The Idiom Teaching in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

As one of the treasure of Chinese language and crystallization of Han nationality culture, idiom has always been the difficult part in both Chinese learning and Chinese teaching. Idiom teaching, part of vocabulary teaching, has its own characteristics, intensively reflecting the features of language structure-function-culture. So it is of high importance and necessity for Chinese learners to rapidly improve their Chinese level and should draw our attentions. The objective of this article is to clarify and analyze the mistakes and misunderstandings when Chinese idioms are used by Chinese learners, additionally, propose some useful teaching measures to help Chinese teaching.

Key words: Chinese idiom; culture; semantics

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1. The Features of Chinese Idioms

There are such main classifications in Chinese idiomatic phrases as idiom, allegorical saying and proverb etc., of which the idiom is quite the important type, for its huge number and common usage, complicate ways of structure and fairly profound cultural connotation. After mastering some certain number of Chinese words and expressions, if these Chinese learners desire to further advance their Chinese to reach a level of authentic and real Chinese, they have to know how to use idioms properly in both formal occasions and written Chinese, and then have the ability to communicate in common idioms to some extent. It is only in this way that they can show their Chinese level and better reflect how they fuse with Chinese cultural community.

Chinese idiom is the kind of set phrase people extensively use from generation to generation during long term social communication, so its entire characteristics show a steady structure, integral meaning, various syntactic function and concise expression. Specifically, it has the following three features: (1) the steadiness of its structure and composition. As a set phrase passed down in long term, what idioms compose of generally cannot change at will or insert in or attach some other words and expressions. (2) Most of idioms can serve as components. Except few idioms like "不言而喻" serve as parenthesis, general idioms can serve as sentence components. (3) the idiom is kind of complication in expressing meanings. The idiom consists of several morphemes, so it is necessary to express the meanings of several words, among which some combinative relations will happen; but also the extended meaning is always not consistent with its literal meaning, which has much more figures of speech effect or makes people generate other relevant imaginations.

Enjoying a long and rich history, Chinese idiom always directly reflects the distinct history, values, customs and life experience of a nation, which determines the important position of Chinese idiom teaching. However, it is the complications that lead to kinds of errors when the learners don't master its semantic limit and habitual collocation completely yet, did not understand the cultural connotation and deep meaning in idioms, or not clear about syntactic function and the context.

2. The Cultural Connotations of Chinese Idioms and Its Importance in Chinese Teaching

2.1 The Cultural Connotations of Chinese Idioms

Culture is the combination of material and spiritual civilization people create in the long process of history. In summary, material culture, behavior culture and conception culture are included. But it is well known that every language is the carrier and national features of its culture, so Chinese idioms keep mass cultural atmosphere in ancient China, covering such aspects as food and clothing, folk customs, religion belief, habits of mind and concept of value etc.. They always contain various deep meanings which show the characteristics of Chinese history culture and strong traditional color of nation, bury ancient oriental cultural deposits. Let's take some examples to explain the relevant roots of culture.

Some idioms are related to Chinese silk. Since the very ancient times, China has been
the home of silk. Among the numerous silk one kind named "Jin（锦）" was the very top grade fabric often seen in royal or official family, the color as brilliant as gold, the pattern ornate and exquisite. Therefore, the idioms such many as "锦衣玉食","锦上添花","锦囊妙计"etc. are all similarly to express the magnificence and elegance. Later, sometimes "锦"and "绣" together to describe good things or optimistic prospects, for instance, "锦绣山河"、"锦绣前程"etc. are all produced from these meanings.

Other idioms are relative to Chinese traditional merits and rites. For example, "相敬如宾"and "举案齐眉" should be used between wife and husband; the younger generation should respect and show filial obedience to their elders, otherwise, they will become "不肖子孙"; "礼尚往来" should be paid attention between guest and host, and never try to "喧宾夺主"; a monarch should love his subjects of feudal ruler, adhering to "礼贤下士"，and a minister should be absolutely loyal to his monarch, "鞠躬尽瘁死而后已"。These traditional virtues and rites are what Chinese people all the time pursue and advocate, whilst still advocating the notion of peace. Even if we have to break the peace, we should also "师出有名"、"先礼后兵"。

Chinese idiom is just like the mirror, which can reflect the cultural features of our Han nationality from every angle. Every idiom has its own story, meaning, statement and allusion with rich history cultural traditions. If we take them to be a point of view and teach our foreign students to use these idioms in a correct and precise way, from the history and culture literacy of Han nationality, as far as I'm concerned, it will never be a tough thing to do. In fact, due to limited class time, our teachers cannot cover every story and culture behind the idiom in class, let alone spend much time on mass idioms. Thus the students should be asked to collect and read some relevant materials, increase the amount of after-class reading information, so as to make up for the lack of in-class lack, which can make up for the lack of it in class.

