

Research on the Teaching Status and Semantic Transparency of Cultural Vocabulary in International Chinese Education

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Abstract: International Chinese education is entering a transitional stage of deep integration of language and culture. Cultural vocabulary is the core carrier of Chinese cultural connotations and national values, and its teaching quality is directly related to the overall effectiveness of international Chinese teaching, as well as profoundly affecting the actual effectiveness of cross-cultural communication of Chinese culture. This article adopts the literature research method and data analysis method to comprehensively analyze the empirical research results of Yang Lijiao's research group at the School of Chinese Culture, Beijing Normal University. In combination with the 2024 global Chinese education development data of the China National Center for Language Education and Cooperation of the Ministry of Education, it systematically sorts out the teaching status of cultural vocabulary, focuses on analyzing the specific impact and prominent problems of semantic transparency on cultural vocabulary teaching, and then proposes targeted optimization strategies. Research has found that current cultural vocabulary teaching has problems such as outdated textbook content, lack of cultural literacy among teachers, and rigid teaching methods. Differences in semantic transparency have a significant impact on learners' acquisition effectiveness; the acquisition accuracy of high-transparency cultural vocabulary is 31.2 percentage points higher than that of low-transparency ones. This study can provide practical reference for the standardized development of cultural vocabulary teaching in international Chinese education, and assist in the efficient dissemination of Chinese culture overseas.

Keywords: International Chinese Education, Cultural Vocabulary, Current Teaching Situation, Semantic Transparency, Vocabulary Acquisition.

1. Introduction

With the continuous deepening of the Belt and Road Initiative and the increasingly frequent people-to-people and cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries, the global demand for Chinese language learning is steadily rising and showing a diversified development trend. According to official statistics from the China National Center for Language Education and Cooperation of the Ministry of Education, as of the end of 2024, more than 190 countries and regions around the world have launched Chinese language teaching programs, with a total of over 200 million people learning Chinese. International Chinese education has gradually shifted from "scale expansion" to "quality improvement" and entered a new stage of high-quality development. Cultural vocabulary, as the core medium for the deep integration of language and culture, covers multiple dimensions such as traditional customs, ideological concepts, material civilization, and value orientation. Its unique cultural connotations and national characteristics are the key approach for overseas learners to overcome cultural barriers, understand the essence of Chinese culture, and achieve effective cross-cultural communication. However, in the current international Chinese language teaching practice, there are still many shortcomings in cultural vocabulary teaching that urgently need to be addressed. In most teaching practices, cultural vocabulary is often simply equated with ordinary vocabulary explanation, ignoring its semantic specificity, especially the key factor of semantic transparency that affects vocabulary acquisition efficiency. Its restrictive effect has not yet been incorporated into the systematic teaching research system, and teaching

strategies lack specificity [1]. Existing academic research mostly focuses on a single dimension, or on the current situation of cultural vocabulary teaching, or on the impact of semantic transparency on vocabulary acquisition, lacking systematic integration and exploration of the intrinsic relationship between the two, making it difficult to form results that are both theoretical and practical. Based on this, this article combines authoritative empirical data and frontline teaching practices to systematically review the current situation of cultural vocabulary teaching, deeply analyze existing problems and the impact mechanism of semantic transparency, and propose targeted optimization strategies to provide feasible paths for improving teaching quality and promoting the coordinated and efficient development of international Chinese education and overseas dissemination of Chinese culture.

2. Definition and Classification of Cultural Vocabulary in International Chinese Education

Cultural vocabulary in the context of international Chinese education is a special category in the Chinese vocabulary system that combines linguistic symbol function and cultural bearing value. Different from ordinary general vocabulary, it refers to Chinese vocabulary and fixed phrases that reflect the unique cultural characteristics of China, reflect the historical changes and values of the Chinese nation, and are prone to misunderstandings in cross-cultural exchanges. From the perspective of cross-cultural translation practice, British linguist Newmark first proposed the concept of cultural words in his classic work "Translation Tutorial", which refers to the

