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Embodied Philosophy and Its Implications for English Vocabulary Teaching Strategies in College

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Abstract

Language is the result of human cognition and words are derived from human experience. Embodied philosophy brings rich implications for vocabulary teaching in college classroom. The research aims to analyzes the potential strategies of teaching vocabulary on the basis of experiential view of language. At the level of vocabulary teaching, teacher can improve students' vocabulary memory effect from the motivations of physical experience, environmental experience and cultural experience behind vocabulary. At the level of morphology teaching, teacher can focus on explaining the formation of words regulated by cultural experience based on the experiential perspective to help students master the formation mechanism of words. These strategies are argued to be effective in improving students' vocabulary proficiency.

Keywords

embodied philosophy, teaching strategy, vocabulary teaching, teaching implication, motivation

1. Introduction

Taking English as foreign language for many years, teachers and students in China have also long been aware of the significance of vocabulary in language teaching and learning and they have already devoted much time and energy to help students improve vocabulary proficiency. But the effect of vocabulary teaching remains far from satisfactory (Zhou, 2010). Pu (2003) claims that one reason for this lies in the lack of effective teaching methods and strategies in English classroom. He has found that the traditional translation method has been predominant in English classroom where many teachers believe that vocabulary learning is more a matter for students themselves and in vocabulary teaching they are usually confined to reading new words, showing the meaning and usage of the word.

However, the fact is that language cognition is different from skill cognition, inanimate cognition and mechanical cognition because it emphasizes the embodied cognitive experience of physical and mental

active participation. Foreign language teaching should pay attention to the integration of body and mind, so that students can devote themselves to learning, and play a positive role in foreign language teaching. As a new paradigm, experiential cognition can not only be applied to the practice of language cognitive activities, but also effectively guide English teaching activities (Xu, 2012), bringing many implications for English vocabulary teaching in college. The present research aims to analyze the implications embodied cognition brings to shed some lights on English vocabulary teaching practice and promote the teaching efficiency.

2. Embodied Philosophy

In 1999, American linguists Lakoff and Johnson put forward the theory of “embodied philosophy” in their book *Philosophy of Experience: The Mind Based on Experience and the Challenge to Western Thought*. Embodied cognition emphasizes the interaction and importance of body, mind and situation in the cognitive process. In other words, human beings understand the world through interaction with the surrounding environment. On the one hand, embodied cognition emphasizes the importance of physical experience, which is the source of constructing knowledge. On the other hand, the formation of cognition depends on the real and vivid physiological experience and the connection between reality and physical experience. The generation of language comes from human perception and understanding of the world. The body is the medium for human beings to connect with the world. Various “live” body feelings and life experiences are the channels for learning knowledge and the origin of human cognitive development. On the basis of criticizing the dichotomy of a series of “disembodied” characteristics of the separation of body and mind, subject and object, and mind and object in the traditional cognitive theory, embodied cognition emphasizes the role of the body, and attempts to reconstruct the dimensions of embody, situation and generation (Li, 2022).

Embodied philosophy believes that human category, concept, reasoning and mind are originated from physical experience and conceptual systems are organized according to categories (Langacker, 2000). Since human beings have language, they will naturally fix the results of conceptualization and categorization in the lexical expression. This is the so-called lexicalization of category or conceptualization. Therefore, categorization has experiential characteristics. Concepts and words also have experiential characteristics. The experiential nature of English vocabulary is a supplement to many attributes of language. Language is mainly formed through cognitive processing on the basis of people’s experience of the world through sensory organs and is the result of subjective and objective interaction (Wang & Li, 2004). This theory gives a new explanation to the essence of language. The structure and pattern of language are inspired by the repeated experience patterns of human beings and language comes from human rich experience of the objective world. That is, language is the result of human cognition on the reality, and the structure of language reflects the structure of human experience. Both cognition and language are experiential.

