common sources of misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication are semi-lexical gaps and conflicting terms—words sharing conceptual meanings but differing in symbolic significance or emotional connotations.[2]This study primarily adopts Zu Xiaomei's classification from *Cross-Cultural Communication*, analyzing three representative categories of cultural terms: animal names, color terms, and number words through semantic and cultural perspectives.

Color words exist in all languages, but their associative and symbolic meanings vary across cultures. For instance, in Chinese Peking Opera, red represents loyalty while black symbolizes integrity. However, in Indonesian shadow puppetry, red signifies greed whereas black represents tension. Additionally, white traditionally associated with funerals

contrasts sharply with red's auspicious symbolism, which explains the past widespread use of red items at weddings. Yet with the influence of Western culture, white wedding dresses have become increasingly common in modern Chinese ceremonies, symbolizing pure love. China also features a unique cultural phenomenon where specific colors carry special names – "ya qing" (dark blue) for deep azure and "hai ke qing" (crab-shell blue) for particular shades of cyan.

While numbers are fundamentally numerical, they carry distinct cultural symbolism. In Chinese culture, the number "eight" is considered auspicious due to its homophonic association with "fa" (wealth), symbolizing prosperity and good fortune. The number "six" also holds deep cultural significance, representing smooth progress as seen in the saying "liu liu da shun" (six sixes bring great fortune). In Japan, "eight" remains a lucky number because its character expands from narrow to wide strokes, signifying progressive success. Conversely, Western cultures typically regard "seven" as the lucky number. Similarly, people associate their emotions with animals and project their understanding of things onto animals, giving many animal names some special symbolic meanings.[3] Cultural differences shape nations' attitudes toward animals, sometimes with striking contrasts. In ancient China, owls were considered inauspicious creatures whose eerie calls evoked ominous omens, often linked to misfortune or death – as reflected in the proverb "When a night owl enters the house, good things don't come." In Greek mythology, however, owls embody wisdom and intelligence.

2.2. The Role of Chinese Cultural Words in Teaching Chinese to Non-native Speakers

(1) Chinese cultural words can help improve students' Chinese proficiency and cross-cultural communication ability

Chinese cultural terms often feature unique word formation patterns and semantic nuances. Mastering these expressions helps students better understand and use the language accurately, playing a vital role in teaching. With China's rapid economic growth, Chinese culture has gained increasing global influence. As second language learners develop growing interest in Chinese culture, integrating these cultural terms into teaching can transform monotonous content into engaging lessons, motivating learners to actively participate in Chinese language acquisition.

On the other hand, at the linguistic level, this approach can enhance Chinese learners' expressive abilities, expand their vocabulary, improve their linguistic intuition, and help them better understand and apply the Chinese language. Integrating these cultural elements into international Chinese education enables students to more easily comprehend Chinese culture and language, strengthens their pragmatic competence to avoid communication errors, while simultaneously boosting learners' interest and motivation in Chinese studies, as well as their cross-cultural communication skills.

(2) Chinese cultural words help students better understand Chinese culture and history

Chinese cultural terms serve as vital windows into understanding China's heritage. Many expressions encapsulate the nation's unique culture: geographical features like the "Loess Plateau" and "Danxia landforms," along with customs reflected in phrases such as "sweet candies" and "Spring Festival." These linguistic artifacts reveal traditional values, directly mirroring Chinese thought patterns and social norms. Historical references and social transition terms like "iron rice bowl" and "going into business" also document

China's historical evolution. Studying these expressions helps us trace the development of Chinese society.

The cultural connotations and linguistic meanings of these terms have become deeply intertwined, frequently appearing in daily communication. The ability to accurately comprehend and use these expressions directly impacts communicative effectiveness. Teaching Chinese as a foreign language is not only language training, but also systematic cultural knowledge teaching.[4] If students fail to grasp the embedded cultural significance during second language acquisition, their understanding of these terms will remain superficial and fragmented, ultimately compromising cross-cultural communication.

3. Analysis of Cultural Words Bias in Second Language Learners

3.1. Forms of Expression

In his work "Analysis of Grammatical Errors in Foreigners Learning Chinese", Mr. Lu Jianji categorizes errors into four types based on their nature: omission, addition, substitution, and sequencing. Although teaching cultural terms is not grammatical instruction itself, the manifestations of errors in this domain closely resemble those in grammar learning. Through corpus analysis of second language learners' errors in acquiring cultural terms, the following conclusions can be drawn.

