

# *Culture Factors in ESL Vocabulary Acquisition of Language Teaching*

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**Keywords:** Culture, Vocabulary, Transfer, ESL, Language Teaching

**Abstract:** If grammar, according to Generative Grammar of Chomsky at least, is innate to some extent, the vocabulary of a language is the products of culture. If we say a language is part of a culture, the fact is mainly reflected in its vocabulary, if universal grammar does exist as Chomsky claims. This research is based on this hypothesis: Cultural differences affect the vocabulary transfer of the mother tongue into the second language and culturally similar words are much more easily acquired by an ESL learner than culturally different words. If this hypothesis is true, culturally similar words should be easily learned by ESL learners and the previous study of the second language culture should help ESL learners acquire those culturally different words. Obviously the proof of this hypothesis has great significance for ESL learners and it is significant to the English teaching.

## 1. Introduction

Linguist Lado (1957) pointed out that we couldn't teach language without mastering the cultural background of language; language is part of culture. As result, you cannot master language, if you cannot understand the model and norms of language [1].

Language transfer has been a central issue in applied linguistics, SLA and FLL for at least a century. Transfer means that something previously learned influences the later learning, whether promoting or hindering the learning process [2]. Language transfer, therefore, indicates the positive or negative influence of the previously learned language on the language to be learned. For a native speaker of Chinese to learn a second language, his Chinese will influence his learning. In ESL teaching and learning the former promotes learning, while the latter obstructs learning [3].

## 2. Culture, Language and Vocabulary

### 2.1. Words and the Environment

Due to the influence of climate and landforms, Chinese people live on rice. So in China there are scores of words denoting different types of rice, such as Dao (paddy), Liang (fine grain), Ji (grain), Mai (wheat), Shu (millet), Ji (broomcorn millet).

It is well known that as a country of islands, Britain is surrounded by sea. When British people want to go and see world, they will inevitably turn to ships. So, the British people are quite familiar with ships and there are a number of words indicating different kinds of ships. Besides there are numerous compound words of boat or ship such as ferryboat, sailboat, steamship, and warship.

Many idioms about the ocean mirror the fact of their dependence on the oceans, such as smooth sailing (everything is all right), trim the sails (to have it both ways); and in the same boat (people in the same condition help each other)[4]. When they want to describe a large number of something, these things may be compared with the sea, such as a sea of debt (a large amount of debt); and a sea of smile (many smiling faces), etc.

Since British is famous for its rainy climate, mushrooms are abundant there. Thus British people use like mushrooms or to mushroom to describe something flourishing[5]. When spring comes, people can find blackberries everywhere, so British people use as plentiful as blackberries to describe something that is as numberless as the sand.

## 2.2. Influence of vocabulary from Different Social Values

As the carrier of culture, words reflect culture, and are also under the influence of culture. The characteristics of one culture is accumulated and deposited on the words of that language. We can find the influence of traditional Chinese social values in its vocabulary from the following aspects, as shown in Figure 1:

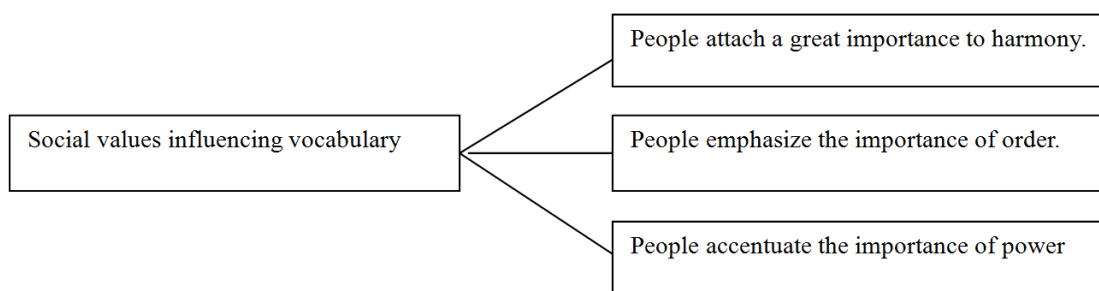


Figure 1. Influence of traditional Chinese social values in its vocabulary

### 1) People attach a great importance to harmony.

The Chinese history show us, Chinese people believe that the basic condition for maintaining the steady existence of an entity is the harmony and balance of the conflicting factors inside it and China exists a united country since the early times.

