

## EFL STUDENTS' AWARENESS OF CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS OF WORDS

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*This study testifies that EFL students' enhanced awareness of cultural connotations of words could improve their judgment of the appropriate usage of words in certain context. Frequency of the cultural connotations of words has been proved to greatly influence their performance. Based on the study, some pedagogical suggestions have been provided.*

### INTRODUCTION

Grammar and vocabulary are two fundamental pillars of the language mansion. If grammar is the framework of the building, then vocabulary can be regarded as the bricks. However, grammar has always been a favorite topic for researchers, while vocabulary seems to have been a forgotten area in the past. Since the 1970's, this situation has begun to change. More and more researchers have conducted research on vocabulary acquisition and instruction, especially in the area of second/ foreign language vocabulary research.

Various aspects of vocabulary have been researched in the past two decades, e.g. vocabulary learning strategies and acquisition (Coady, 1996a; Ellis, 1997; Ijaz, 1986; Strick, 1980); vocabulary instruction (Lewis, 1996; Nation, 1990; Nattinger, 1988; Ooi & Kim-Seoh, 1996; Sinclair & Renouf, 1988; Sokmen, 1997; Zimmerman, 1996); relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension (Nation & Coady, 1988; Qian, 1999); vocabulary and testing (Read, 1997, 1993); L1 influence on L2 vocabulary (Laufer, 1990; Swan, 1997), etc. Apart from all these, depth of vocabulary knowledge has also obtained a fair amount of attention (Henriksen, 1999; Nation, 1990; Qian, 1999). However, there are still some areas in vocabulary research which are seldom touched upon by researchers. The cultural connotation of words in different languages is such an overlooked area.

As language and culture are deeply intertwined with each other, and language is the vehicle of cultural manifestation, it is natural that some words represent different notions and cultural values in different languages. That is to say, "many foreign words which appear to have an equivalent basic meaning in the learner's L1 are nevertheless different because of their different connotations" (Laufer, 1990, p.582). Lado (1972) defines these words as culturally-loaded words—"lexical items which have similar primary meaning but widely different connotations in two languages" (p.285). One example would be the word *old*, which can make many English-speaking people feel offended if they are addressed as *old* in English, but in Chinese, the way to address someone as "old + surname" or "surname + old" shows intimacy with or respect to the one being addressed. This is a difficult area of vocabulary

acquisition as the “tendency of the learner will be to transfer the L1 connotation into L2” (Laufer, 1990, p.582). If the word has a positive or neutral connotation in L1 but a negative connotation in L2, or the word is taboo in L2, owing to the lack of awareness, NNSs may use it when they communicate with NSs, thus causing miscommunication. Conversely, if the word has a positive/neutral connotation in L2 but a negative connotation in L1, NNSs tend to avoid using such words. So if language learners have an awareness of the area of culturally loaded words, they might use words more correctly and appropriately. If they miss the cultural connotations of certain words, this could cause serious problems in their communication with NSs (Liu & Zhong, 1999).

English and Chinese are two linguistically remote languages which are embedded in two distinct cultures and ideologies. Under the influence of the traditional Chinese philosophy and Confucianism, the Chinese culture values harmony, group solidarity, tradition, authority, filial piety, etc., while western cultures value individualism, uniqueness, creation, adventure, etc. (Jia Yuxin, 1997). Under different social and political systems, it is very likely that Chinese and westerners will have different understandings of certain political and ideological issues. In addition, as English is neither an official language nor a *lingua franca* in China, and there are no true English-speaking communities in Mainland China, those Chinese EFL learners have rather little access to the cultural aspect of English, and they have relatively few chances to communicate with native speakers of English. Moreover, under the test-orientated educational system in China, grammar has always been the focus of the English teaching curriculum and cultural elements of English-speaking countries have been neglected for a long time. So even when language learners score high in exams like the TOEFL and GRE, they lack knowledge of western cultures. All these factors may cause great problems for Chinese learners of English to understand the correct cultural connotation of words in English and to judge whether the usage of certain words are appropriate or not in certain contexts in English.

Liu & Zhong (1999) conducted a study to show that certain words have different cultural connotations in Chinese and English, such as *old*, *propaganda*, etc. They tested Chinese EFL learners to see if their judgment on words used in a specific English context is proper or not, and their studies pointed out the Chinese learners' perception of whether a word is used properly with specific English contexts deviated from that of native speakers of English. This paper extends their study on Chinese EFL students to test whether their enhanced awareness of the area of different connotations of words in different languages (specifically, Chinese and English) may improve their judgment of the appropriateness of words used in specific contexts in English. Based on the current study, some pedagogical implications are suggested for integrating cultural elements into the language teaching curriculum and on improving the instruction of culturally-loaded words to EFL students. “L2” is used to refer to English studied as a foreign language in this paper.

