

INITIAL UNDERSTANDING OF CULTURAL WORDS' MEANING FROM SELECTED EFL TEXTBOOKS

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ABSTRACT

For language learners, in order to accomplish reading tasks with good results, they are required to own a comparatively adequate number of vocabulary including cultural words. Reading tasks in EFL textbooks are a must to finish for students. As far as the study is concerned, the authors are going to investigate 39 tertiary students' initial understanding of cultural words' meanings in several EFL textbooks (a case study). The cultural words are taken from reading passages in the books based on theories of cultural words and their classification. Findings showed that students initially comprehended the meaning of this special type of words in some EFL textbooks. However, they still found it troublesome to figure out the semantic features of idiomatic expressions or collocations utilized by native speakers. By the end of the research, pedagogical implications in language teaching and learning are going to be proposed in detail.

Keywords: cultural words, initial understanding, meaning, EFL textbooks

1. Introduction

Learning vocabulary is normally considered one of the most pivotal things to do while mastering a language. To comprehend the meaning of words, learners are advised to look the word up in dictionary and see it in context, as well. According to A.I. Smirnitsky, meaning of a word is the natural reflection of things, phenomenon, or the relationship in awareness in the structure of the word from the inside (Nguyen Lien Huong, 2018:21). Cultural words are among the vocabulary source that language learners should manage to pick up from the beginning. Research on specific groups of English cultural words can be found in linguistic works. However, it could be seen obviously that there have been not many works mentioning the understanding of students in terms of cultural words' meanings especially cultural vocabulary in EFL textbooks.

Within this study, English-majored students' initial understanding of English cultural words'

meanings in selected EFL textbooks is analyzed and discussed. Typical ways to understand these special words are figured out in real context. Then, pedagogical implications in language teaching and learning are mentioned for teachers and students at a university in Hanoi, Vietnam.

2. Literature Review

Definition of cultural words

There appear some studies discussing definitions of cultural words in Vietnam and in the world. The authors would like to introduce these studies from the earliest to the latest.

Williams (1983:15) defined cultural words as follows: firstly, these words were important ones associated with a few certain activities and ways to comprehend these keywords; secondly, they were important words, revealing something in certain forms of thinking. The writer added that certain uses were in line with several identified ways of viewing culture and society, not only in these two common word groups.

Wiezbicka (1997) considered cultural words as below: in a sense, words with special, specific meaning in culture reflected and transferred not only the living style of a certain society but also the way of thinking [p.5]. She confirmed that the existence of specific names in linguistics for special types of things (tangible) was what a person who knew a normal language could understand; the existence of different customs and social organizations associated with specific names in a language but not in other languages have been widely known [p.2]. The author summarized that keywords (or cultural words) were extremely important words that were revealing in a certain culture [p.15-16].

To make the matter clearer, Wiezbicka (1997) [tr.16] clarified that: Firstly, it is necessary to assert that the word belongs to the common vocabulary, not outside word; secondly, the word is frequently used, in terms of a specific semantic field; As well, the word is at the central position of a complete phrase. Wiezbicka (1997:17) added that a keyword existed not only in the form of a word but also in the form of common collocations, fixed phrases, grammatical expressions, idioms, etc.

Li, Ran & Bai (2010) regarded cultural keywords as the words associated with visual culture, they are the results of long history, tribal culture, closely linked to national legends and ancestor worship. Those words appeared in human language, literature and works of art over many generations; then gradually developed as a signal in a relatively stable way and has specific cultural meaning; some words even incorporated generalized cultural images. Also discussing definition of cultural words, Nurrohmah (2014) said that cultural vocabulary can be defined as specific words representing the way a group of people interact and communicate with one

another within their community and a period of time containing ideas, customs, skills, art, tools, etc.

