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CULTURAL REFLECTIONS IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE COMPARATIVE IDIOMS

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Abstract: The article examines the cultural distinctions reflected in English and Vietnamese idioms. Primarily, the influence of Vietnamese and American cultural contexts on the formulation and expression of idiomatic expressions was analyzed and compared. Furthermore, the study elucidated the differences in lexical usage between Vietnamese and English idioms of comparison, particularly in terms of their semantic equivalence. Consequently, for educators of English, it is imperative to employ diverse pedagogical approaches to facilitate learners' comprehension and effective utilization of comparative idioms in both Vietnamese and English.

Keywords: Idioms of comparison, different culture

INTRODUCTION

With remarkable economic growth in recent years, Vietnam has been actively integrating into the region and the global community, as evidenced by its participation in numerous international activities. To achieve its stated objectives of modernization, industrialization, and international integration, the mastery of foreign languages, particularly English, has emerged as one of the most critical strategies.

In contemporary contexts, to become a proficient English user, it is essential for learners not only to understand the structural and grammatical aspects of the language but also to acquire the ability to use it fluently and effectively. Proficiency in English can be significantly gauged by idiomatic competence. The broader a learner's knowledge of idiomatic expressions, the more effectively they can utilize the language. Specifically, in everyday

communication, comparative idioms, which are closely tied to real-life experiences, are frequently employed. As emphasized by Ghaffari (cited in Khosravi & Khatib, 2012, p. 1855), "without using idioms, the language becomes harsh and unattractive, so it can be said that words are like the skeleton of the language, while idioms are its soul." In practice, it is evident that each country possesses unique historical, cultural, and social characteristics, which are reflected in its language. According to Trinh (2010, p. 3), "every language exhibits differences in the ways of expressing the same idea through comparative idioms." Consequently, the expression of similar concepts through comparative idioms varies across nations, including Vietnam and England.

Recognizing the significance of this issue, the topic "Cultural Differences Reflected in

Vietnamese and English Idioms of Comparison; has been selected for investigation. This study aims to identify cultural distinctions by analyzing the lexical choices in English and Vietnamese comparative idioms. Additionally, the research seeks to provide practical suggestions for the teaching and learning of comparative idioms. Furthermore, it is hoped that this study will contribute to enhancing awareness of intercultural communication, particularly in understanding the cultural differences between Vietnam and England. Based on the findings of the research, it is expected to answer the three questions as follows:

1. How does Vietnamese and American culture influence on expression of its idioms of comparison?
2. What is the difference in using words between Vietnamese and English idioms of comparison in equivalence?
3. What should a teacher of English do to help learners master and use Vietnamese and English idioms of comparison effectively?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Definitions of terms

In order to be aware of the differences in culture between Vietnamese and English idioms of comparison, it is required to consider the insight contributions related to the topic. First of all, it is very important to fully acquire the definition of culture which is defined by Geertz (cited in Hinkle, 1999, p.30) as a “historically transmitted semiotic network constructed by humans and which allows them to develop, communicate and perpetuate their knowledge, beliefs and attitudes about the world”. Due to the close relationship between culture and language, Harklau (cited in Hinkle, 1999) clarifies that language both reflects and carries cultural values. Second, the concept of idioms is defined by many researchers in Vietnamese and English. According to Warren (1994, p.1) in Oxford Learner’s Dictionary of English Idioms, it is defined “An idiom is an expression whose meaning cannot be deduced from the literal definitions and an arrangement of its parts but refers instead to a figurative meaning that is known only through conventional use”. Regarding to Vietnamese concepts, Hoanh (2004,

p.5) stated in the book “Vietnamese idioms” that “Idioms is a group of words in terms of a consistent form as well as figurative meanings”. As an inseparable part of idioms, idioms of comparison which are formed by structures “as...as” or “like” in “as white as snow” as well as “to stick like a leech” are considered as a kind used commonly in daily conversations. In addition, as an important part of the language and culture, idioms reflect the transformation in conceptualization of the universe and the relationship between human beings and the universe, Lennon (cited in Rozati, Sayed Mahdi; Ketabi, Saeed, 2013).