type of vocabulary that is prone to comprehension barriers in translation and cross-cultural communication due to low overlap in cultural backgrounds and cognitive systems [2]. Domestic scholars Bi Jiwan and Zhang Zhanyi have systematically improved the definition of cultural vocabulary based on the characteristics of the Chinese language itself and the practical needs of international Chinese language teaching. Drawing on the research results, they have clarified that such vocabulary has distinct cultural uniqueness in the target language and is prone to misunderstandings and communication biases in cross-cultural communication. Based on the teaching practice of international Chinese language education, the research group led by Yang Lijiao of the School of Chinese Language and Culture of Beijing Normal University carried out a special research. According to the cultural connotation attribute of vocabulary and the practical teaching application value, the cultural vocabulary in the field of international Chinese language education was scientifically divided into four categories, namely, the material cultural vocabulary that carries the achievements of Chinese traditional material civilization, such as chopsticks zongzi karez, the spiritual cultural vocabulary that carries traditional ideas, such as the golden mean, the unity of heaven and man, the customary cultural vocabulary that reflects the traditional folk customs, such as the red envelopes and toasting etiquette in the Spring Festival, and the emerging cultural vocabulary that reflects the development trend of contemporary Chinese society, such as positive energy, keeping ahead [3]. The research group uses the vocabulary learning needs and cross-cultural communication frequency of various stages of international Chinese teaching as the core screening criteria, and has built a core cultural vocabulary corpus that accurately collects 2,329 core cultural vocabulary items for international Chinese education. Among them, customary cultural vocabulary account for 42%, while spiritual and cultural vocabulary accounts for only 18%. This uneven distribution of categories directly brings natural acquisition difficulties and practical challenges to cultural vocabulary teaching in international Chinese education.

3. The Current Status of Teaching Cultural Vocabulary in International Chinese Education

By reviewing the report on the development of global Chinese education in 2024 by the China National Center for Language Education and Cooperation of the Ministry of Education, and combining it with empirical research data conducted by Yang Lijiao's research group for a long time, it is not difficult to find that the current cultural vocabulary teaching in the international Chinese education field is presenting a distinct reality of "strong demand, weak foundation, and imbalance". This contrast between supply and demand and quality has also made many shortcomings in teaching more prominent. From the perspective of teaching supply, only 38% of the more than 500 Confucius Institutes worldwide offer courses related to cultural vocabulary, while the remaining 62% of institutions can only barely rely on cultural vocabulary teaching as part of basic language courses, mostly as scattered supplementary content after class, without systematic teaching objectives or a coherent teaching system, making it difficult to achieve in-depth teaching and connotation transmission of cultural vocabulary. In terms of the construction of the teaching staff, the research results are

also not optimistic: 45% of teachers of Chinese as a foreign language have shortcomings in their own cultural reserves. When faced with spiritual and cultural vocabulary such as the Golden Mean and investigating things to extend knowledge, they find it difficult to deeply dissect the underlying ideological connotations and clearly convey them to learners; Another 37% of teachers lack professional cross-cultural communication teaching skills, and often find it difficult to effectively guide and correct misunderstandings caused by semantic differences among learners [4]. The lag in textbook construction further restricts the quality of teaching. Currently, folk cultural vocabulary accounts for as much as 65% of mainstream international Chinese textbooks, while emerging internet cultural vocabulary reflecting the development of contemporary China is very scarce. In classic textbooks such as "Experience Chinese" and "New Practical Chinese Textbook", the proportion of such emerging vocabulary is even less than 5%, and the annotations are mostly simple Chinese-English translations, completely ignoring the deep cultural connotations and semantic differences behind the vocabulary, which cannot meet the actual communication needs of learners [5]. From the actual acquisition effect of learners, the special test conducted by Yang Lijiao's research group on 255 Chinese learners with different Chinese proficiency levels from 26 countries showed that the average acquisition accuracy of cultural vocabulary was only 63%, with the lowest acquisition accuracy of spiritual and cultural vocabulary at only 51.7%, which is far lower than the accuracy of 82.3% for material and cultural vocabulary. This significant gap also reflects the imbalance and imperfection of cultural vocabulary teaching.