In Vietnam, Nguyen Van Chien (2004:6) confirmed that the definition of “cultural words” is the result of the cultural perspective in the process of approaching linguistic codes in terms of vocabulary. He added that in the vast cultural vocabulary, several word classes and groups clearly demonstrated intra-linguistic or extra-linguistic cultural characteristics or both types of this cultural characteristics. He emphasized that the specific types of lexical units of cultural vocabulary include single words, compound words, idioms, and units on words such as proverbs, etc.

Collecting and analysing materials on cultural words, Nguyen Lien Huong (2018:38), in her Ph.D thesis, defined cultural words (cultural keywords) as words of general, basic vocabulary of a language, having specific cultural meanings, reflecting the characteristics of the social life, the way of thinking of a community in that society and having high frequency of appearance, a wide range of uses. The authors quite agree with this definition of Nguyen Lien Huong and will rely on this definition as the basis for choosing cultural vocabulary within the study.

Classification of cultural words

From the collected linguistic materials, the authors found several ways of classifying cultural words in the following studies.

Newmark (1988: 94) divided these special words into 5 specific types, as mentioned below: ecology (flora, fauna, wind, valley, mountains); material culture or artefact (food, cloth, housing, city, transportation); social culture (work, leisure); organization (customs, activities, procedures, political, administrative concepts, religion, arts); gestures, habits.

Balaban & Çaçlayan (2014) categorized cultural vocabulary into 17 smaller types including:

(1) plant names; (2) animal names; (3) food culture; (4) goods, material or object words; (5) maritime-related words; and so on.

Alonso & Ponte (2015) shared the following classification for cultural words (Byram & Morgan, 1994; CEFR, 2001) with 12 types: everyday living, cultural heritage, national identity, popular culture, society, geography, stereotypes; languages, worldwide issues, institutions and organizations, varieties, social interaction.

In this study, the authors follow the final way of classification as it is easy to recognize and group cultural vocabulary with this method.

Meaning of words including cultural vocabulary

Meanings of vocabulary has been so far the topic discussed much in Vietnamese and international linguistics. A number of authors have both similar and different viewpoints.

Smirnitskiy (1957) said that meaning of words is naturally the reflection of objects, phenomena, or relationship in awareness (or psychological composition similar in nature which is formed on the reflection of separated elements in reality) in the word structure from the inner side (Nguyen Lien Huong, 2018:21).

Ullman (1967) explained that word meaning is the relation between the sound and its content. He summarized into a meaning triangle to distinguish between linguists, logicians, and psychologists. He thought that people should not consider it similar between viewpoints of linguists and that of logicians and psychologists.

Lyons (1995) renewed the triangle of meaning as “the triangle of the signified” consisting of three vertices, that is, signal, concept and the signified. The author emphasized that the conceptual content of meaning included many parts differentiated in terms of function and content; and it is necessary to distinguish different types of meaning.

A few other linguists researched the meaning of words including Ogden & Richards (1923) and Stern (1964).

In the linguistics world of Vietnam, many well-known researchers referred to meaning of words. Among them, such names as Do Huu Chau, Le Quang Thiem, Nguyen Thien Giap should be mentioned first. Do Huu Chau (1999:103) clarified that meaning of a word is a mental entity. The author drew a triangle of meaning in spatial geometry to illustrate the relationship between entities such as words and separate elements. The author classified the meaning of words into four smaller groups, namely figurative, significative, expressive and grammatical meaning.

Le Quang Thiem (2008:86) confirmed that meaning is the abstract mental entity existing in all expressions, levels of language so that it could function as a tool for communication, thinking and other diverse specific functions, especially in speech, text and discourse.

Nguyen Thien Giap (2008:312) owned the opinion that meaning of a word is a series of relationship between other phenomena including objects, processes, nature and symbols, definitions and other words. And in Nguyen Thien Giap, Doan Thien Thuat & Nguyen Minh Thuyet (2016:79-80), linguists believed that meaning of any other linguistic units existed in a truly objective manner in words, but in cognition there was only a reflection of those meanings.