For example, people stress great emphasis on the “importance of peace”, “working together with one accord in times of difficulty”, and “timeliness [6], favorable geographical position and human unity”and “the doctrine of the mean.” All these expression testify the influence of the typical Chinese psychology of harmony.

### 2) People emphasize the importance of order.

Western ethical belief holds that people are born equal, but that there is a difference in people’s natural abilities [7]. So, the stronger are able to do what they are qualified to do, while the weaker have to accept what they must accept even if they are reluctant. Thus in the western world people advocate using competition to decide one’s position in the society, one’s potency and money and interests. The words such as “human rights are an endowment by nature” “freedom and equality” and “free competition” are popular concepts [8].

### 3) People accentuate the importance of power.

Chinese people have been deeply influenced by Confucianism and feudal ideology. As the saying goes, “It is the headworker that controls others, and the workers have to be controlled by others.” This concept is believed to be a perfectly justified and unalterable principle even up to the present. The reflection of this thought on words of modern Chinese is obvious. There are more than 50 words of Guan (officer), such as Guanban (run by the government), Guanchai (official business), Guanfang (authority), Guanjiazi (bureaucratic airs), Guanyuan (government official), Guanliao zhuyi (bureaucracy)...

### 3. Different Cultures and Different Languages (Figure 2)

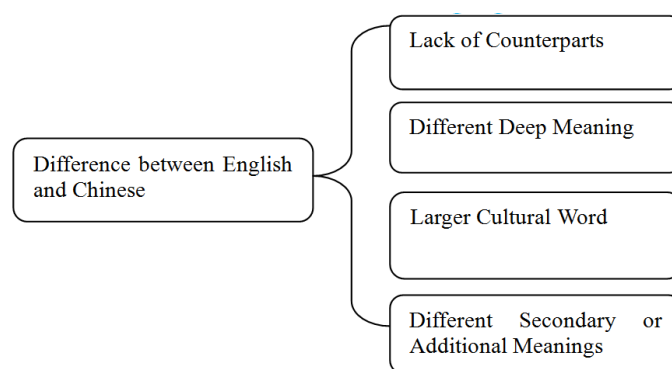


Figure 2. Difference between English and Chinese

#### 3.1. Lack of Counterparts

It is quite common that one word in a language lacks a counterpart in another language. “A lack of counterparts is the main factor causing confusion in cross-cultural communications.”

There are a number of other examples that we could take to illustrate a concept that exists in Chinese without counterparts in English. For instance, the Chinese Ganbu, which is often translated as cadre is not exactly the same as Ganbu[9]. Also, cadre is not a commonly used word. Even many native English speaker don't know the meaning of it. Some other words are suggested to replace it like official or administrator[10]. But none of these can mean exactly the same as the Chinese word Ganbu. Most English speakers have never slept on a kang, which means a heatable brick bed in English, and they have never eaten Bingtanghulu which means candied haws on a stick, or used Cheng, steelyard in English[11]. For the Chinese people, they have never punched time clock, and do not know much about hippie or cowboy, which are the symbol of U.S, for there are no equivalents in China, Mutong and Niuzai can not reflect the legend or romance of cowboy, and Xipisi, though could be a term to mean hippie, but it could be misleading, because it can not completely reflect the cultural meaning hippie stands for.

From the above-mentioned examples we find that many words bear different cultural loads between the Chinese cultural context and the English-speaking cultural context.

#### 3.2. Different Deep Meaning

The second category of differences between English and Chinese cultural words is that the surface meaning of words in both languages may mean the same thing, but in fact they refer to different things in deep meaning[12].

For instance, a story is told about a sign in front of a shoe store in Rome says the following to attract the English speakers: “Shoes for street walking. Come in and have a fit.” Though the sign attracted the attention of the English-speaking customers, they break out into laughter when they

saw the shoes displayed by the window[13]. The Italian shop owner did not know the street walker means a prostitute, and to have a fit means violently angry.