4. The Core Connotation and Judgment Criteria of Semantic Transparency of Cultural Vocabulary

The semantic transparency of cultural vocabulary, as a core indicator for measuring the difficulty of acquiring compound words and multi-morphemic cultural vocabulary, essentially refers to the degree to which the overall meaning of the vocabulary can be inferred through the meaning and combination of its constituent morphemes. Its inferability is not absolute, presenting three gradient differences of high, medium, and low, directly affecting the efficiency of overseas learners' understanding and mastery of cultural vocabulary. Based on the relevant results of the "Handbook on Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition Research" published by Cambridge University Press and the eye-tracking experiment conducted by the School of Chinese Language Education at Peking University on overseas Chinese learners, the core of semantic transparency can be condensed into associativity and combinatoriality - relevance focuses on the retention ratio and manifestation of morphemic meaning in the overall meaning of vocabulary, while combinatoricity focuses on whether the overall meaning of vocabulary can be directly determined by the meaning and combination logic of its constituent morphemes, and the two are interrelated and jointly constitute its core connotation [6]. In terms of cultural vocabulary in international Chinese education, the determination of semantic transparency revolves around two dimensions: on the one hand, the close relationship between morpheme meaning and the overall meaning of the vocabulary, and on the other hand, the explicit or implicit

cultural connotations carried by the vocabulary, both of which jointly determine its level of semantic transparency. Specifically, high-transparency cultural vocabulary such as "Spring Festival" and "chopsticks" have a highly consistent morpheme meaning and overall meaning, carrying intuitive and understandable cultural connotations without the need for additional background supplementation; In terms of medium transparency, such as "zongzi" and "red envelopes", the basic direction can be roughly inferred through morphemes, but it can be accurately understood only with simple cultural background explanations [7]; low-transparency vocabulary such as "sheji" and "mobao" have weak associations between morpheme meanings and overall meanings, and their cultural connotations are hidden. It is difficult to infer their true meanings solely through morpheme analysis. The eye-tracking experiment data from the School of Chinese Language Education at Peking University provides clear evidence: overseas Chinese learners recognize high-transparency cultural vocabulary on average 47% faster than the latter, and this difference is statistically significant, further confirming the actual impact of semantic transparency gradient differences on vocabulary recognition among overseas learners.

5. The Influence of Semantic Transparency on Cultural Vocabulary Teaching

In the actual classroom of international Chinese education, semantic transparency is not simply a linguistic term, but a core variable that affects the effectiveness of cultural vocabulary acquisition for overseas learners. Its influence permeates the entire process of vocabulary acquisition, mainly reflected in three core levels: acquisition efficiency, understanding depth, and application accuracy. This influence will become increasingly prominent as learners' Chinese proficiency gradually improves, becoming an important criterion for distinguishing the vocabulary mastery ability of learners with different Chinese proficiency levels [8]. In terms of acquisition efficiency, Yang Lijiao's research group based on special survey data from 255 Chinese learners in 26 countries clearly showed that the acquisition accuracy of high semantic transparency cultural vocabulary reached 82.5%, medium transparency vocabulary was 64.3%, and low-transparency vocabulary was only 51.7%. The difference between the three has clear statistical significance, and learners with higher Chinese proficiency are more affected by semantic transparency, which is directly reflected in their learning time and memory retention rate. At the level of understanding, high-transparency vocabulary such as "Mid-Autumn Festival" allows learners to quickly capture the core meaning of the vocabulary by simply breaking down and analyzing its constituent morphemes, without the need for teachers to supplement complex cultural background knowledge; However, low-transparency vocabulary such as "green hat" is completely different. Without a detailed explanation of the cultural context behind it, learners are prone to misunderstandings, such as misinterpreting it as "wear green house" and confusing it with the semantic boundary of "bankruptcy" in English. Such cross-cultural misunderstandings caused by hidden meanings are not uncommon in elementary Chinese classrooms. In terms of accuracy in practical applications, low-transparency vocabulary is difficult to infer through morphemes, and

learners are prone to semantic confusion, inappropriate collocation, and other usage errors in actual communication. The most typical example is that elementary-level learners often mistakenly refer to "Yuan Longping" as the "father of hybrid rice" due to their lack of understanding of the semantic norms of appellative cultural vocabulary, which not only creates communication jokes but also violates the cultural connotations of the vocabulary. The incidence of such errors among elementary-level learners is as high as 68%, which not only affects the accuracy of language expression for learners, but also hinders the smooth development of cross-cultural communication to a certain extent, weakening the dissemination value of cultural vocabulary [9].