In terms of meaning of cultural words, there could see several works in Vietnam and other

countries, as well. Authors chose to study selected cultural keywords in Vietnamese and other languages. Wiezbicka (1992) focused on investigating many dimensions of psychological, emotional and moral aspects through comparing the meanings of word pairs between English and Russian, including: soul, memory and heart; fate and destiny; courageous, brave, risky, etc. In this work, the author also developed special meta-language when using a small set of basic vocabulary such as *I, you, want, think, good, something, this* to describe the properties of the English keyword "mind".

Levisen (2012) continued Wiezbicka's research path on some keywords (cultural words). Specifically, the linguist wrote the book *Cultural Semantics and Social Cognition – A Case Study on the Danish Universe of Meaning*; In it, the author systematically analyzed in terms of semantics and ethno-pragmatics some Danish keywords, that is, *hygge* (warmth), *tryghed* (security), *lykkelig* (happiness), the verb *synes* (seem) và *mener* (think), etc...in the light of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) (Goddard and Wiezbicka, 1994, 2002).

Nguyen Van Chien (2004) divided cultural vocabulary into three classes: I. Words expressing things, phenomena, concepts, etc about the natural world around humans; II. Words expressing things, phenomena, concepts, etc about society/ organizations and social structure that people create and adhere to; III. Words expressing things, phenomena, concepts, etc related to understanding people themselves and about people. Besides, the author focused on establishing meanings in cultural word symbols and meaning organization of these words; the writer believed that this process was significantly influenced by the cultural and linguistic rules of each nation. The linguist also asserted that cultural words, as the basic symbols of a language, reflected the outside world of the language.

Nguyễn Liên Hương (2018) delved into meaning of several certain cultural vocabulary groups (the group with reference in reality: *land, water, house, people* and the group without reference in reality: *dragon, ghost, fairy*), compared Vietnamese and English, thereby establishing the model framework to compare cultural vocabulary.

Le Thi Kieu Van (2017) synthesized materials of definition of cultural words, how to recognize cultural keywords, and analyzed the role, functions of the four keywords: Fate- Homeland-Face-Soul in perception and actions of Vietnamese people, compared with a few other languages. The book pointed out some characteristics in Vietnamese people's perception and similarities, differences in Vietnamese compared with English and Russian. The author exploited specific linguistic materials (Vietnamese, English and Russian), with sociological survey data, thereby pointed out concepts that Vietnamese people used to express the world picture with language were differences with other languages while expressing the same concept domain [p.15].

Research Questions

Here are the research questions the authors are managing to answer in the study:

- i) What are the ways students understand the meaning of collocations and idiomatic expressions in some EFL textbooks?
- ii) What factors help students figure out the meaning of the collocations and idiomatic expressions in some EFL textbooks?

3. Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The study was carried out at a university in Hanoi, Vietnam with the participation of 39 English-majored students (a case study). The students were 19-20 years old then and all of them were quite young, healthy and enthusiastic. There were both male and female students; the male ones were fewer. Some students tended to be more active and talkative; while the others were slightly quieter and less active.

Design of the Study

Within the study, participants were given exercises related to English cultural words taken from the selected textbooks including Q: Skills for success (Reading and Writing) 4 and Real Life (upper-intermediate). The researcher asked them to figure out the meaning of a few English cultural words in the sentences taken from reading texts without using dictionaries or smartphones. The cultural words might be idiomatic expressions or collocations that were predicted to easily make students troublesome to comprehend. The students were asked to accomplish the tasks in 40 minutes under the strict observation of the researcher.

Data collection & analysis

The students of one class were given exercises related to cultural words to figure out the meaning in real contexts of reading passages. After collecting answer sheets from the students, the researcher had a thorough look at the sheets to find out distinctive features in the answers and analyze students' ways of understanding meaning of the words in Vietnamese. The writer managed to discover difficulties the students faced while finding the way to comprehend the meaning of these words and compare the meaning in students' answer sheets with the suggested one in the dictionary. To some extent, students' answers were valuable and acceptable or even more interesting. Naturally, a few answers were not comparatively appropriate enough for the real context. After analyzing the students' answers, implications in teaching and learning foreign

languages are proposed in detail.