The proposals of embodied philosophy theory can be summarized into three basic principles - the

experience of mind, the unconsciousness of cognition and the metaphor of thinking. The most important is the experience of the mind. Experience can be roughly divided into three categories: physical experience, environmental experience, and cultural experience, which are overlapping and cannot be separated independently. Physical experience refers to the mapping from sensori-motor domain of human body, such as space, weight, distance, temperature, size and smell to subjective judgments including status, responsibility, intimacy, emotion, importance, evaluation, mood. Environmental experience refers to the experiential cognition of geography, climate, biological environment and other aspects. For example, people often map the meteorological domain (such as thunder, rain, electricity and snow) to the non-meteorological domain (such as people's mood, attitude, situation and situation). Cultural experience refers to the experience and cognition of life customs, communication etiquette, aesthetic habits, religious beliefs and other aspects. Chinese and western people have the same body organs, face the same or similar natural environment, and share the universal characteristics of experience. Therefore, the commonness of Chinese and English physical experience and environmental experience makes it easy for Chinese students to have a positive transfer in the process of learning English. However, there are also great differences between Chinese and western social customs, religious culture, historical origins and other aspects, revealing the relative characteristics of experience. The differences between Chinese and English cultures make Chinese students liable to have negative transfer in the process of English input and output. Therefore, emphasizing the experiential cognitive processing mechanism of language, the experiential view helps to understand the laws of human language learning, and brings new research perspectives and significance enlightenment to English vocabulary teaching strategies.

3. Vocabulary Learning and Teaching

The knowledge of vocabulary might be divided into vocabulary in breadth and depth (Wesche & Paribakht, 1996; Qian, 1999), receptive and productive vocabulary (Nation, 2013). When it comes to emotional vocabulary, it can also be divided into emotional state words and emotional load words (Chen & Gu, 2021). However, Chinese undergraduate students obviously have small number of English vocabulary. According to the survey conducted by Xu and Liu (2014) in a state university of China, the average receptive vocabulary of freshmen in 2011 is 2983, while the productive vocabulary is 844, which is much lower than the required number by English Curriculum Standards for High School issued in 2003. The Standards require that the students should master at least 3300 words to meet the level of being admitted by universities. Moreover, Laufer (1998) believes that 5000 words should be the minimum vocabulary required for English reading. If learners have a vocabulary of 9000, their reading accuracy rate is only 70%. American linguist Diller (1978) believes that 10000 vocabulary is the most basic requirement for reading moderately difficult English articles. Thus the vocabulary possessed by Chinese college students is far from meeting the requirements for smooth reading of moderately difficult articles in English (Wei, 2003).

The acquisition of vocabulary knowledge is divided into incidental acquisition and intentional acquisition (Hulstijn, 2008). Webb and Nation (2013) believe that the purpose of vocabulary teaching is to solve the problem of vocabulary breadth and depth. The former refers to vocabulary size, while the latter covers the form, meaning, and use of vocabulary. Sonbul (2013) proposes that there are two main methods of vocabulary teaching, one is explicit teaching focusing on the form of vocabulary, and the other is implicit teaching that provides contexts of words usage. The former intends to expand the breadth of vocabulary, while the latter focuses on the use of vocabulary. Most of the existing vocabulary teaching research focuses on the impact of vocabulary presentation methods on vocabulary teaching (Zhang & Li, 2017; Zhang et al., 2018;), such as presenting vocabulary through vocabulary tables, text, pictures, or incidental context. There are also studies on promoting vocabulary learning and use through writing (Zhu & Liu, 2021). However, most of these researches are conducted in a classroom where the traditional teaching method is in predominance. Therefore, it is particularly important and necessary to innovate teaching methods for English vocabulary (Zhou, 2010).

4. Strategies for Vocabulary Teaching

The experiential view of language has brought strategic enlightenment to the teaching practice of English vocabulary. This section is to analyze the potential strategies to teach vocabulary as well as their rules of construction and usages in Chinese college classroom.

4.1 Strategies for Forms and Meanings of Words

Metaphorical thinking and experiential mind are the core principles of experiential philosophy. Most of human thinking is metaphorical, and metaphor is one of the most basic ways of human thinking. Language is an external symbolic expression of human thinking. The cognitive mechanism of word naming reflects the metaphorical nature of human thinking, representing the causes and elements of human real and rich physical experience, environmental experience and cultural experience. The following analysis mainly focuses on the metaphorical words in English vocabulary, and discusses its experiential motivation.