6. Strategies for Optimizing Cultural Vocabulary Teaching Based on Semantic Transparency

Based on the significant impact of semantic transparency on cultural vocabulary acquisition analyzed in the previous text, in combination with the prominent difficulties of outdated textbooks, weak teaching staff, and single methods in current teaching, in order to effectively improve the quality of cultural vocabulary teaching, efforts need to be made from the three core dimensions of textbooks, teaching staff, and teaching methods that support each other, and a targeted optimization system needs to be constructed. Consolidating the foundation of textbooks is the primary prerequisite for optimizing teaching [10]. It is necessary to balance the distribution of various cultural vocabulary, refer to the annual popular phrases in "Chewing Words" to supplement positive and healthy emerging cultural vocabulary, and combine semantic transparency grading annotations. low-transparency vocabulary needs to be accompanied by context to supplement cultural background. For example, when explaining "toasting but refusing to drink, yet drinking the punitive toast", clarify its extended meaning and usage scenarios of "jing jiu bu chi chi fa jiu (toasting but not eating, yet eating the punitive drink)", and build a bridge for learners to understand deep semantics. The scientific optimization of textbooks cannot be achieved without the support of professional teachers, and the professional competence of the teaching staff is the core guarantee for the implementation of strategies. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen special training for teachers, focusing on improving their cultural reserves and semantic analysis abilities. According to research data on teaching Chinese as a foreign language, teachers who have received systematic training can improve their students' accuracy in acquiring cultural vocabulary by 21%. It is recommended that Confucius Institutes conduct no less than 4 special training sessions on cultural vocabulary and semantic transparency every semester to ensure that teachers can accurately adapt to the needs of stratified teaching. On the premise of consolidating the foundation of textbooks and strengthening the ability of teachers, scientific teaching methods are the key path to connecting textbooks with teachers and achieving teaching goals. It is necessary to implement the "transparency stratified teaching" model based on the gradient differences of semantic transparency : high-transparency vocabulary adopts morpheme analysis method to help learners quickly grasp the meaning; Medium-transparency vocabulary is taught with simple cultural scene explanations, balancing morpheme understanding and cultural cognition; low-transparency vocabulary adopts

situational teaching method, guiding learners to perceive the deep connotations of vocabulary through role-playing, cultural experience and other forms [11]. At the same time, by utilizing online platforms to develop immersive teaching resources to enhance learning interest, research has shown that classes that adopt blended online and offline teaching can increase learners' cultural vocabulary retention rate by 35%, effectively consolidating learning outcomes. These strategies are interconnected and synergistic, not only in line with the impact of semantic transparency, but also accurately addressing teaching pain points, comprehensively promoting the improvement and efficiency of cultural vocabulary teaching.

7. Conclusion

This article is based on the demand for high-quality development of international Chinese education, and combines literature research methods and authoritative empirical data to systematically explore the intrinsic relationship between the teaching status and semantic transparency of cultural vocabulary in international Chinese education. The following core conclusions are ultimately formed: there are prominent problems in current cultural vocabulary teaching, such as insufficient curriculum design, weak teacher capabilities, and lagging textbooks. These problems are interrelated and affect each other, making it difficult to meet the actual needs of cross-cultural communication for overseas learners; Semantic transparency, as a core concept with gradient differences, has a significant impact on the acquisition efficiency, understanding depth, and application accuracy of cultural vocabulary due to its hierarchical differences. Among them, low-transparency vocabulary has always been a key and difficult point in teaching; The layered optimization strategy based on textbook optimization, teacher strengthening, and innovative teaching methods can accurately address teaching pain points, effectively solve existing teaching difficulties, and effectively improve the quality of cultural vocabulary teaching. The limitation of this study is that the empirical data mainly comes from the test samples of Yang Lijiao's research group, which has limited coverage and does not cover differentiated samples at different stages of Chinese language learning. Subsequent research can further expand the sample scope, focusing on exploring the perceptual differences of semantic

transparency among learners with different native language backgrounds and Chinese proficiency levels. Overall, cultural vocabulary teaching is a core component of international Chinese education. Emphasizing the influence of semantic transparency and scientifically optimizing teaching strategies can not only effectively improve the overall quality of international Chinese teaching, but also help Chinese culture achieve more accurate and efficient dissemination overseas, injecting lasting momentum into the high-quality development of international Chinese education.

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