2.2 The Great Importance of Chinese Idiom Teaching
2.2.1 Inevitable Demand to Improve Entire Teaching Level

Rooted in the vast and deep Chinese cultural fertile soil, Chinese idioms have been preserved through hundreds of years of use. It not only becomes the language use of Han nationality, but also display a wonderful and profound window of Chinese culture. It carries various abundant history and cultural traditions.

As Chinese teachers to foreign students, only by restoring and preparing much relevant knowledge can we select the most appropriate way to teach our students. And when we master much more idioms and communicate with our students, we will teach them idiom knowledge consciously or unconsciously even in and after class, which, of course, is a high requirement for the teachers. So if we want to be qualified teachers especially responsible for Chinese idiom teaching, we must keep improving our teaching level at every moment.

2.2.2 Great Help to Promote Students' Ability to Express

It is of great importance to both language input and output in foreign language teaching. Language expressing is just to output language. The more knowledge the students show of Chinese idioms, the higher the level of Chinese language acquisition they display.

When learners cannot understand the meaning of vocabulary others say, this kind of communication obviously won't continue. The amount of vocabulary input directly affects the amount of output, moreover, it is far larger than
a learner output. Therefore, lack vocabulary, misunderstanding the meaning, not mastering the pragmatic rules, these all will lead to the failure or frustration of language communication. What they say is "foreign" Chinese contrary to Chinese culture, which accordingly limit the learners' reading ability to develop and writing level to improve.

Hence the amount of mastering idioms and the ability to use idioms to some extent represents the students' Chinese level and also determines their written ability.

2.2.3 Beneficial to Expand Students' Understanding of Chinese Culture

It is mentioned above that language is the carrier of its culture, so language and culture are one. Language contains culture, and a language stands for its corresponding culture, in reverse, culture reflects its language. They are inseparable. However, as a bright and special kind of aspect in Chinese culture, idioms carry much more profound cultural information than general vocabulary. When misunderstanding occurs in our communication, it is not only because of bad pronunciation and grammar, I believe the more reason is cultural difference that blocks the communication. And this kind of difference is caused by geographic location, natural environment, ethnicity, historical change, religious belief and the different economic development and so on. It means to master and understand the historical background and process of development of this language when learning Chinese. It is the same as Chinese teaching, for culture teaching and culture infiltration are throughout the whole language teaching, together to develop and change.

Based on the above, conclusion is that it is great benefit to skillfully master the use of Chinese idioms in order to deepen their understanding of Chinese culture.

3. Analyzing the Patterns of Error Made by Foreign Learners

By collecting, concluding and summarizing the materials, the error patterns made by foreign learners are classified generally into such four types as written form error, semantic understanding error, syntactic misuse and pragmatic error etc.

3.1 Written Error

The written error is mostly caused by the learners' incomplete mastering of Chinese intonation or confused usage of homophone and similar Chinese character. Only if paid more attention to, this kind of error can be fully avoided. For example:
①穿过森林，突然豁然开朗。
（豁然开朗）
②她打扮得花枝招展出门了。
（花枝招展）

There still other mistakes as setting the idiom apart because of violating the stability of Chinese idioms, the integrity of meaning. However, this type of error only happen on occasion among beginners, and when emphasized will it never again.
③我小心地翼翼打开她给我的礼物。
④我和她不约而且同来看电影。

If the fixed structure of idioms is neglected, students "creatively" separate these firm idioms, there will be like the above examples ③④.

3.2 Semantic Understanding Error

Since the structure of idiom is quite stable and integral, but the meaning of idiom is not just to simply add up these components, but to generalize the entire meaning by metaphor and extending on the basis of its literal meaning. Otherwise, the foreign Chinese learners will
make mistakes. As we all know, the meaning of a word contains rational meaning and color meaning, so does Chinese idiom.