## THE STUDY

### *Hypothesis and Research Question*

It is hypothesized that if EFL students were aware of the area of culturally loaded words, this awareness would probably have a positive influence on language learners' competence to judge whether words used in specific contexts are appropriate or not in English. The research question in this study, therefore, was whether by increasing language learners' awareness of the existence of different connotations of certain words in English and Chinese, Chinese EFL students' competence in judging the appropriateness of words used in specific contexts in English would be generally improved.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Subjects*

Forty high-level language learners in their third year of university study were selected from the English Department of University C in city W in China. Their ages ranged between 20 and 22 at the time of testing and they have been studying English for about 9 years on average. High-level students were chosen according to their academic records and recommendations from their teachers out of the consideration that some words tested in the pre- and post-test might be beyond low-level students' knowledge, so there could be an unpredictable factor of mere-guessing in subjects' choice if low-level language learners were chosen. This would taint the validity of the study.

### *Testing Materials*

There were a pre- and a post-test on 20 words (10 words in each test) in a multiple-choice format (see Appendix I and II for the specific testing items). The tested words were underlined in the sentences presented in specific contexts. Subjects were asked to evaluate whether the words used in the sentences were appropriate or not in those specific contexts based on a 5-point scale: 1-appropriate, would use it, 2-somewhat appropriate, probably would use it, 3-not sure, 4-somewhat inappropriate, probably would not use it, 5-inappropriate, would not use it. The purpose of the test is not to test the grammaticality of the words used in the sentences, but whether the words are properly used or not under the specific context (the degree of appropriateness/inappropriateness).

Some of the words tested were culturally neutral: the usage of these words was judged to be appropriate or inappropriate in both English and Chinese in the given contexts; and some of the tested words were culturally loaded, which meant that they were appropriate when used in one language under specific context (e.g. addressing someone by "surname + old" in Chinese), but inappropriate in another language (offense from the addressee when being called *old* in English). The maximum score of each test was 20. Subjects would get 2 points for each ideal answer (can only be 1 or 5). If the

ideal answer was 1, and they chose 2, they would get 1 point. If the ideal answer was 5 and they chose 4, they would also get 1 point. No point was given to choice 3 at any time.

### ***Procedures***

#### ***Pilot Test on Native Speakers***

Ten native speakers of English in Canada, who were either professors of English or graduate students in Applied Linguistics, were pilot-tested on the 20 tested words for their perception of the degree of appropriateness of the tested words. Their responses to the tested words only differed slightly as to the degree of appropriateness or inappropriateness for some of the tested words. When dissent occurred, the opinion taken by the majority was regarded as the ideal answer. Their choices would be used as the criterion in the real test.

#### ***Pre-Test***

The 40 subjects were given the pre-test as an intact group, and then divided equally into the control (C) and the experimental (E) group according to three variables: score, sex and the class they were in (to balance teachers' instruction. University C did not adopt a credit system towards students' academic progress then. Thus, all students who are put under one class will have all courses under the same group of teachers until the third year of their university study). As all subjects were between 20 and 22, age was not considered as a factor to be evenly distributed. Table 1 shows the division of subjects into the C and E group.

Table 1: Division of Subjects into C & E Groups

Group	Mean score	Sex		Class					
				1		2		3	
		F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
Experimental (E)	10.35	17	3	4	0	7	0	6	3
Control (C)	10.45	17	3	4	1	7	0	6	2

#### ***Lectures and First Questionnaires***

A week after the pre-test, both the C and the E group were given a lecture in different classrooms on different topics at the same time. Professor Z (who offered courses to graduate students on Cross-cultural Communication) was invited to give a lecture to the E group on culturally loaded words in English and Chinese. Topics covered the general area of cultural, social and ideological differences, and their influence on connotations of words in different languages. For example, the color "blue" means melancholy in

English, but this connotation is missing in Chinese. None of the tested words were used as examples in the lecture. The purpose of this lecture was to make subjects aware of the area of culturally loaded words if subjects had no awareness before the lecture at all, or to enhance their awareness if subjects had already been exposed to this field before.

Immediately after the lecture, subjects were given the first questionnaire which asked about their perception of the area of culturally loaded words before and after the lecture. The following questions were listed on the questionnaire. Were they unaware of this area before the lecture at all, or did they have a vague idea about this area, or were they quite familiar with this area before the lecture? Fourteen subjects claimed having a vague idea about this area and this lecture strengthened their knowledge; six subjects revealed that they were familiar with this area before the lecture, and also learned new things from this lecture. From their responses, it was clear that all of the subjects in the E group knew about the area of culturally loaded words before the lecture, but the majority of them only knew this area vaguely, and they all learned something new from this lecture.