4. Findings and Discussion

Here are answers by students for the English sentences with cultural words. Through their answers, their understanding of the cultural vocabulary can be figured out obviously.

To understand the phrase “shed new light” in the sentence “Superheroes face questions we will have to face in the future, and they **shed new light** on our present condition”, two students left blank; while the other 33 students wrote “đem ánh sáng mới”, “làm sáng tỏ”, “tự thắp sáng ngọn lửa”, “làm rõ tình trạng”, “soi sáng”, “thắp sáng”, “gieo ánh sáng”, “mở ra một tia sáng”, “đưa tới những ánh sáng mới”, which are considered as comparatively similar in meanings. The rest, four of them had different ways to understand this phrase, including: “mở đường”, “dùng nó để làm...tốt hơn”, “dẫn lối”, “đã đem đến những niềm hi vọng”. As mentioned in the dictionary, “shed new light” meant “làm sáng tỏ”.

For the phrase “keep that flame alive in our hearts” in the sentence “Superheroes can **keep that flame alive in our hearts**”, here are students’ understanding of the meaning. 27 students wrote relatively similar ways to understand the phrase with the appearance of the image “ngọn lửa”, that is, “giữ ngọn lửa trong tim mỗi chúng ta”, “giữ ngọn lửa đó mãi còn trong tim chúng ta”, “giữ ngọn lửa sống trong những con tim của chúng ta”, “giữ ngọn lửa đó luôn tồn tại trong tim chúng ta”, “giữ ngọn lửa trong trái tim”, “giữ ngọn lửa đó luôn tồn tại mãi trong trái tim chúng ta”, “giữ ngọn lửa đó bùng mãi trong tim chúng ta”, “giữ ngọn lửa sống mãi trong trái tim chúng ta”, “giữ được ngọn lửa trong tim chúng ta”, “giữ ngọn lửa trong trái tim ta”, “giữ lửa sống trong tim chúng ta”. One of them did not know how to comprehend this phrase; while the six other students wrote “sống mãi” “trong lòng chúng ta” or “trong tim chúng ta”, “trong trái tim chúng ta”. The rest (five out of 39 students) created different versions with “giữ sự sống trong trái tim của chúng ta”, “giữ sự sống cháy bỏng đó trong trái tim chúng ta”, “giữ tiếng nói về sự sống trong trái tim chúng ta”, or “giữ nhiệt huyết trong trái tim chúng ta”. In the dictionary, it is written “giữ ngọn lửa đó sống mãi trong trái tim chúng ta”.

The phrase “pull us in its directions” in the sentence “What is good will **pull us in its directions**” was understood in a few ways by students. Five of the students had no answers to this phrase. Some other 14 students said it meant “hướng chúng ta theo con đường đó”, “kéo ta theo hướng của nó”, “kéo chúng ta theo những hướng của nó”, “dẫn dắt chúng ta theo những chỉ dẫn của nó”, “đưa chúng ta tới những sự chỉ dẫn”, “đưa ta theo đường của nó”, “đưa ta theo đường của nó”, “hướng chúng ta theo hướng của nó” or “thúc đẩy chúng ta theo hướng đi của nó” with the keyword “theo hướng/đường/chỉ dẫn”. Ten of them wrote “thu hút ta theo đúng hướng của nó”, “đưa chúng ta đi đúng hướng”, “đẩy chúng ta đi đúng hướng”, “làm chúng ta đi