2. Culture differences reflected by Vietnamese and English idioms of comparison

As can be clearly seen, Vietnamese and English have experienced a long term of developing language. Hence, the origin of the two languages is formed in different geographic conditions, history, religious belief and traditional culture thoughts. With this reason, idioms of comparison have been shaped based on different cultural backgrounds in each of different country. Regarding Vietnamese and English comparative idioms, they are categorized into three groups. The first group is the same images of animal between Vietnamese and English idioms of comparison. It is clear to consider the following as an example “as timid as a rabbit” or “as fat as a pig”. Moreover, the different animals in such kind of idioms are set in the second group with an example as “as strong as a horse” in English whereas Vietnamese version is “as strong as a buffalo”. On the other hand, the third group is considered as constraints for Vietnamese learners to understand English meanings because this kind does not have equivalent Vietnamese idioms of comparisons. A typical example in order to illustrate the third one is “as poor as a church mouse”. According to Vietnamese people, when they learn idioms, they had better have their own idioms of comparison in advance. Hence, in order to be better at intercultural communication, they must find out a Vietnamese comparative idiom which would be equivalent to English idioms in meaning. To sum up, comparative idioms are a typical aspect which needs to consider when studying, especially the second and third group of idioms as above.

2.1. Animal-related comparative idioms in the light of different geography environment and history

There are many animal-related idioms in English and Vietnamese. According to the habits of animals, images of animals are often used to describe the appearance or personality of humans and depict the expression more vividly with typical features of specific animals. Vietnam and England are both countries with very different living environments as well as its own history. Hence, it leads to idiomatic expressions in using words shaped distinctly. In particular, England is a country in which people are familiar with the scene related to people ride a horse on the grassland as well as a herd of sheep with the efficient help of sheepdogs. With such beautiful images, the numerous imaginative comparisons are related to these animals. There are many typical examples of such ones in terms of “as strong as a horse”, “as tame as a sheep” and “as muddy as sheepdogs”. On the other hand, Vietnamese idiomatic expressions in using words are shaped based on agriculture which has connected closely to Vietnamese people’s life for a long time. It is really important to realize that the buffalo has played an extremely crucial role in Vietnamese agricultural life for thousands of years. As a result, “as strong as a buffalo” in Vietnamese is replaced instead of using “as strong as a horse” in English. Moreover, Vietnam is a country of wet rice cultivation which influences strongly on using language in idioms of comparisons. This is a typical example for highlighting Vietnamese culture. The examples for illustrating above-mentioned statements are “as stubborn as a crab” in Vietnamese replacing “as stubborn as a mule” in English and “as mute as a clam” instead of “as mute as a fish” in English. In general, Vietnamese and English idiomatic expressions of comparison seem to be different in using different images related to its own cultural backgrounds. Therefore, it is the best idea to be aware of “using idioms when speaking is a usual way for the local people to express their ideas clearly and lively to people in the world, so in the course of cross-culture communication, it is really necessary to use them correctly in order to make us better understood by the people with

different cultural backgrounds”, (Yang, Chunlin, 2010, p.148).

2.2. Traditional culture thought-based idioms of comparison in England and Vietnam

Due to the differences in thoughts and human between English and Vietnamese, idioms of comparison are shaped based on such differences which have been expressed in literature as well as in daily social communications. As regarded to its own literature, Vietnamese people use the idiom of comparison “as jealous as Hoan Thu” which refers to a person who is dreadfully jealous in Vietnamese literature. On the contrast, in English, the idiom “as jealous as Othello” is used popularly to indicate a person’s jealousy. In addition, Vietnamese people always consider a fairy in “as happy as a fairy” to state the happiest person, whereas English comparative idiom as “as happy as a king” to show the happiest person. In order to distinguish about English and Vietnamese idioms of comparison in the case, it is necessary to consider its cultural thoughts. In addition, regarding to the Vietnamese people’s perspectives, they are always proud of being descendants of the holy dragon which has been considered as a symbol of power and luckiness in Vietnamese folk tales and traditional ceremonies. Therefore, the symbol of the dragon is shaped commonly in Vietnamese idioms of comparison as “to drink as a dragon”. Moreover, in Vietnamese daily communications, people often use the images of castles or pets in terms of cows, pigs, dogs, cats to symbolize the stupidity. It is “as stupid as a cow” or “as stupid as a pig”, for instance. On the other hand, in English culture, people consider domestic pets as a symbol of loyalty and friendliness. As a reason, English people do not eat dog meat in community and domestic animals are becoming like a family member such as “as faithful as the dog”, “as friendly as a puppy”, “as playful as a kitten”. In fact, idioms of comparison are a real way to reflect culture and communication of a nation which is absolutely different and distinctive among nations. Studying on comparative idioms between English and Vietnamese is a strategy to master its own general culture background in term of traditional thoughts and to help intercultural communication more effectively.

