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On Fossilization of English Vocabulary Learning in High School and Some Relevant Strategies

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Abstract

Vocabulary acts as the basis of English language, the fossilization of vocabulary competence is a barrier for the improvement of English learning. In order to avoid such kind of barrier, the thesis analyze the causes of students' fossilization in English learning process via interviewing some high school students with different English levels and put forward some effective measures against it with the help of helping English learners improving their vocabulary comprehension and expression.

Key Words: *vocabulary; fossilization; English teaching*

1. General Introduction

Larry Selinker, a British famous linguist and a professor of London University, first suggested the concept of interlanguage in 1972. Fossilization is a process during which some incorrect linguistic forms are relatively permanently incorporated into a person's second language competence. Whatever kind of teaching approaches are taken, teachers have to be faced with the matter how to make vocabulary learning efficiently. Generally speaking, it is quite a common phenomenon that vocabulary teaching is difficult to get rid of the setting of "pronunciation, spelling, part of speech and meaning", which has been a common teaching method these years. Thus, we have to attach importance to the effects that fossilization brings to.

1.1 Some manifestations on lexical fossilization for high school students

Dictation is quite a common teaching procedure in high, in which process high school students always memorize the Chinese meaning of each word. Later on, when they meet the words in reading materials or translate into English, they are willing to use the words from their memory, while neglect the cultural backgrounds. Lexical fossilization

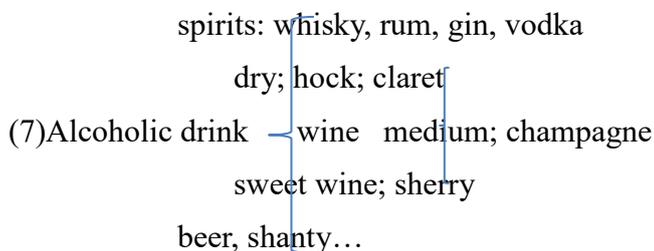
can be classified as follows on the basis of degrees:

1.2 Entirely identical fossilization phenomenon

It refers to phenomenon that students choose the English word based on the Chinese meaning when they are communicate with foreigners or in writing. When ambiguity occurs, they know some mistakes are made in the choice of the words. For instance, we know cash means money or paper money, but (1)“cash crop” can not be interpreted as money crop, which means economic crop. Another example, the word(2) “lover”, which means a partner in a sexual relationship outside marriage from the oxford dictionary is quite different from the reference of “husband” or “wife”. While in Chinese, *Airen* refers to a spouse. English word “lover” does not mean a spouse, both of which have opposite meanings. Lacking the experience, high school students do not really know the daily groceries so that they might not know *Hongcha* should be translated as(3) “black tea” , not “red tea”, and *Hongtaiyang* in Chinese should be translated into English as (4)“yellow sun”. Such kind of lexical fossilization should be focused on as they exist in communication.

1.3 Partially identical fossilization

Both English and Chinese words have more than one meaning and reference. In English, for example, (5) “observe” means to see or notice somebody or something, to watch somebody or something carefully, especially to learn more about them, to make a remark, to obey rules and to celebrate festival, birthdays, etc. All the five meanings are likely to be on the college entrance examination. Meanwhile, in Chinese, some concepts are not defined so clearly, but are defined in English so different words are chosen to expressed. For example, in English(6) “wine” is regarded as *Jiu*, but in fact, wine refers to alcoholic drink made from the fermented juice of grapes. In Chinese, *Jiu* can refer to all kinds of that kind of alcoholic drink, but it can be divided into several kinds.



Some other words have to be defined specifically catering for the need of social communicative needs, such as *Shushu*, *Bobo*, *Jiujiu*, *Gufu*, *Yifu*, while in English only one word can describe them, which is (8) “uncle”. So is (9)“cousin”. Another example is the Chinese word (10) *Wazi*, which is divided into stocking and sock according to the

length.

There are some more examples like these, all these mistakes must be noticed and corrected in time otherwise failures would occur.

1.4 Emotional difference on fossilization

In translation and communication, although the words in vocabulary list can convey the main idea of the translator, they fail to express the inner meaning and cultural connotation, which makes it hard for Chinese senior high students to learn English. For example, in Chinese (11)“Dog” does not have a positive meaning most of the time, but on the contrary, in English, dog is always used to convey the meaning of loyalty, cute, and lovely and so on. So there are such kind of proverbs like:

(12)You are a luck dog.

(13)Every dog has his day.

(14)Love me, love my dog.

Another example is about the word (15) “liberal”, which means “given or giving freely, open-minded, free from prejudice in English. but “liberalism” means “liberal views or principles. From this point of view , it does not have the negative meaning of “ Ziyoushuyi” in Chinese. (16) “Sophisticated” is often adopted to modify a person who knows the rules or principles of the society and is not honest and deceptive in relationships. In English, however, sophisticated means experienced, having learnt the ways of the world and having lot natural simplicity.

2. Some causes of Fossilization Phenomena in vocabulary learning for high school students

From the examples mentioned above, we can safely draw the conclusion that it is quite easy for students to make mistakes in English-Chinese or Chinese-English translating literally. Leave alone the difference between English and Chinese, there lie many lexical differences between American English and British English.