In order to avoid the halo-effect, a lecture on an irrelevant topic (i.e. on how to improve English study) was provided to the C group by me at the same time in a different room. Topics related to cultural, social and ideological differences were avoided in this lecture. After that, they were also given a questionnaire about their perception of this lecture. Was it very helpful or somewhat helpful or not helpful to their future study? Subjects in both groups were told not to write down their names on the questionnaires and recommended not to discuss the content of the lecture with subjects in the other group.

#### Post-Test and Second Questionnaires

After ten days, the post-test was distributed to the subjects (the E group in one place and the C group in another) at the same time. Both examiners were trained beforehand to follow the same steps in administering the test.

Immediately after the post-test, subjects in the E group were given a second questionnaire to clarify the reasons for all the choices they made in the post-test. The following questions were listed. Did they randomly select one answer? Were they urged to choose "inappropriate" as the answer to the tested words because they were influenced by the lecture on cultural connotations of words in the lecture even if they didn't know the exact connotations of the tested words? Or were they sure of their choices because they knew the exact connotations of the specific words? Subjects in the C group were also given a questionnaire to clarify reasons for their choices with the attempt to trace any possible effect on their post-test (in case they exchanged information with students from the other group on cultural connotations of words), and whether they knew about the area of different connotations of certain words in English and Chinese before the post-test. If so, how did they get the knowledge? Did they know the content of the lecture given to the experiment group? These two

questionnaires added qualitative data to the quantitative analysis of comparing the results of both groups in the post-test.

## RESULTS

In order to answer the research question, a t-test was used to compare the test scores of the C group and the E group on the post-test. From Table 2, it can be seen that the mean score of the experimental group in the post-test is much higher than that of the control group. This result is statistically significant at the  $p < 0.001$  level with the t-value being 3.84. Thus, we can say with confidence that after the lecture to the E group, subjects in the E group performed much better than the subjects in the C group as far as their awareness of culturally loaded words is concerned.

Table 2: Experimental Group & Control Group Results on the Post-Test

Group	Mean Score	SD	T	P
Experimental	13.75	2.45	3.84	<0.001
Control	10.6	2.75		

df=38      (n=20 in each group)

The responses to the first questionnaire by the subjects in the E group showed that fourteen subjects had a vague idea of the area of different connotations of certain words in English and Chinese before the lecture and this lecture strengthened their awareness. Six subjects were familiar with this area before the lecture but also learned something new from this lecture. So it was clear that most of the subjects only had a vague awareness of this area and all of them obtained new knowledge from the lecture. So we could say that their awareness had been heightened by the lecture.

Analysis of the subjects' choices from their second questionnaire showed that most subjects in the C group knew the area of culturally loaded words vaguely before the lecture. However, as the lecture provided to them was not related to this area, they did not get profound knowledge and their awareness had not been heightened.

Based on this analysis, it seems that by increasing Chinese EFL students' awareness of different connotations of certain words in English and Chinese, their competence of judging the appropriateness of words in specific contexts in English has generally been improved.

### *Analysis of the Second Questionnaire Results*

In the second questionnaire given to both groups, subjects were asked to clarify the reasons for their choices in the post-test. Options A, B, C,

D were listed for their reference, with A—guessing an answer randomly; B—choosing “inappropriate” because of being influenced by the lecture (to E group), B—choosing “inappropriate” because of knowing the lecture to the E group (to C group); C—being certain of the choice; D—other reasons. As there were 10 words and 20 subjects in each group, the total number when a, b, c and d were added together is 200 (20x10) in each group.

Table 3 provides information on the number and percentage of each option chosen by subjects in the two groups in their second questionnaires.

Table 3: Number (No.) and Percentage (%) of Each Option Chosen by All Subjects

Group	A Random guess		B Lecture influence		C Certainty of choice		D Other reasons	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
E	13	6.5%	36	18%	132	66%	19	9.5%
C	35	17.5%	17	8.5%	111	55.5%	37	18.5%

Responses from the subjects in the E group in their second questionnaire showed that most of the time, they were either certain of the answer or biased to choose “inappropriate” as the answer because of the lecture (the percentage of A is 6.5%, nearly 1/3 of that of C group, that of B is 18%, more than twice that of the C group, that of C is 66%). The lecture on cultural connotation of vocabulary clearly had a deeper influence on subjects in the E group in their post-test than on subjects in the C group. This could function as an indicator of their enhanced awareness of the field of different connotations of words in different languages from the experiment group, which related to their greatly improved performance in the post-test.