đúng hướng”, “dẫn chúng ta đi đúng hướng”, “giúp chúng ta đi theo hướng đúng”, “dẫn cho ta đi theo đúng hướng”, “giúp ta đi đúng con đường” with similar words “đúng hướng”, “hướng đúng” or “đúng con đường”. Three others understood it as “mang lại cho ta những điều tốt đẹp”, “hướng ta tới những điều tích cực” or “hướng ta tới những điều thiện” with such positive keywords “những điều tốt đẹp/tích cực/thiện”. Three out of 39 owned another way to figure out the phrase, that is, “kéo chúng ta về hướng đó”, “kéo chúng ta theo hướng đó”, “kéo chúng ta về hướng nó”, which can be considered alike for such words “theo hướng đó/nó”. Two others thought it was “dẫn lối cho chúng ta”. The rest (two students) noted down “kéo chúng ta vào (những) sự trực tiếp của nó”. The version in the dictionary is “kéo chúng ta theo hướng của nó”.

For the phrase “speak to our fears” in the sentence “Their stories also **speak to our fears** in equally important ways” could be figured out in a number of ways, as below. 25 out of 39 students said it was “nói lên/về/đến (những) nỗi/sự sợ (hãi) của chúng ta/mọi người”, “nói ra đến nỗi sợ hãi của chúng tôi”, “nói ra nỗi sợ”, “nói lên nỗi sợ trong mỗi chúng ta” with the same words “nói lên nỗi sợ”. Two students chose to leave it blank. Two other students wrote “phản ánh nỗi sợ của chúng ta”. Two others noted down “cho thấy (được) nỗi sợ của chính chúng ta”. The other two thought it was “chạm đến nỗi sợ của chúng ta”. There witnessed several other ways to comprehend this phrase, including: “tác động đến nỗi sợ của chúng ta”, “đến với những nỗi sợ của chúng ta”, “đưa nỗi sợ của chúng ta”, “đại diện cho nỗi sợ hãi thầm kín trong mỗi người”, “chia sẻ nỗi sợ của chúng ta” or “liên quan đến nỗi sợ mà chúng ta muốn quên đi”. Here is the way to understand the collocation in the dictionary: “nói lên nỗi sợ hãi của chúng ta”.

The authors also asked the students to find suitable ways to comprehend a few other collocations from the selected EFL textbooks such as “the spices of education”, “this coping mechanism”, “instantly grab attention”, “can be squeezed into the space”, “had it on the market”, “are difficult to stage”, “clearing everything off nightstands”, “good role models”. From their answers, obviously, they always possessed their own ways to explore the meanings of these collocations.

Turning to idioms found in the textbooks, the authors asked students to understand such sentences as “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”, “Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety- nine percent perspiration”, “Behind a great man there’s a great woman”.

For the idiom “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”, students had some ways to figure out the meaning. 34 students thought it was “Vẻ/ Sắc đẹp (của người phụ nữ) (luôn/ thường) nằm/ tồn tại/ chỉ có trong (ánh/ đôi) mắt (của) kẻ si tình”, “Sắc đẹp chính là ở con mắt của những kẻ si tình”, “Cái đẹp nằm trong con mắt của kẻ si tình”, “Cái đẹp chỉ xuất hiện trong ánh mắt của kẻ si tình” or “Vẻ đẹp của người con gái nằm trong con mắt của kẻ si tình”, which had similar words “mắt của kẻ si tình”. The other 5 students wrote differently, including: “Vẻ đẹp không nằm trên

gò má người thiếu nữ, mà nằm trong đôi mắt kẻ si tình”, “Vẻ đẹp không nằm trên đôi má hồng của người thiếu nữ mà nằm trong ánh mắt của kẻ si tình”, “Vẻ đẹp thì nằm trong mắt của người ngắm”, “Sắc đẹp nằm trong đôi mắt của chính người đó”, “Vẻ đẹp nằm trong đôi mắt của người biết...”. In the dictionary, it was understood as “Vẻ đẹp nằm trong mắt người nhìn”.