(1) Mistaken addition

Misinterpretation is the most common phenomenon in second language acquisition among international students. For instance, regarding the use of animal terminology: "As the ancient saying goes, 'A tiger father does not have a dog child' -it's not an exaggeration to say parents are children's first teachers." This proverb typically praises parental excellence or children's achievements, without implying that parents serve as their children's primary educators. The error lies in the author's literal translation that led to this misinterpretation.

(2) Misrepresentation

Misinterpretation refers to the erroneous understanding of a cultural term's meaning. The background knowledge of the cultural background of the target language is vast and contained in a large number of target language materials.[5] For example, in the Chinese proverb "They both dislike swimming, just like crows that are all black", the phrase "all crows are black" conveys that bad people or negative traits are universally identical regardless of context, serving as a derogatory expression. The original meaning "liking" carries no negative connotation, which demonstrates how learners' native cultural experiences lead to misinterpretations and inappropriate substitutions of intended meanings.

(3) Omission

This type of error occurs when components are omitted in words or sentences. It often arises from native language interference, repetitive elements, and redundant components. For example, the phrase "jiu niu er hu li ji" (Nine Oxen and Two Tigers' Effort) contains two distinct animal terms and a quantifier. Second language learners may misidentify similar words or morphemes during acquisition, such as grouping "jiu long er hu" (Nine Dragons and Two Tigers), or failing to attach the suffix "li ji" (effort) when splitting the phrase, resulting in incomplete expression.

(4) Ambiguity

This phenomenon refers to situations where cultural expressions create semantic ambiguities. Typically manifested as the author's contradictory interpretation[3]of the original meaning, resulting in semantic contradictions. For example: "His handwriting is neither neat nor tidy." In this sentence, the intended emphasis should be on disorganized and messy writing, whereas "neither neat nor tidy" usually denotes someone who is dishonest or rule-breaking, lacking the intended semantic layer.

3.2. Analysis of the Causes of Cultural Word Acquisition Bias

The semantic expression of cultural terms is remarkably complex. In most cases, they not only carry their literal meanings but also connotations and extended meanings. Learners of a second language often struggle with accurate semantic comprehension due to gaps in acquired knowledge or limited capacity to process new concepts. Many Chinese cultural terms carry unique cultural connotations – for instance, the concepts of "fengyun" (destiny) and "feng shui" (geomancy) lack direct equivalents in other cultures, making it challenging for learners to grasp their precise meanings. This requires proper learning strategies and targeted practice to solidify understanding. The correct sequence for teaching cultural term meanings should follow this order: literal meaning, extended meaning, and extended meanings.

Cultural connotation refers to the specific cultural information embedded in a term when it denotes an object. It exhibits characteristics such as conventionality, temporality, and duality. For instance, animal terms like "bear," "tiger," and "monkey" in the *Modern Chinese Dictionary* have established independent definitions. Cultural vocabulary acquisition faces challenges due to contextual differences, social distance, and psychological barriers. While students may grasp basic Chinese cultural terms, they often overlook their cultural connotations—a key factor causing cross-linguistic communication conflicts. Chinese cultural expressions frequently employ rhetorical devices like metaphors and symbolism. Idioms such as "half-hearted" (mama huxu) and "adding feet to a snake" (huashen tianzu) demonstrate significant gaps between literal meanings and their actual implications, which increases learning difficulty.

4. Analysis of Learning Strategies

Language acquisition is essentially an unconscious process. Learners focus less on linguistic form during language acquisition, prioritizing the ability to convey intended meanings while ensuring comprehension by the listener. Multiple factors influence language acquisition, including both external and internal elements. Beyond objective environmental factors like cultural backgrounds[6], learning conditions, and teaching environments, we must recognize that while common patterns exist in the learning process, language acquisition ultimately depends on learners themselves. In this context, individual factors play a decisive role in language acquisition. Therefore, only through thorough analysis of learners' strategies can we truly understand the acquisition processes and patterns of second language development.

4.1. Characteristics of Learning Strategies

As active participants in language acquisition and communication, learners adopt proactive strategies to

overcome challenges, achieve effective learning, and facilitate smooth interactions during both language acquisition and application. [7]These strategies manifest as learning strategies and communication strategies. Specifically, learning strategies encompass various plans, approaches, steps, methods, techniques, and adjustment measures that language learners utilize to master linguistic rules, develop verbal skills and communicative competence, and resolve difficulties encountered in the learning process.