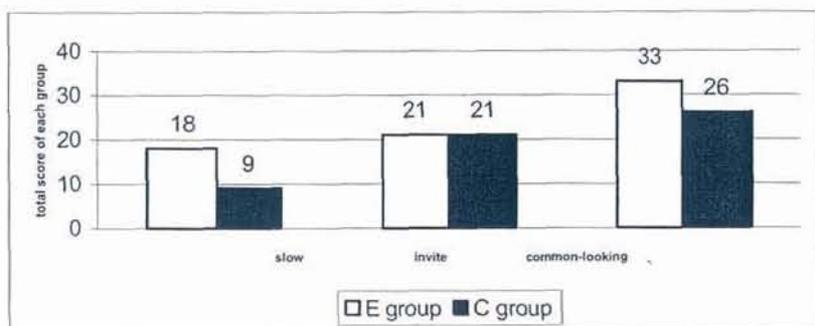
From questionnaire C2, it could be seen that subjects in group C were not as certain as subjects in group E when making choices (the percentage of A—random guessing is 17.5%, almost three times that of E group). That of B—lecture influence is 8.5%, that is to say, out of 200 times, only 17 times did subjects in group C choose “inappropriate” because they were influenced by the lecture to the E group. This is a relatively small number. The percentage of C—certainty of the choice is 55.5%, almost the same as that of group E. But further analysis showed that although they stated being certain of the different connotations of the words, actually some subjects picked wrong choices sometimes (it also applied to choices of some subjects in E group). Detailed explanation of option “D—other reasons” given by subjects in the two groups did not provide anything very valuable for the research.

#### ***Analysis of Culturally Neutral and Culturally Loaded Words***

In the post-test, there were three culturally neutral words (words with the same connotations in different languages), *slow*, *invite*, *common-looking*.

Figure 1 compares the total score of all subjects in group E and C on these words. The maximum total score of each word for all subjects is 40 (2x20).

Figure 1: Total Scores on Culturally Neutral Words



There were seven culturally loaded words (words with same primary meaning but different connotations in different languages) in the post-test, *old*, *peasants*, *compromise*, *take advantage of*, *yellow books*, *waste* and *politician*. Figure 2 compares the total score of all subjects in the two groups for these words in the post-test.

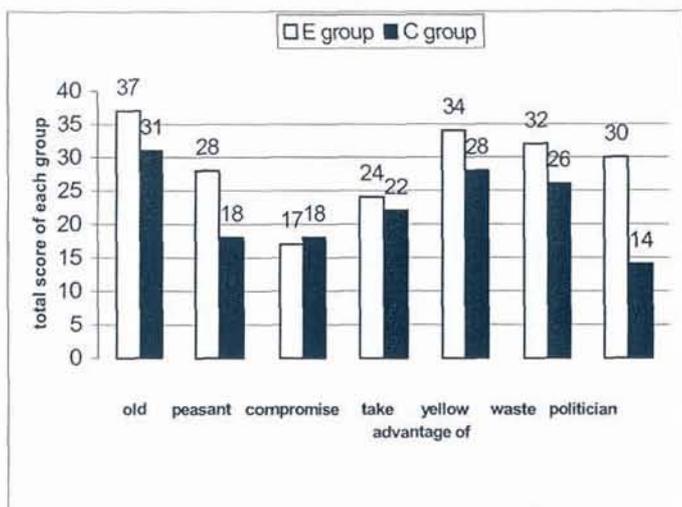


Figure 2: Total Scores on Culturally Loaded Words

From Figure 1 and 2, it can be seen that the E group scored higher for most of the words than the C group did, with the exception of *invite* (same

score for the two groups) and *compromise* (the score of group E is one point lower than that of group C). This reflected the improved competence of the E group to judge the appropriateness of words in certain context after the enhancement of their awareness. The comparison of the scores in each group also showed that scores for individual words differed within the same word-category, sometimes greatly, in the case of *slow* and *common-looking*, *old* and *compromise*. Most of the culturally-loaded words got higher scores than the culturally neutral words, like *invite* and *slow*. This is contrary to the expectation that scores for culturally-loaded words would be much lower than that of culturally-neutral words. It is assumed that familiarity with the words by the students, i.e. the frequency of words encountered by these Chinese EFL students, apart from the cultural connotations, influences students' performance as well.