The idiom “Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration” was comprehended in a few ways by students. 14 out of 39 students wrote comparatively similar meaning for this sentence, that is, “Thiên tài là 1% cảm hứng và 99% mồ hôi/nỗ lực/công sức/sự cố gắng, kiên trì/kiên trì/chăm chỉ, mồ hôi” with such keywords “cảm hứng”. 16 other students owned another version, which is “Thiên tài chỉ có 1% tài năng/thiên bẩm/năng khiếu/bẩm sinh/thiên phú/tài năng bẩm sinh và 99% là nỗ lực/kiên trì/cần cù, siêng năng/kiên định/rèn luyện/luyện tập/cố gắng”.

in which the students thought 1% of a genius was born available, “thiên bẩm”. Five other students had another way to understand this sentence, that is, “Thiên tài là 1% thông minh và 99% là sự nỗ lực cố gắng/mồ hôi, cố gắng” with the first clause “1% thông minh”. Two of the students did not write anything for this sentence. The rest, two students comprehended the sentence in quite different directions; one noted down “Thông minh có 1% nguồn lực và 99% nỗ lực”; the other said that “Thiên tài là 1% sáng tạo và 99% là công sức của họ”. The dictionary wrote “Thiên tài là 1% cảm hứng và 99% mồ hôi.”

For the idiom “Behind a great man is a great woman”, the students had their own thoughts. 31 out of 39 students created such version that “Đằng sau người đàn ông/bậc nam nhân thành công/thành đạt/vĩ đại” or “Đằng sau sự thành công của người đàn ông” “là một người phụ nữ tuyệt vời/vĩ đại”/ “luôn có/ là bóng dáng/ bóng hình của một người phụ nữ”, in which they believed it was “một người đàn ông thành công”. Seven other students thought it was “Đằng sau một người con trai/dàn ông tuyệt vời/tốt/hoàn hảo” for the very first words in the sentence. Only one student said “Đằng sau một người đàn ông...”. The author found this meaning in the dictionary “Đằng sau một người đàn ông vĩ đại là một người phụ nữ tuyệt vời”.

From the findings mentioned above, it can be seen clearly that students tended to have more difficulties understanding the meanings of the collocations with the combination of a few parts of speech that they did not normally see or use. Possibly, the unusual order of the words brought about their misunderstanding or different versions of the same collocations. One obstacle was that they were not allowed to make use of smartphones or dictionary; hence, they had to think thoroughly to find out the most appropriate ways to comprehend the collocations.

Regarding English idioms, it seemed that the students did not need to make too much effort in figuring out the meanings in Vietnamese. Most of them could find equivalent idioms or

meanings in Vietnamese, which revealed that they knew a quantity of Vietnamese idioms/ idiomatic expressions from early age until the present. What is more important is that they chose the most suitable version in their mother tongue to go with their homeland's culture.

5. Conclusion

Based on the theoretical background discussed above, the authors investigated cultural vocabulary taken from selected EFL textbooks for English-majored students at a university in Vietnamese from the perspective of their meaning under the eyes of 39 students (a case study).

Students' initial understanding of the cultural words' meaning was explored through collecting their answer sheets and analyzing the Vietnamese versions for the English words in a variety of sentences from the textbooks. In general, the participants could find some ways to comprehend the special words (collocations or idioms); only some of them faced troubles during transferring the cultural words into their mother tongue due to several factors. That means they possessed comparatively good level of English and knew Vietnamese culture quite well.

For limited time and scope of the study, the authors have only analyzed answer sheets of 39 students at a university. For further research, the writer expects to expand to more answer sheets of the students at the same tertiary institution and some others in Vietnam.

Implications in teaching and learning English cultural words

For lecturers, they should sometimes design appropriate types of exercises with the appearance of cultural words that the students have studied in the textbooks. This somehow enlarges students' vocabulary range and opens their mind about culture of the target language and the source language.

To students, they should actively look up the special words in English so as to know the meanings and discover the cultural aspects of both English and Vietnamese languages, as well. In case they do not know how to do that job, they had better ask for the lecturer's help and consultancy.

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