4.2. Classification of Learning Strategies

The research on early language learning strategies mainly lists the learning strategies of successful language learners and briefly classifies learning strategies.[8]Cognitive strategies form the foundational approach in second language acquisition. As outlined by Rubin's six cognitive strategies, cultural term learning involves three key components: lexical analysis, associative memory, and situational simulation. For example, when studying the term "拜年" (literally "paying New Year's greetings"), learners can connect it with the familiar concept of "Spring Festival" while practicing role-playing scenarios that mimic traditional New Year greetings rituals.

Metacognitive strategies represent an indirect approach where learners critically examine their cognitive processes through planning, monitoring, and evaluation. Functioning as the "cognition of cognition," [8]this deep-level cognitive activity involves learners assessing their cognitive characteristics, understanding task requirements and strategies, while self-regulating through experiential feedback to ensure learning success. Key components include goal-setting, self-monitoring, and selective attention. Intermediate learners may enhance these through building personal cultural lexicons or mind maps for regular review. Affective strategies encompass cross-cultural communication (using cultural expressions when interacting with Chinese peers), emotional regulation, and collaborative learning. These strategies can be flexibly integrated in teaching practices. For example, when studying the term "Spring Festival travel rush," educators might first use cognitive strategy videos to understand the phenomenon, then set learning objectives for mastering related vocabulary, and conclude with group discussions about personal experiences.

4.3. Learning Strategies that Affect Bias

(1) move

Transfer was originally a psychological term. In the process of second language teaching, it mainly refers to learners' recourse to known first language knowledge to understand and use the target language when they encounter difficulties. Most of the errors made by learners are initially caused by transfer.[9]

When learning cultural words, the deep connotation of cultural words will vary greatly due to the different learning background and cultural history of second language learners. If learners rely on first language knowledge in the process of acquisition, it will lead to partial errors in the mastery of such words, increase the difficulty of acquisition and make communication difficult.

(2) Overgeneralization

In order to solve the problem in communication, the speaker overgeneralizes a certain object language rule and applies it to an inappropriate object language form or environment. This refers to errors caused by learners'

overgeneralization of newly acquired target language knowledge through reasoning. [10]Such errors typically arise from incomplete induction when learners have not fully mastered the target language, ultimately extending these patterns to their language acquisition process. For instance, many second language learners, after learning the term "hat," often remain at the surface-level meaning of words like "high hat" and "green hat," overlooking the underlying cultural connotations behind these terms.

(3) simplify

Simplified strategies typically involve learners deliberately reducing redundant elements in the target language or breaking complex sentences containing adverbial clauses or attributive components into simpler segments. Such cognitive biases are particularly prevalent in cultural expressions like proverbs, idioms, and colloquial sayings. This phenomenon may stem from learners' anxiety during language acquisition, or their assumption that omitted parts don't impact communication effectiveness. However, for native speakers with strong grammatical awareness, these errors appear remarkably superficial.

5. Suggestions on Learning Strategies of Cultural Words

5.1. Suggestions from the Students' Perspective

(1) Comparative analysis

In Chinese culture, we often speak of "the spirit of the dragon and the auspicious phoenix," where words related to dragons are predominantly positive. The dragon is revered as the most noble creature in China, symbolizing the Chinese nation. In ancient times, it represented imperial authority, majesty, and divine power, while modern interpretations emphasize its association with good fortune, wealth, and success. However, in Western culture, the corresponding term "dragon" carries negative connotations. The classical literary figure "dargon" in Western literature is depicted as a colossal creature spewing fire from its mouth, symbolizing evil, arrogance, and aggression.

Through comparative analysis, this paper points out the differences in meaning between Chinese cultural words and corresponding words in other languages, so as to help second language learners better grasp the subtle differences in cross-cultural communication. Determine the key and difficult vocabulary in the learning process of students, so that the teaching of cultural words is more scientific.[11]

(2) Trace the source

When teaching Chinese cultural terms, educators should not only explain their literal meanings but also delve into the cultural significance, historical context, and social customs behind them. [11]This approach helps international students grasp the deeper implications of these terms within specific cultural contexts. For instance, the term "chui niu" (blowing air into a raft) originally referred to inflating a leather raft rather than its modern usage. Originating from the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia and Inner Mongolia regions, this phrase first appeared as a colloquial expression in modern Chinese. Today, it typically describes people who speak or act without factual basis, using exaggerated or hollow statements.