#### ***Frequency of Words Encountered by Chinese EFL Learners***

In this part, words will be categorized into high/low/medium-frequency groups. For the purpose of this study, frequency includes two aspects: one is the frequency of semantic meanings of words encountered by Chinese EFL students--whether a word belongs to the lower, medium or higher vocabulary band in the English language curriculum stipulated by Chinese educational committee; another is the frequency of different cultural connotations of words encountered by Chinese EFL students-- judged according to the subjects' responses and opinions from some English teachers.

High-frequency words are words of the lower vocabulary band (such as *waste*, *invite*, etc.) in the English curriculum stipulated by the Chinese educational bureau. If misunderstanding of the connotations of a word in English and Chinese is very typical for Chinese EFL learners, and teachers have consequently emphasized the different connotations of this word in the two languages, this word is regarded as a high-frequency word (such as *old*, *yellow*, etc.). A low-frequency word belongs to the higher vocabulary band in the English curriculum (such as *propaganda*, *compromise*). If the cultural connotation of a word is not often encountered by Chinese EFL learners, or teachers have not talked about the different connotations of the word in English and Chinese, this word is regarded as a low-frequency word (such as *slow*). Medium-frequency words are words in the medium band in the English curriculum (such as *politician*, *common-looking*, etc.). Frequency of the cultural connotation of these words range between that of high-frequency ones and low-frequency ones.

Table 4 provides details about how the 20 tested words are divided into high/ medium/low-frequency groups.

Table 4: Accuracy Rate of High/Medium/Low Frequency Words in the Two Tests

High-frequency	Accuracy rate	Medium-frequency	Accuracy rate	Low-frequency	Accuracy rate
Old	97.5%	peasants	70%	slow	42.5%
yellow books	82.5%	intimate	95%	compromise	62.5%
Waste	87.5%	laborers	70%	critique	25%
Fat	97.5%	take advantage of	72.5%	propaganda	47.5%
Privacy	82.5%	common-looking	90%	individualism	60%
Messy	80%	politician	70%	ambitious	37.5%
Visit	60%				
Invite	72.5%				

It can be seen that the accuracy rate is generally the highest for the high-frequency group and the lowest for the low-frequency group. However, in each group the accuracy rate for some words is much higher or lower than that of other words. Reasons for this will be discussed next. As subjects only explained the reasons of their choices for the words in the post-test, words in the pre-test will be omitted.

In Figure 3, it can be seen that subjects in the E group scored higher than the subjects in the C group. The word *old*, when used to address people, is usually regarded as *experienced* and is respected in Chinese, however, in English, when *old* is used to describe a person, it generally implies *incapable* and is derogative. The different connotation of this word in English and Chinese has been repeatedly emphasized, so most subjects could make correct choices for this word. The word *yellow-book* is often used as a well-known example by Chinese EFL teachers to show the mistakes in transliteration as the color *yellow* in Chinese means *obscene, pornographic*. It does not have this sense in English. Thus, most subjects had no problem in choosing the correct answer to this word. The literal translation of the Chinese way of parting is "Sorry to waste your time." This expression reflects the modesty of the Chinese people and doesn't have the sense of belittling oneself. On the contrary, "Sorry to take up your time" is more often used as a way of parting in English, as *waste* indicates a slightly negative attitude towards oneself. This is often mentioned when teachers introduce the differences between attitudes held by Chinese and westerners towards the value of time and self-modesty.

Figure 3: Comparison between Total Scores for Four High-Frequency Words in the Post-Test

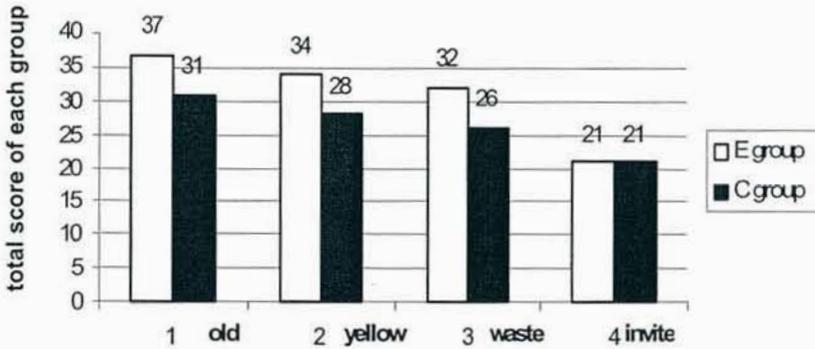
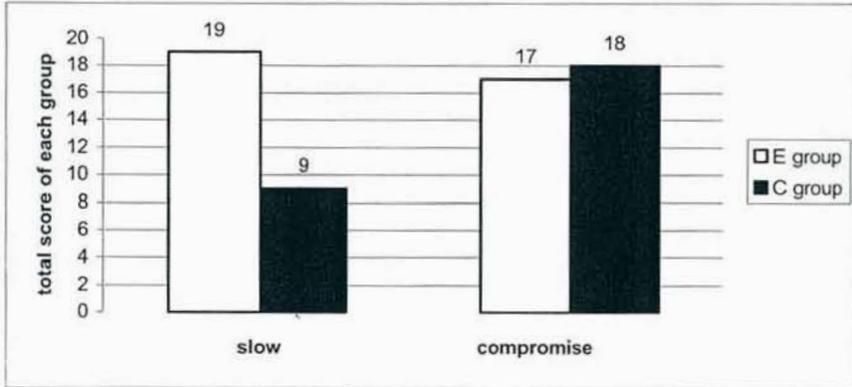