III. IMPLICATIONS

As can be stated clearly, the paper offers us a general view on idioms in term of English and Vietnamese comparative idioms. Thanks to the paper, culture reflected in idiomatic expression of comparison is shaped differently from each country with its distinctive origins. Based on very important findings, some useful implications for teaching idioms of comparison, communication and translation will be mentioned as follows. First of all, in reality, idioms of comparison are used very commonly in Vietnamese daily life, especially in communication due to its condensation and full of meaning. However, in a English-speaking environment in Vietnam, the use of comparative idioms is limited because of some reasons. The first one is idioms of comparison in English are not taught often in class. Moreover, the second reason is “in class most language students take in knowledge separately and passively and rich cultural resources are left aside” (Doan, p.8). With the second, it is very hard for learners to learn by heart as well as learn with boredom which results in being easy to forget the lesson. With the help of understanding the English and Vietnamese culture shaped in comparative idioms and its idiomatic origin, teaching and learning English could be interesting and make learners have long – term memory on idioms. Furthermore, analyzing cultural elements between the two languages integrated in lessons is the best way to increase learners’ interest of learning idioms of comparison. Based on teacher’s orientation about studying comparative idioms to understand culture, learners are easy to guess the meanings of idioms related to teachers’ hints or explanations. Being familiar with the ways, learners are able to promote their cognition of idioms and get more accurate guesses whenever they encounter new items. As a result, learners are able to understand and find out some Vietnamese equivalent idioms of comparison to English. In particular, it helps learners be effective in learning idioms and use them more frequently in daily communications.

Second, the contrastive analysis enhances not only linguistic competence in English and in Vietnam, but also promote cultural knowledge and intercultural communication. Being aware of the differences between English and Vietnamese comparative idioms actually widen its own

cultural backgrounds. In an international context with English spoken universally, the paper gives Vietnamese students a help to avoid unexpected misunderstandings with native English speakers when using idioms of comparison in communication. More importantly, deeper understandings of English and Vietnamese comparative idioms are aware of the beauty of its mother tongue as well. Third, as a teacher of English, teaching students to understand about culture in comparative idioms which are expressed in word –using is an important duty, especially in translation.

According to Venuti (cited in Khosravi, Shokooh; Khatib, Mohammad, 2012, p.1858), she states “all translation is fundamentally domestication and is really initiated in the domestic culture”. Therefore, being aware of culture is absolutely necessary in the context of translation in which a translator depends on. In order to be effective in translating idioms of comparison in English and Vietnamese, it is crucial to consider whether the acceptability of using the kind of comparative idiom or not. It is, for example, when communicating to an English student, we are expected to adapt and adopt to say “as strong as a horse” instead of saying “as strong as a buffalo”. In short, translating should be considered in each of context

which depends on its own culture. In the case, realizing the appropriateness or the non-appropriateness is definitely important.

IV. CONCLUSION

As above-mentioned, culture is reflected on English and Vietnamese idioms of comparison clearly. In spite of the same to structure using of comparative idioms, there are many the differences in using images to form such idioms. Deeply understanding English and Vietnamese idioms of comparison is the best way to integrate the two different cultures. Thanks to mastering the two cultures, it gives students the help with intercultural communication more effectively and avoids misunderstanding between English and Vietnamese people.

Furthermore, the paper is carried out to help teachers give students some useful strategies of learning idioms in the light of culture which can make students have long –term

memory on it. Moreover, studying on idioms of comparison between English and Vietnamese culture is also a ways for translators to adopt their career more successfully.

In spite of material limitations of comparative idioms, the paper is hoped to infuse the numerous useful information to teaching and learning idioms of comparison in the two cultures. Furthermore, it is very interesting to fulfill further research related to idioms in light of culture and communications.

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