The Chinese people hold a deep reverence for even numbers, as they symbolize harmony and completeness. This cultural belief explains why classical poetry emphasizes parallelism, architecture prioritizes symmetry, and weddings are often scheduled on even-numbered days. The language

predominantly features two-syllable words, while idioms typically consist of four characters. This preference for even numbers reflects Chinese culture's emphasis on balance and harmony. When introducing vocabulary, teachers should utilize the etymological origins and historical evolution of terms to help students accurately grasp cultural nuances through their linguistic roots.

(3) Metaphor analysis

Metaphorical expressions in cultural terms vividly reflect Chinese values, where preferences for or aversion to things are conveyed through word meanings. Terms like "a drenched chicken," "a thousand-mile horse," "a calf serving as a loyal servant," and "all crows are as black as the world" employ metaphors that imbue simple words with profound cultural significance. The term "thousand-mile horse" originally referred to a swift steed capable of traveling a thousand miles daily. Now it metaphorically represents exceptional talents—a positive usage carrying exaggerated praise and commendation.

5.2. Suggestions from the Teacher's Point of View

Teachers play a crucial role in second language teaching. First, they should possess acute cultural awareness to accurately interpret the cultural connotations of words. Second, teachers need to adopt diversified teaching methods such as cultural comparison, situational teaching, and multimedia-assisted instruction.

(1) Scenario simulation and context creation

Through role-playing, simulated dialogues, and other practical activities, second language learners can apply their vocabulary in authentic or simulated cross-cultural communication scenarios, thereby enhancing their language application skills and adaptability. By utilizing multimedia teaching resources such as videos, images, and AR technology, we can demonstrate real-life applications of Chinese vocabulary, strengthening international students' intuitive understanding and memory retention. For instance, the phrase "shuo cao cao cao dao" (meaning "Cao Cao is here") creates vivid scenarios where students might encounter a person who suddenly appears – this visual representation effectively illustrates the meaning of the phrase.

When annotating cultural terms within a linguistic context, most textbooks use bilingual Chinese-English translations. However, due to the unique nature of cultural vocabulary, many terms lack direct equivalents in English. As students' Chinese proficiency improves, the variety and complexity of cultural terms in textbooks will increase accordingly. To enhance comprehension, these annotations should be contextualized within specific cultural settings, enabling learners to better grasp their deeper meanings.

(2) Cultural experience and timely feedback

Organize international students to participate in cultural activities such as Chinese Cultural Festivals, Chinese Language Corners, and cultural lectures, allowing them to experience the charm of Chinese culture firsthand and deepen their understanding and memory of Chinese cultural terms. Encourage students to interact with local Chinese residents, engage in daily life activities, and experience Chinese lifestyles and ways of thinking to enhance their cross-cultural communication skills. Activities like the "International Cultural Exchange Festival" and "Chinese Bridge" are recommended. Provide timely feedback and guidance. This "immersion" teaching method uses a variety of ways and

teaching methods to fully immerse learners in the language environment of a foreign language.[12]For example, when teaching the concept of "face," start by showing contextual videos, then guide students to discuss similarities and differences between Chinese and Western perspectives on "face," and finally design role-playing activities for practical application.

(3) Select high frequency and encourage education

When selecting high-frequency, practical cultural terms as teaching priorities, educators should design tiered instructional activities based on the four elements of language and key learning objectives.[13]These activities should progress from comprehension to application. Emotionally, teachers should encourage learners to actively explore cultural contexts behind vocabulary. Since many beginners experience cultural disorientation, educators need to pay close attention to individual learners, reduce anxiety about challenges, and minimize cultural conflicts.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, research on Chinese cultural terms reveals that the combination of semantic and cultural connotations creates a primary barrier for second language learners in acquiring such expressions. As competent international Chinese language teachers, we should conduct cross-cultural comparative analyses to identify cognitive biases among learners, helping them understand the differences in vocabulary between Eastern and Western sociocultural contexts. By proposing practical acquisition strategies, learners can master these terms through systematic approaches and effective teaching methods, thereby improving their Chinese proficiency and intercultural communication skills. The key to successful cultural term acquisition lies in effectively bridging psychological barriers, reducing alienation, and fostering integration into the target society.

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