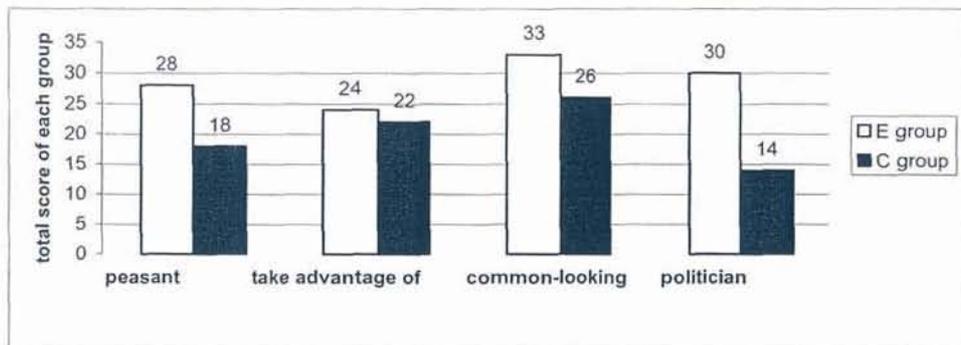
Figure 4 (above): Comparison Between Total Scores for Low-Frequency Words in the Post-Test

Figure 4 shows that scores of low-frequency words are generally lower. Although students know that “slow: means “doing things slowly, not fast”, they are unfamiliar with the sense of “stupid” in this word, and teachers might

ignore this kind of seemingly simple words. For the word “compromise”, the equivalent Chinese word is derogative as it implies “giving up the righteous course or principle under pressure” (from students’ questionnaire). On the contrary, English-speaking people regard it as an indispensable step towards achieving purposes. The difference of the cultural connotations of this word in English and Chinese is seldom grasped by Chinese EFL students, thus, they couldn’t make correct judgment for this word.

Figure 5 shows the scores for these medium-frequency words range between that of high-frequency and low-frequency words. The traditional Chinese English textbooks use the word *peasant* to refer to those poor landless people living in the countryside in China. There is no such a social group in developed countries. In contrast, the equivalent social group represented by the word *farmer* doesn’t exist in China. Students only have a rather vague awareness of the differences arising from the social and economical reality.

Figure 5: Comparison Between Total Score for Medium-Frequency Words in



### The Post-Test

For many Chinese students, to *take advantage of* resources and materials is proper to them, while to *take advantage of* somebody is improper as it implies to gain benefits for oneself by using others’ weakness, which is morally degraded to them. They are not sure of the meaning of “using others’ advantage to help one achieving one’s aim without causing harm to others” (reflected from questionnaire). Consequently, many of them choose wrong answers for this phrase. The phrase *common-looking* is taught to Chinese learners as a euphemism for *ugly*, thus is derogative. Usually, one will tend to avoid commenting on a woman’s appearance before that woman, especially when they are unfamiliar with each other. So students could make correct choices of this phrase under the correct context. The last word is *politician*, which derives from the word *politics*. As *politics* is generally regarded as a neutral word in Chinese, many students fail to recognize the negative sense of *politician*: someone who uses crafty tricks to achieve a purpose.

What can be learned is if students are familiar with the cultural connotation of a word, they are more likely to judge whether the words used under specific context are appropriate or not; and if they are unfamiliar with this area of study, their judgment is more likely to deviate from the native speaker norm. Based on this, teachers should explicitly point out the cultural connotations of words and provide more opportunities for students to familiarize themselves with the usage. Assumption cannot be made that students will master this aspect automatically, even for those semantically simple words.

### **PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

The analysis of scores of the control and the experimental group in the post-test proved that by increasing subjects' awareness of different connotations of certain words in English and Chinese, their competence in judging the appropriateness of words in specific contexts in English was generally improved.