### 3.2.1 Rational Meaning Misunderstanding

The rational meaning (理性义) of idiom refers to its literal meaning (字面义), extended meaning (引申义) and metaphorical meaning (比喻义). When we use the literal meaning of the idiom, we cannot catch the meaning only from its literal meaning, for idioms often have other implications more or less. The literal meaning of idiom are similar (引人入胜), contrary (八面玲珑), or even relevant (一气呵成) to its extended meaning. In turn, the extended meaning derives from its literal meaning, but we cannot infer totally from the literal meaning. The metaphor meaning of idiom also cannot be explained just according to its literal meaning, sometimes this meaning refers to that meaning, such as "迈水楼台"、"风毛麟角".

For example:
1. 我刚来中国时，不会说汉语，也没有朋友, 经常手苦伶仃。
2. 我心甘情愿他通过HSK。

Example ① "孤苦伶仃" is often used for the lonely, pitiable old without anybody's taking care. However, this sentence is just to tell a learner's loneliness during studying abroad. However, Obviously, it is not appropriate to use this idiom in this sentence.

Example ②, "心甘情愿" is to describe one's complete willingness without any reluctance, and more often it means that one will make some certain sacrifice. But this example just wants to express the speaker's celebration to the person who pass HSK, not to tell if he is willing or not. Therefore, this kind of misuse will be easy to generate misunderstanding.

### 3.2.2 Color Meaning Misunderstanding

We have mentioned above that idiom has rational meaning and color meaning, moreover, strong emotional color, which is added in by people. If close attention is not paid, there is room for much error. For instance:
1. 同屋在装饰房间, 我对她指手画脚。
2. 毕业后, 我希望找到游手好闲的工作。
3. 他已被抓三次, 因为他盗窃而如醉如痴。

The three idioms above “指手画脚”、“游手好闲” and “如痴如醉” all misuse the color meaning, among which the former two are both negative. So it is improper to be used in these two sentences. However, the third idiom is originally positive, but here is used negatively. As a result, the students have to master the positive, negative or neutral meaning of the idiom when learning Chinese idioms. To abuse or misuse will of course break the atmosphere and effect of communication.

### 3.3 Syntactic Application Error

The structure of an idiom shows the grammatical function, which can determine its syntactic function. For this reason, according to the relationships between the components inside of the idiom, we generally analyze the basic structure of idioms. So the figure is:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure Types</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Four morphemes together</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject-predicate+</td>
<td>天长地久</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject-predicate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb+object+</td>
<td>探头探脑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb+object</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attribute-center+</td>
<td>暴风骤雨</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attribute-center</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adverbial modifier</td>
<td>精打细算</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+Adverbial modifier</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predicate-compliment+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predicate-compliment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Based on the types of idioms in the above form, some errors in syntactic made by our foreign learners appear as following:

① 那里的山层峦叠嶂。（property mingled）
② 大家赞不绝口这部电影。（verb+object improper match）
③ 放假了，走过了无人烟的教室，我很怕。（attribute+center improper match）
④ 画家栩栩如生地画画。（adverbial+center improper match）
⑤ 他说汉语说得自由自在。（compliment+center improper match）
⑥ 你第一次开车，要开车得小心翼翼。（improper order）

3.4 Pragmatic Context Error

<An Introduction to Pragmatics> says that we regard the mistakes, which are caused by not getting full communication effect during communication between people, as pragmatic errors. ...this kind of error...is not the grammatical structure error leading to the result...mainly attribute to the improper way of speaking, or unfit expressing habit, or even bad time and bad place to speak. This error affects language communication the most seriously, and is the least kind to tolerant. For instance:

① 我和我邻居相敬如宾。
② 我爱我妻子，但我们不相敬如宾。
“相敬如宾” is to describe the mutual respect between husband and wife, as if they were treating their guests. This idiom can only be used to describe the relationship between couples; and is not suitable to be used on any other occasion. However, here just violate this rule, and we can use “和睦相处”or “融洽相处” to describe the relationship with the neighbors.

Moreover, idioms are mostly used in written Chinese and much formal occasions with solemn and elegant color. Except for a few idioms, general idioms will not appear in oral Chinese. Mr. Pan Xianjun(2006) listed some dialogue examples of his students.

① A：你家离大学远吗？
   B：不远，一箭之遥。

In this example, A and B are two acquaintances, they are just greeting with each other, but here appears a formal written idiom, which will make people feel uncomfortable, and improper occasion in style. Of course, it does not match Chinese daily communication habit.

② 王老师明天下午要请2班的同学到家吃饭，他们真是三生有幸。

“三生有幸” means that one is lucky in his three generations, in other words, he has extremely good opportunity and luck. Generally, it is used in some formal self-modesty occasion, so improper here.