When hearing the sentence “The young man was anxious to help the stranger.” A Chinese may give the word anxious as an explanation for eager or ready, while an American will think of it as worried. Because according to Chinese philosophy it is a virtue to help others. But in America where the crime rate is high, people are not willing to venture to help a stranger, especially in large cities[14]. This also reflects the difference in understanding of the word meaning due to the influence from society and culture.

The above-mentioned words seem to have the same meaning to beginners, while it turns out that they denote quite different things[15]. Here we find out that many words in Chinese cultural context bears totally different meaning from those in an English-speaking context.

### 3.3. Larger Cultural Word

Many concepts expressed by one or two terms in one language may have many terms in other languages, and there are finer distinctions of these terms in that language.

There are many terms in Chinese indicating for kinship, and this reflects the phenomenon of extended family. For example, in Chinese there are various forms of address for kinship, which reflect the peculiarity of the Chinese family, i.e. the extended family. Owing to its long history of a patriarchal clan system, Chinese people have attached great importance to their kindred members. Besides parents and children, they have other expressions for their cousins, aunts, uncles, etc. whether from the paternal or maternal side. Thus the title uncle includes the relationship of Bofu, which means father’s elder brothers, Shufu which means father’s younger brothers, Gufu which means husband of father’s sisters, Jiufu which means mother’s brothers, and Yifu which means husband of mother’s sister in Chinese. In China, people’s family members can be ascended to several generations before. Thus they have many “Biaoshu ,Biaojiu, Biaogu, Biaoyi”, who are the children of their grandparents’ brothers or sisters. There is a famous old Chinese saying that vividly describes this phenomenon: Yibiao sanqianli, which means that your relatives may be distant in consanguinity. But in the western world, there are not so many complicated appellations for family members. They have a strong sense of equality so sometimes they do not rigidly adhere to the title. It is quite common for children to simply address their parents’ name, which is regarded as disobedient to their parents in China. This mirrors the fact that care more about family kinship terms than the majority of Westerners, as shown in Figure 3.

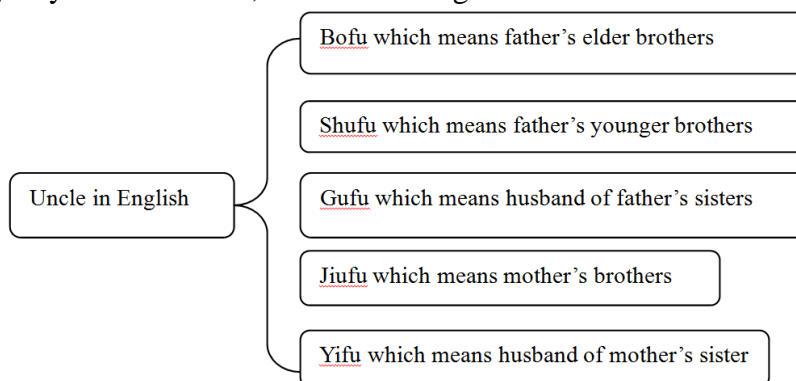


Figure 3. Expression distinctions of uncle in English and Chinese

Maybe because England is a country of islands, in English there are a variety of words to describe different kinds of bays, while there is only one word “Wan”, thus in Chinese we have to turn to other adjectives to explain bay, gulf, bight, cove, creek, fiord, etc.

Comparing the words in the above examples, we find that many words in a Chinese cultural context bear a larger load than those in an English-speaking context and vice versa. Generally speaking, words in the native cultural context carry a larger load than its equivalent in a foreign cultural context. This phenomenon mainly results from the influence of the real world upon people's everyday life.

### 3.4. Different Secondary or Additional Meanings

There are some terms that have more or less the same primary meaning in one language, but their additional meanings are quite different.

Every word carries with it a different connotative meaning. As a result, it arouses different reflected meanings and affective meanings. Both in English and Chinese there are many words describing color, but their secondary meanings are not always the same.