The results of this research are significant for EFL teaching. In an EFL context, compared with an ESL situation, language learners have relatively less access to cultural, social and ideological aspects of the target language. My personal teaching experience testifies that many EFL teachers themselves are weak in this area. Allen (2000, p. 51) also expressed the idea that in order to design and implement foreign language instruction that integrates culture with language, teachers must first have a deep understanding of the target culture and an awareness of their own culturally conditioned and individually formed beliefs, attitudes and values. For EFL teachers, their task is first of all, apart from keeping their own identity, improving their knowledge of the cultural aspect of the target language so that the incorporation of cultural aspects into English teaching curriculum is not a "superficial aspect of language teaching programs [...] and an add-on to make the class more interesting" (Allen, 2000, p. 5).

Secondly, language and culture can't be treated separately because they are closely intertwined and language is deeply embedded in culture. Various social, cultural and ideological aspects of the target language should be included in the curriculum and introduced to students as much as possible. Ronowicz and Yallop (1999) stressed culture had to be integrated into the language classroom from the very first day of language learning, and culture must be taught in conjunction with language, not as an adjunct. The educational bureau of China has already realized the importance of this issue, and elements on western cultures have been added into the curriculum. However, the present attempt to include cultural issues into the curriculum for language teaching seems to stay at a superficial level of knowing some facts and interesting anecdotes. Great effort has to be made to deepen the understanding of both the teachers and the students.

Thirdly, the essence of understanding the cultural content of words is in their connotations (Byram, 1997). The appropriateness of words and their

connotations are dependent on specific social/cultural contexts. Words that are appropriate in one context may become inappropriate in another social/cultural context. So lexis should not be taught in isolation (Byram, 1997; Liu & Zhong, 1999; Ooi & Kim-Seoh, 1996), but always be presented and taught with proper social/cultural context (Nattinger, 1988; Sokmen, 1997).

In addition to the previous suggestions, authentic materials should be employed as much as possible in text-books for EFL students. The examples given by Xu Guozhang (1987) showed that many articles published in English to Chinese learners of English used phrases or sentences that are English in lexical form but Chinese in cultural content. This kind of usage not only confuses native speakers of English, but also leads Chinese EFL learners astray. Using authentic materials can not only broaden the chances for language learners to encounter low-frequency words and original expression (Coady, 1996), but also introduce the culture of the target language. Not only should the educational bureau adopt more authentic materials in language teaching textbooks, but each individual language learner should also read as many original articles as possible to familiarize themselves with the cultural aspects of the target language.

Explicit instruction to language learners is very important in vocabulary acquisition. As mentioned by Sokmen (1997), in terms of vocabulary teaching, the emphasis was on implicit, incidental learning of vocabulary during the period of 1970s and 1980s. Although providing incidental encounters with words is one method to facilitate vocabulary acquisition, many studies now suggest explicit vocabulary teaching in the L2 classroom as explicit instruction leads to the acquisition of a greater number of words as well as more in-depth knowledge (Coady, 1996). As has been reflected by subjects' responses in the questionnaires, although the majority of them claimed that they knew about the area of culturally-loaded words, many of them only had vague awareness. After the explicit instruction to subjects in the experimental group, these subjects scored higher than the subjects in the control group who had not received explicit instruction. So, language teachers can't assume that the connotations of some words are obvious to all the students even if the words are semantically easy to understand (Taylor, 1990). The connotations of words need to be explicitly emphasized to language learners.

The last pedagogical implication is that teachers should provide more chances for students to know words and their connotations. Lado (1972) expresses the idea that "we can not do much to teach or to test subtle differences (of connotations of words in different languages---added by the author) specifically and completely, but it is possible to sample the more frequent and obvious cases of wide discrepancy in connotation" (p. 285). The analysis from subjects' answers also reflected the fact that for high-frequency words, subjects generally performed better than they did for low-frequency words. This also implied that if students have more access to the usage and connotation of low-frequency words, their competence to judge the appropriateness of words in specific contexts would be improved.

Note: Some of the testing items in the pre- and post-test are similar to those used in Liu & Zhong (1999). But more testing items are co-constructed by two Chinese scholars of English and me. My sincere appreciation to Mr. Zhang Yinling and Mr. Li Yi for their valuable suggestion on the design of the testing materials.

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## APPENDIX I

### Pre-test

**Directions:** Please read the following sentences and indicate if the underlined words in each sentence are semantically and/or socially appropriate in the specific contexts by circling one of the numbers:

**1=Appropriate and you would use the word**

**2=Somewhat appropriate and you probably would use the word**

**3=Not sure**

**4=Somewhat inappropriate and you probably would not use the word**

**5=Inappropriate and you would not use the word**

1. A and B are classmates. After A mentions to B that his aunt is not tall but weighs two hundred pounds, B responds by saying "Your aunt is a very fat woman."

