



Research Article

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Overcoming Barriers in Intercultural Communication: A Case Study on Agricultural Idioms in English, Ukrainian and Chinese

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Abstract

The paper deals with the case study, focused on exploring certain problems in intercultural communication of Ukrainian and Chinese students in the academic environment of Sumy National Agrarian University. The participants of the ethnographic-linguistic stage of the experiment learned, interpreted and compared the phraseological funds of the Chinese, Ukrainian and English languages, displaying the conceptual sphere "Agriculture", in order to find out similarities and divergences in the outlook of people, engaged in agricultural production, as well as the perception of agricultural sphere in these cultural-ethnic communities. The qualitative stage of the experiment was conducted to discover the stereotypes about the representatives of other nations, which the informants had. It was revealed that learning idioms and participation in the experiment helped students overcome the stereotypes and improve the intercultural interaction amid academic groups. It was concluded that the students, who learned the target language idioms, belonging to the conceptual sphere "Agriculture", gained knowledge of the geographical and economic conditions, moral values and traditions of the target language native speakers, became aware of the analogies in their own background. Thus, the participants realised that they could eliminate obstacles that impeded intercultural communication by mastering culturally marked target language material concerning the sphere of their future professional activity.

Keywords: idioms, the conceptual sphere "Agriculture", international students, intercultural communication, a target language

1. Introduction

The Ukrainian-Chinese cooperation at the agricultural product market has resulted in the collaboration sphere of higher agrarian education. Sumy National Agrarian University (SNAU), Ukraine, has been working with Chinese universities since 2017. Currently, Chinese students have made up the largest group amid international learners (238 out of 525), (SNAU, 2020).

Ukrainian and Chinese academicians use English as a lingua franca, a mediating language in the dialogue between their communities. Successful language mediation and intercultural communication in the context of students' exchange programs require the consideration of similarities and differences in peoples' outlook, as cultural diversities may cause confusion among international students and hinder their communication within the university environment and with local population. As contacts among representatives of different cultures potentially raise certain problems, emerging because of the mismatch of norms, values and peculiarities in the partners' backgrounds, so it is relevant to find "points of contact" that link three different linguistic and cultural bases.

The goal of the paper is to examine possible barriers in intercultural communication between Ukrainian and Chinese students by seeking similarities and overcoming stereotypes while learning Ukrainian, English and Chinese idioms of the conceptual sphere "Agriculture" in the course of target language learning and intercultural trainings. The objectives of the article are the following: to analyse the formation factors and core concepts of Ukrainian, English and Chinese idioms of the conceptual sphere "Agriculture"; to explore in what way the comprehension of culturally diverse background affects the intercultural communication amid students' groups; to highlight the stereotypes and overcome them.

2. Literature Review

Intercultural communication, as an exchange of information between individuals who are "unlike culturally" (Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999) enables setting contacts and collaboration between different cultural and social groups, comprising individuals with distinct religious, social, ethnic and educational backgrounds taking into account various cultural and behavioural modes, ways of communication and interaction. Different national, ecological, material, social and religious environments are the factors that create distinct language habits, social culture, local customs, practices and other contextual features in their own language environment (Yu, 2014). Intercultural studies are utterly important in the educational sphere as international students, teachers and scholars apply cognitive ways of their native culture to understand a target language culture (Fomenko, 2018).

However, communicating with people who belong to different cultural-ethnic groups, one may face more complications than harmony caused by several possible barriers, among them: seeking similarities, stereotyping, uncertainty reduction, withdrawal, prejudice, racism and ethnocentrism (Samovar et al., 2007).

In the framework of the study, overcoming such intercultural communication barriers as seeking similarities and stereotyping was focused on.

One of the most important problems of intercultural communication is that people tend to avoid culturally distinctive companions (Samovar et al., 2007), preferring to socialise with those who have much more in common with them and to seek similarities with interlocutors (Jandt, 2004; Samovar et al., 2007). Another important issue that complicates intercultural communication is stereotyping as an overgeneralisation of a certain ethnic or cultural community without singling out members' individualities (Lustig & Koester, 1999), that results in their attempts to predict how representatives of another culture would act and think (Samovar et al., 2007) and leads to discrimination, prejudice and ethnosuperiority in cross-cultural contacts (Le Roux, 2001; Neuliep, 2006).

While exploring language material for the study, it was found out that many similar and diverse national characteristics, ideas, stereotypes are widely represented in idioms. Currently, the term "idiom" itself is often considered to be a stereotype. It was noted that "if a language with its aspects is

a system of social establishment, it means that idioms represent features of the nature of its culture and predetermine customs, beliefs and social attitudes" (Nasser, 2019: 317).