About the causes of lexical fossilization, the author interview some senior high school students in ar High School.

(17) Oliver, a male student, has a good command of English. He can memorize the Chinese meaning of English words very quickly. In English writing, he seldom makes mistakes on the use of words, but in reading comprehension, he finds it hard to comprehend some familiar words if he translates the words into the meaning in word list. For example, in a recent paper, a sentence goes like this “ *For Susan, the “cowboy”*

not only picked the key, but fixed her day, or rather, warmed the long and cold winter days.” From his point of view, to understand the meaning of a word completely, one would better put that word in the real context.

(18) Janet, a female student, who ranks in the middle of the class, sometimes makes mistakes in writing and in oral English. She finds it hard to convey her true meaning when speaking English, so she often spends a lot more words to interpret what she expressed, which makes it harder for her to communicate.

(19) Bruce, who is not so good at English, has a small amount of English vocabulary. He keeps the habit of writing down the Chinese meaning of new words in a small not book, so he memorize the Chinese meaning one by one most of the time. In English writing, however, he will think out the meaning with Chinese pattern so that he always fails to find an appropriate word to express his ideas.

From the description of the three students with different English abilities above, we can find out some causes of lexical fossilization.

2.1 Interference of the mother tongue

As is known to all, there are differences between mother tongue and the target language, and the main difference is the basis of mother tongue interference. They have acquired the mother tongue when any foreign or second language learner is like to receive mother tongue interference. The learner has got used to the knowledge systems and thinking patterns in his native language which have a lasting impact on his target language learning. In the Chinese English language learning situation, it is a solid barrier in learners' progress toward the second language competence.

2.2 Conventional and Cultural difference

Owing to the long history of developing its own special cultural habits, the language expressing meaning will unavoidably have its own national characteristics. It is not so easy for Chinese to understand privacy in western countries. On the contrary, it will make people feel intimate if you ask others' private matters, such as one's age, marriage, children as well as income while such kind of situations never occur in western communication especially in formal situations. For example, individualism is the moral stance, political philosophy, ideology, or social outlook that emphasizes the moral worth of the individual. All in all, it can be defined as a positive word. But in Chinese, it is often misunderstood that individualism emphasizes the deeds of focusing one's own interests and ignoring the interests of other people.

2.3 Internal feature difference

Both English and Chinese have great differences in word-formation. The quantity of

general words in Chinese can be more than those in English. In Chinese, general words are often used. If people want to define different class of one category, more words will be added before or after the words, for example, “ Hua, Shu, Che” ect. In English, however, some totally different word are used to refer to these words.

(20)

Flower	
Rose	Oriental cherry
Winter Jasmine	Orchid
Touch-me-not	Camellia

(21)

Tree	
Pine	Cypress
Oak	Birch
Palm	Elm
Clove	Spruce

From both examples above, we can see clearly that different words are used to refer to different trees. While in Chinese this kind of word-formation can be X-flower or X- tree. Although there are some examples in English like boar, wild boar; ox, wild ox, these kinds of word-formation are much smaller in quantity. Perhaps this is the reasons why there are millions of, even billions of English words.

According to the cause of fossilization, the paper has put forward some strategies to cope with the fossilization of English teaching and learning.

3. Avoid mother tongue interference

Chinese senior high school students' interference accompanies learners since the time when they pick up English. Students' mother tongue provides abundant hypotheses about the second language. Improving the learning and teaching conditions is very important in order to reduce mother tongue interference. The terminal aim is to help students to establish the cognitive systems of the target language and reduce the fossilization in English vocabulary learning.

3.1 Master the cultural background

English learning is, to some degree, culture learning besides phonological, lexical, semantic or grammatical learning. The tradition, history, society and conventions are also quite essential when one learn and study the true meaning and reference of each

word so that it can be used and expressed correctly. When interpreting a word, especially a noun form word, teachers can present some pictures, videos and even movies on TV so that students can have a better understanding of the words and leave a deep impression on the words.

3.2 Develop students' English thinking mode

Teachers can rely on every possible teaching assistance to build a English context for students, which contributes a lot to the efficiency of English learning.

What's more, using English -English dictionary such as *Oxford Dictionary for Advanced Learners the 8th version*, and *Longman Dictionary* is an effective way of developing English thinking mode. English- English dictionary can help students understand the meaning of words accurately and precisely and enlarge vocabulary as well. For example

(22) Continual: always happening, very frequently

Continuous: unbroken, uninterrupted in time and sequence, going on without a break.

Only by referring to English- English dictionary can students know the difference accurately and develop English thinking mode.

4. Conclusion

Conventionally, a "word" is unit of expression which is intuitively recognized by native speakers in both spoken and written and spoken language. The thesis attempts to introduce the fossilization of English vocabulary learning in High School and some relevant strategies. Only by avoiding mother tongue interference, mastering the cultural background and developing students' English thinking mode can high school students solve the problem of fossilization in vocabulary, get higher scores in exams and most importantly, have a better competency of English.

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