Appropriate 1      2      3      4      5 Inappropriate

2. Contrary to what we think, teachers may not know everything in their field of study. So we should reasonably critique what they say instead of blindly accepting their every word.

Appropriate 1      2      3      4      5 Inappropriate

3. An American man is chatting with a Chinese woman whom he doesn't know very well. When they begin talking about another man (both of them know that this man has had affairs with several women), the man tells the Chinese woman "It seems to me that you are very intimate with him."

Appropriate 1      2      3      4      5 Inappropriate

4. You always talk to your mother about what happens in your school every day. You told her what you did yesterday. You said, "We visited an auto plant yesterday."

Appropriate 1      2      3      4      5 Inappropriate

5. After quarreling with his father, a Canadian teenager asks him to leave his room. He says, "Dad, would you please close the door of the room so that I can have some privacy?"

Appropriate 1      2      3      4      5 Inappropriate

6. Mary is only an acquaintance of yours. She is not good at house-keeping. After you went to her home several times, you told her that her room was messy and she should tidy it up.

Appropriate 1      2      3      4      5 Inappropriate

7. ( In a meeting of a company) Many people still have not heard of our new product. We need to engage in more propaganda about the product to let more people know about it.

Appropriate 1      2                  3                  4                  5 Inappropriate

8. (The speech of a principal in an assembly) Our school's job is to produce moral, educated and disciplined laborers for the country.

Appropriate 1      2                  3                  4                  5 Inappropriate

9. Two friends are discussing an acquaintance, and one of them says " He likes to show off. What's more, he always brags about being different from others and being much better than others. The word individualism fits him exactly."

Appropriate 1      2                  3                  4                  5 Inappropriate

10. (Scene in a play) The evil prime minister has a plot to murder the righteous king in order to control the whole country. You think that he is a very ambitious and unscrupulous person.

Appropriate 1      2                  3                  4                  5 Inappropriate

## APPENDIX II

### Post-test

**Directions:** Please read the following sentences and indicate if the underlined words in each sentence are semantically and/or socially appropriate in the specific contexts by circling one of the numbers:

**1=Appropriate and you would use the word**

**2=Somewhat appropriate and you probably would use the word**

**3=Not sure**

**4=Somewhat inappropriate and you probably would not use the word**

**5=Inappropriate and you would not use the word**

1. A school invites a group of retired officials to its annual convocation. The principal introduces these officials to the audience by saying, "Today we are honored to have these old officials join us at our assembly."

Appropriate 1      2                  3                  4                  5 Inappropriate

2. Most peasants in developed countries own their land and adopt modern scientific techniques in farming.

Appropriate 1      2                  3                  4                  5 Inappropriate

3. During economic negotiations between two countries, the representatives of one country are having a discussion. One of them says: "We have to make a compromise at this stage in order to achieve our final goal."

Appropriate 1      2                  3                  4                  5 Inappropriate

4. A teacher is talking to Mr. Smith about his son's problems at school. The teacher says, "Mr. Smith, I've explained the math problems to your son many times, but he still doesn't get them at all. It seems that he is slow."

Appropriate 1            2                            3            4            5 Inappropriate

5. Most of the courses are purely in the format of lecture, but we will be taking advantage of the facilities of the multi-media lab as much as we can.

Appropriate 1            2                            3            4            5 Inappropriate

6. It was reported that police officials would destroy a large number of illegal publications. Some of them are yellow books and videos which are obscene and will do harm to the younger generation.

Appropriate 1            2                            3            4            5 Inappropriate

7. After a student finished visiting his professor concerning a course assignment, the student says to the professor, "I'm sorry to have wasted so much of your time."

Appropriate 1            2                            3            4            5 Inappropriate

8. Lily is a very kind person. She cares much about her friends, listens to their complaints and helps them out of trouble. She also has the ability to make correct decisions in times of emergency. You think she has all the qualities of a politician.

Appropriate 1            2                            3            4            5 Inappropriate

9. Your birthday is coming and you are going to have a party. You tell your friend "I'd like to invite you to my birthday party at 7 p.m. next Friday at my house."

Appropriate 1            2                            3            4            5 Inappropriate

10. A and B met each other for the first-time. After A showed B a picture of his/her sister, B commented on her appearance by saying "Oh, your sister is a common-looking girl."

Appropriate 1            2                            3            4            5 Inappropriate