Though these words describing color have similar primary meaning, we can find out that the understanding of white is not the same between Chinese and English-speaking people. In Chinese, white symbolizes reactionary and under-developed, thus it is combined into the word as “Baijun, Baifei, Baiqu, Baisekongbu”, but if we translate them directly into English, the English speakers may not quite understand them if they do not know something about Chinese history. Thus usually we will give them a further explanation, for example, when it comes Bai qu, we will translate them as the Guo Mindang controlled area instead of the white area. In other words, though there is the character Bai, the word has nothing to do with that color. For example, is not white paper, instead, it means a blank sheet of paper; Baijuan is unanswered examination paper; Baikaishui is plain boiled water; Baishoujiqia means to build up from nothing; Yiqiongerbai means poor and blank; Baida is no use; Baiyan refers to dirty look or supercilious look; Changbailian means pretend to be harsh and severe. In English the secondary meaning of white means auspicious, pure, stainless, and straight-out. Thus the English word a white day does not refer to a day that is of the color white, it means a lucky day; if we say “It is a day marked with a white day”, a Chinese may not understand the meaning as lucky day; a white lie is a harmless lie; a white witch is a witch who always does good things; stand in a white sheet means to confess one's mistake publicly, as shown in Table 1.

*Table 1. Different secondary meaning of “Bai”*

Baiqu	Guo Mindang controlled area
Baizhi	a blank sheet of paper
Baijuan	unanswered examination paper
Baikaishui	plain boiled water
Baishoujiqia	build up from nothing
Yiqiongerbai	poor and blank
Baida	no us
Baiyan	dirty look or supercilious look
Changbailian	pretend to be harsh and severe

Both in English and in Chinese the color black bears a derogatory sense, but still do not act as counterparts for each other. In Chinese, black symbolizes anti-revolution, they thus there are the words like Heibang (sinister gang), Heishehui (gangland), Heimu (shady deal), Heishoudang (Mafia) etc. Besides these, there are Heidian (an inn run by brigands), Heihuo (contraband), Heihua (argot), etc. All these words are not connected to color black in English, for in English the color black does

not represent reactionary feelings and sentiments. In English “black” means dark, dinginess, gloomy, or ominous. Thus the English word black tea is not tea which is black, but red tea. Black coffee is coffee without milk. If a person has a black mood, he is depressed. A black stranger is a total stranger to us, as shown in Table 2.

*Table 2. Different secondary meaning of “Hei”*

Heibang	sinister gang
Heishehui	gangland
Heimu	shady deal
Heishoudang	Mafia
Heidian	an inn run by brigands
Heihuo	contraband
Heihua	argot

From these examples we know that due to the difference in our cultural background even the colors sometimes do not look the same in the two languages.

#### 4. Conclusion

Vocabulary is most important part in SLA for whatever kind of target language, since it is a basic material in building language and essential unit for expressing meaning. “D.A.Wilkins (1978) said that without grammar one cannot speak correctly, but without words, one can say nothing.” So we can reach the conclusion that the VA and mastering vocabulary accuracy plays an important role in ESL teaching.

Language is the principal means by which culture is illustrated. Furthermore, the meaning of the language is conveyed by the words of that language. As a result, by comparing English words between the two languages, the differences between English and Chinese culture are revealed.

It is a unique way for the teachers to take different strategies and practice method to teach culturally different words order to get the best English teaching effect. In ESL learning process, the teacher should aim to introduce different cultural characteristics and to make the student rehearse the same sentence structure under different imaginary conditions in order to minimize or avoid negative vocabulary transfer in students' language communication, thus providing the students with their familiar norms and principles. Culturally similar words help positive and quick transfer, culturally different words require that the ESL learner should know the culture difference when learning to speak the words. Through the ESL teaching practice, we prove that conducting cultural knowledge in English teaching process consciously enlarge the ESL students' cultural view, enhance their sensitivity of cultural difference, raise their logical ability, paid a good cultural foundation and promote their cultural attainment.

#### Funding

This article is not supported by any foundation.

#### Data Availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Conflict of Interest

The author states that this article has no conflict of interest.

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