There are different approaches to define the term "idiom". Ukrainian linguists have distinguished the phraseological units of the following phenomena: phraseological concretions (or idioms in the narrow sense), phraseological unities, phraseological combinations (or collocations) and set expressions (Negrych, 2014). However, British and American linguists regard all phraseological units as idioms, including paremias – proverbs, sayings, catch phrases, quotations, etc. (Masimova, 2018). There are special catch phrases and idioms in the Chinese language called chengyu, "ready-made expressions". They are phraseologically related, stable lexical and syntactic units (Shi, 2015). Considering the fact, the term "phraseological unit" is almost never used abroad, on the contrary to the term "idiom", so these terms can be used for comparing phraseological material in different languages.

In most cases it is complicated for foreigners to interpret target language idioms, because their formation has been inspired by diverse geographical conditions, historical development, economic situations, religious beliefs and traditions, socio-ethnic psychology and moral values of a particular nation. At the same time, idioms are extremely valuable for comparative linguistic-cultural studies, as the similarities found in phraseological material stimulate cultural overlaps (Shi, 2015).

This study has examined the specific aspect of the phraseological fund of the Ukrainian, English and Chinese languages, which corresponds to the conceptual sphere "Agriculture" of these cultural-ethnic communities, regarding this phenomenon as a fragment of the conceptual picture of the world formed by human ideas and represented by a set of memory units (concepts) grouped according to their thematic features (Kosmeda, 2010).

3. Research Methods

The case study was conducted among Ukrainian students and students from the People's Republic of China who took Master and Postgraduate courses in various specialties at Sumy National Agrarian University, 60 informants – Chinese and Ukrainians – were involved. The communication was held in English, as the Chinese and the Ukrainian respondents had Pearson's B1 or B2 levels certificates.

Within the limits of the experiment that took place in the lessons of target languages, Chinese students learned English and basics of the Ukrainian language and culture, Ukrainian students also learned English and basics of the Chinese culture, moreover, they took part in the series of intercultural communication trainings. The experiment was divided into linguistic-ethnographic and qualitative stages.

The linguistic-ethnographic stage of the experiment was aimed to find similarities and divergences in the outlook of culturally diverse people by examining the idioms covering the agricultural sphere, such as: geographical and economic conditions; agricultural plants bearing symbolic meaning; attitude to agriculture in the society. The Ukrainian and the Chinese students applied heuristic methods, among them: "analysis through synthesis" to reveal the content of target language idioms; reflection on their own attempts and mistakes to find out the meaning of idioms; the analogy and the use of semantic properties to comprehend the meaning of target language idioms to obtain relevant or plausible interpretations and to compare them with the corresponding ones in their native languages (Bilotserkovets, 2019).

During the qualitative stage of the study the participants were questioned and interviewed in order to collect data and find answers to the following research questions:

1. What stereotypes about people of culturally different background do the participants possess?
2. Does the learning of idioms of the conceptual sphere "Agriculture" in Ukrainian, Chinese and English positively affect the overcoming barriers in intercultural communication of students in the agrarian university?

4. Results

Every nation mentioned in this study exists in a particular natural environment. From the point of geographical and economic conditions, Ukraine, Britain and China belong to completely different regions.

Fertile black soil and temperate climate, high population density, convenient economic and geographical location and agricultural traditions that had long been established in Ukraine historically influenced the formation of a peasant who inherited centuries of agricultural activities experience, desire and ability to cultivate land and a deep respect for it. These facts are imprinted in a number of phraseological units containing the concept of “land”.

In the Ukrainian proverbs, the land is interpreted as the ‘source of food and life’. For instance, “Чорна земля білий хліб родить” (The black land gives the white bread); “Земля-трудівниця парує і людям хліб дарує” (The land-labourer already vapors and donates bread for people); “На добрій землі що не посієш, те й вродить” (Whatever you sow on a good land it will grow); “Хто землю удобряє, тому й земля повертає” (The one who fertilizes the land will profit from it) (Encyclopedia of the Ukrainian Studies, 1994).

Unlike Ukraine, the United Kingdom is an island country with a rich maritime heritage as its economy greatly depended on the sea trade. The wealth of the fishermen and sailors’ jargon had led to the creation of numerous nautical idioms which are also used in the modern language, though as time passed most of these marine idioms and utterances became metaphorical and their original meanings were long forgotten. For example, “There are plenty of fish in the sea”, which means: there are many wonderful people, things and opportunities in the world; “To weather the storm” – is said about those who have successfully solved a very difficult problem; “Better one small fish than an empty dish”, i.e. better something not substantial than nothing (The Free Dictionary, 2020).