4.1.1 English Vocabulary Based on Physical Experience

Lakoff and Johnson (1999) have listed the 36 most common conceptual metaphors based on physical experience. There are words derived from the perception of body temperature which is mapped onto human personality. A man who is friendly and ready to help others in need can make others feel warm and heated, associating this experience with one's temperature in his body, constructing motivation of the expression "warm-hearted". On the contrary, "cold-blooded" is created to refer to the person who does show any pity and emotion. Similarly, originating from the perception of space, we derive such conceptual metaphors as HAPPY IS UP and SAD IS DOWN. Moreover, the perception of smell or taste can associate "stink" with bad and "bitter" with painful; the perception of object size endows "big" with the meaning of "important" and "little/small" with unimportant; and the "close" distance is a symbol of "intimate" relationship and "remote" distance represents "not close and distant" relationship.

4.1.2 English Vocabulary Based on Environmental Experience

English vocabulary based on environmental experience reflects the experiential cognition of geography, climate, biology (including animals and plants). The similarities and differences of metaphorical expressions based on environmental experience in English and Chinese coexist, mainly including the shared experience type in English and Chinese, similar experience type in English and Chinese, unique experience type in English and Chinese. The words from shared experience by English and Chinese are reflected in such expressions as “thunderous applause” and “cloud of groom”. The expressions like “gooseflesh” and “black sheep” are the reflections of similar experience by Chinese and English although the metaphorical meaning are expressed using different animals, with “goose” in English being equivalent to Chinese “chicken” and English “sheep” being similar to Chinese “horse”. The words derived from exclusive English experience are reflected in such expressions as “kangaroo care” and “wind someone around”, which can’t be found such metaphors in Chinese. Similarly, the words like “panda eye” and “weather beaten” which are exclusive to Chinese have no equivalence in English.

4.1.3 English Vocabulary Based on Cultural Experience

English vocabulary created by the unique culture of English-spoken countries, such as religion, numbers, diet, color culture, has become a difficulty for English learners in reading comprehension. One example which can be used to illustrate this is the expression “red terrorism”. In English, “red” as a color word, refers to something “extremely dangerous and violent” since in the eyes of English people, the death, violence and war are saliently associated with people’s bleeding. But in Chinese, the red color is usually associated with “progress and revolution”, like in the expression “red regime” and “red army”. Take religion and digital culture as another example. Influenced by Western Christianity, the number “seven” in English often has auspicious and perfect meanings, such as “in seventh heaven” which means “very happy”. However, under the influence of Taoism and Buddhism, the number “seven” in Chinese is closely related to folk religious ghosts and gods, often carrying the meaning of “unknown and death”, such as “头七 (the first seven days after one’s death)” and “七级浮屠 (a seven-storey high pagoda, which symbolizes a high-level state of practice where the Buddhist enters into the state of complete liberation and transcendence of all troubles and disturbances)”.

Vocabulary is the most important cornerstone of English learning, especially metaphorical vocabulary, which accounts for a large proportion, is of great benefit to the improvement of oral English, reading, translation and writing ability. Most metaphorical words are based on direct or indirect multidimensional experience. If teachers teach vocabulary from the basic physical, environmental and cultural experience of words, they can help students grasp the specific usage of words more quickly and firmly, and then improve the idiomaticity of spoken English, such as the expression “The movie stinks” being used to express the concept “the terrible movie” and “it’s a big day today”; to enhance the ability to understand English reading, especially words from English exclusive cultural experience, such as “green eyed” and “red cent”; improve the ability to translate unique cultural words into English or English into Chinese.