Among the above four error types, semantic understanding is the most common, and then is syntactic misuse. These two kinds of error have some certain relations, whereas the most errors occur in the errors of students written work.
4. Countermeasures and Suggestions for Chinese Idiom Teaching

By analysis, every single Chinese idiom puts its meaning, structure and cultural connotation related together. So when teaching idioms, Chinese teachers should start from the cultural background at the same time. Thus the students will find it easy to accept and absorb. Therefore, Chinese idiom teaching in teaching Chinese to foreign learners should focus on the following points:

Firstly, strengthen the semantic teaching of the idioms. During teaching, not only the literal meaning of idioms but also the implications, extended meaning, metaphor meaning and additional meaning should all be explained and clarified to students. Consequently, students will fully and thoroughly master Chinese idioms and try to avoid unnecessary error.

Secondly, enhance the syntactic function teaching of the idioms. Syntactic function is the most crucial step in using an idiom, so only the meaning of idiom paid attention to but syntactic function overlooked does not work during teaching. The three levels of idioms, semantic, grammatical and pragmatic level, cannot do without plenty of exercises and practices. Practice makes perfect, which means that only in practice can one master and properly utilize Chinese idioms completely.

Thirdly, emphasize the error analysis. We should actively and flexibly adjust our teaching strategy at the orientation of the students' error. Besides, the teaching amount and exercise amount of idioms should be increased during Chinese teaching to the foreign learners. Only combining in-class teaching and after-class self learning and practicing can they reach a good result.

Additionally, on the aspect of Chinese idiom teaching methods, we should seek much more concise and high efficient way to get the effect of doing less for more. This, therefore, need a great deal and full thorough preparation before the class, to choose some important idioms to teach in class, and to explain with a combination of language environment. What's more, students need intensive practice on their own and to scan similar idioms after class. To put it simply, we can take proper measures in the following to teach idioms:

1. To explain the meaning of the idiom: to explain the literal meaning and extended meaning etc.;
2. To interpret the history of the idiom: to know about the origin of the idiom to help students memorize. The Teacher should select some classical and common-used idioms, many of which are from historical events, ancient fables, Chinese mythologies, literary works etc..

So,

(a) We should choose idioms with good stories, such as “守株待兔”、“愚公移山”、“掩耳盗铃”、“画蛇添足”;

(b) We can also choose idioms with strong national characters, such as “龙风呈祥”、“望子成龙”、“龙飞凤舞”;

3. To comprehend by analogy:

When we teach “充耳不闻”, we can tell students “闻” means “听” (“充” means “塞住”), we can teach together with other analogous idioms about “闻”, such as “充耳不闻”、“闻鸡起舞”、“耳闻目睹”, thus, they will learn these idioms immediately.

When we talk about “之”, the analogous idioms “不速之客”、“惊弓之鸟”、“弦外之音” etc. should be taught at the same time.

Another kind is ascending number order like “三番五次”、“五颜六色”、“七嘴八舌”、“千变万化”, the words between the numbers are similar, thus, these idioms are
comparatively easier to catch the whole meanings.
(4)To determine the structure type:
When“惊弓之鸟”is mentioned, we should tell it is a modified type and often as subject, object;
Similarly, “呆若木鸡” is a compliment type, often as predicate;
Teaching the type of structure can avoid structural misuse of the idioms which students choose right.
(5)To match and practice:
When “荒无人烟” is related, students should know it always matches "森林、小岛、沙漠、村子"; when it turns to “兴致勃勃”, we can also list a formula like “兴致勃勃+地+观看/参观/游览/谈起”;
(6)To analyze comparatively the culture, but only comparing differences without judgment. For instance, Chinese are deeply influenced by Confucian culture and autonomous code of ethics, so they tend to "忍辱负重"、“逆来顺受”、“宠辱不惊”；in the sense of family, they advocate "夫唱妇随"、“大贵妻荣”、“落叶归根”.

The measures mentioned above are just some measures often used in class teaching. Of course, we teachers can make it diversified, such as filling in the blanks, proof-reading and error correction, idiom game playing etc., any of which can be adopted in class.

6. References:

5. Conclusion
To sum up, this paper mainly focuses mainly on the futures, cultural connotations and importance of Chinese idiom. It analyses common errors made by foreign learners and gives some corresponding countermeasures just as reference, in the hope that the above mentioned will be some help to Chinese idiom teaching.