4.2 Strategies for Morphology

Morphology refers to the rules of words formation and usage. Lexical structure is similar to human experience or conceptual structure. Experiential category reflects people's cognitive style of things and events. There are different English morphologies for things in a static or dynamic, short or continuous, ongoing or completed state. Relying on people's experience of taking the initiative to beat or being beaten passively, people recognize the relationship between the subject and the receptor of the action, distinguish between transitive verbs and intransitive verbs, and produce active voice and passive voice. According to people's real experience of space, the conceptual metaphor "TIME IS SPACE" has been generated, and the past, present and future tenses have been derived. English words are composed of a limited number of morphemes, and their word formation mechanism follows the principle of iconicity, especially distance iconicity. Distance iconicity refers to morpheme distance iconicity and conceptual distance (Wang, 2009). The closer the conceptual distance between symbols, the easier it is for people to put them together to think about the conceptual meaning (Wen, 2014). In daily life, people often count things. Therefore, nouns and quantities are closely related in conceptual distance, having a high co-occurrence frequency. There are many quantifier affixes, such as uni-, bi-, tri-, quarter and hept-, etc. and noun roots such as angle, cycle, ann-, grade, etc. Many words can be derived from the combination of these quantifiers and noun roots, or some suffix words. Similarly, actions and directions based on people's life experience are also closely related to conceptual distance, and the probability of relevant morphemes being merged into words is also high, such as ingress (in+gres), egress (e+gress), progress (pro+gress), retrogress (retro+gres). The combination of action morpheme and direction morpheme can derive many words.

The combination of English words reflects some conventionality of cultural experience. To be exact, the order of English words is influenced by English social culture to a certain extent. For example, English is prone to using "right and left", while Chinese is prone to saying "left and right". In terms of "left-right" symmetry, human sense of direction is not as strong as the vertical gravity dimension of "up-down", so the sense of "right and left" is more affected by cultural factors. In English culture, right often means "good" and "correct", while left often means "bad". English defines right and left on the basis of facing north, that is, right corresponds to east, while left corresponds to west. "East" is the direction from which the sun rises, full of brightness, warmth and vitality. "West" is quite opposite. Originating from the experience of the natural environment where the sun rises in the east and sets in the west every day, English adopts the order of east first and then west, and produces the corresponding fixed expression "right and left". In Chinese history and culture, the Chinese nation has the habit of respecting both the left and the right and "left and right, before and after" respectively corresponds to "east, west, north and south", so modern Chinese tend to use "left and right" rather than "right and left".

Morphology seems to derive multidimensional motivation from human life experience. In daily English morphology teaching, teachers should first help students master the rules of English word formation

from the perspective of humanistic experience, such the principle of “man before beast” as in the expressions “beauty and beast” and the principle of “animate before inanimate” which is reflected in such expression as “man or machine” and “life or death” rather than “machine-man” and “death or life”. Secondly, the word formation mechanism such as distance iconicity principle and construction schema should be explained in depth to help students master the construction and combination rules of morphemes, such as the combinations of nouns and quantifier morphemes as well as action and direction affixes to improve the efficiency of word memorization. Thirdly, we should focus on the combination of words regulated by cultural experience, especially the words exclusive to English culture, so as to help students improve the idiomaticity of English writing and the accuracy of Chinese-English or English-Chinese translation.

5. Conclusion

Embodied philosophy has brought important practical enlightenment to college English vocabulary teaching. First, at the level of vocabulary teaching, teachers can help students better and more efficiently master the rich usage of words from the motivations of physical, environmental and cultural experience behind vocabulary, especially metaphorical vocabulary. Secondly, at the level of morphology teaching, teachers can help students master the formation mechanism of morphemes and the formation rules of words from the perspective of humanistic experience, focusing on the word combinations regulated by cultural experience. The research on the teaching strategies of English vocabulary and morphology from the perspective of experiential view helps to improve the efficiency of word memorization and the oral idiomaticity, enhance students’ ability of reading comprehension and translation of specific cultural words, and promote the ability of writing. However, the research is not complete and one of its evident shortcomings is that it just analyzes the theoretical implications without any teaching practice. Moreover, the research only focuses on the strategies of teaching vocabulary without discussing the effect of embodied philosophy on the teaching of other aspects of a language, such as pronunciation and syntax.

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