For Ukrainians, the concept of “sea” has a positive connotation too, especially when combined with their own weal: “Чистим зерном сійте поле, то вродить хліб, як море, а нечистим посієте – собі шкоди надієте!” (If you sow the field with pure grain wheat will grow vast spread like the sea, but if you sow with the unclean one you will harm yourself!) (Plaviuk, 1946). Growing wheat is also filled with an important sacred sense for the British: “To reap what you sow” – that is, every action has consequences; what you are doing is coming back to you anyway; “Separate the wheat from the chaff” – to make judgments about which people or things in the group are bad and which are good (The Free Dictionary, 2020).

China, on the other hand, has long been a large continental country; most of its territory has no access to the seaside, except the east coast. Historically the Chinese linguistic and ethnic community belonged to the agrarian society that had agricultural production as a priority, opposing to industry and trade (Shi, 2015). The nobility of peasant labour is emphasized and compared to education, art and philosophy: 在計劃一年時, 種植玉米。在規劃十年時時時計劃生活, 培訓和教育人員時 – When planning for the year grow grain. When planning for decades plant trees. When planning for life train and educate people; 只有兩種方法可以實現真理 – 文學和農業 – There are only two ways to reach the truth – literature and agriculture; 心曠神怡的田地會形成空心的肚子, 未讀的書籍會讓人 心曠神怡 – Uncultivated fields make empty stomachs and unread books make an empty mind; 三年学成个, 十年难学个农民 – It takes three years to become a master, but even ten years are not enough to teach a farmer (Chinese-Tools, 2020).

According to the historical documents, long before the widespread introduction of rice farming in China, millet had been the first crop cultivated in the region, which had ensured the survival of the people. The concept of “millet” in Chinese is associated with an enduring person who always finds a way out of difficult situations. For example, the chengyu 黍谷生春, which can be literally translated as “millet is being revived to life”, means finding a way out of a difficult situation and making dramatic changes for the better (Chinese-Tools, 2020).

Lately the main concept of agricultural topics for the Chinese is “rice”, for example: 生米煮成熟

饭 – rice has already been boiled, that is things are done and nothing can be changed. It takes a lot of effort to grow rice; it has been etched in the idiom: 一粥一饭, 当思来之不易 – a cup of rice is hard to gain; 一粒米, 一滴汗, 粒粒粮食汗珠换 – a drop of sweat is paid for each grain of rice (Chinese-Tools, 2020). The analogy to it was found in the Ukrainian language, the idiom “Скроплювати землю потом” (to irrigate the land with sweat), that means “to work hard, spend a lot of effort cultivating the land” (Sofroniv-Levyc’kyj, 1963).

The concept of “apple” has a symbolic meaning for Ukrainians. Idioms containing the concept of “apple” convey the moral guidelines: “Не виростиш яблуню – не з’їси яблука” (if you do not grow an apple-tree, you will not eat apples, that means if you do not work and earn money, then you will not achieve anything and starve); characterise the inner and outer world of a person: “Червоно на вигляд, та сидить черв’як” (apple is red, but has a worm inside – it is often spoken of people who look good, but their inner world is empty); “Гниле яблуко сусідні псує” (a rotten apple spoils neighboring ones – if you make friends with a bad person, you will sooner or later become bad) (Plaviuk, 1946).

English idioms with the concept of “apple” are also used to denote a person, calling someone “a good apple”, “a bad apple” or “a rotten apple”, hinting at the hereditary predisposition: “The apple never falls far from the tree” (The Free Vocabulary, 2020). An idiom “Adam’s apple” comes from the biblical legend that an apple got stuck in Adam’s throat in the Garden of Eden after he had eaten a forbidden fruit given by Eve. An interesting analogy is also found in the Ukrainian language: “Адам зів кисличку, а у нас оскома на зубах” (Adam bit a sour apple and we have toothache) also having a biblical root (Plaviuk, 1946).

The origin of the idiom “an apple of discord” leads to even more ancient times, the tales of the Trojan War. Eventually this idiom was transformed into the popular expression “to upset the apple cart”, that is “to ruin plans” (The Free Vocabulary, 2020).

An important plant for the Chinese culture is a plum, the symbol of beauty and wisdom (Chinese-Tools, 2020). Moreover, an ancient dictionary of Chinese idioms is called the Plum Blossom Chinese Proverb Scroll, which contains up to 20,000 ancient sayings including 瓜田李下 – a melon field under plums originating from more ancient saying 瓜田不納履, 李下不整冠 / 瓜田不納履, 李下不整冠 – do not put your boots on a melon field and do not hang your hat on a plum tree. This idiom was taken from a folk legend and signifies doubtful situations that one should avoid in order not to be suspected of what one had not done.

The idiom 望梅止渴 means: to quench thirst when thinking of plums, that is, to be consoled with fantasy and has also evolved from Chinese legends. The idiom 青柿子和竹馬 – green plums and a bamboo horse comes from the poems of the famous poet Li Bai and means: lovers who grew up together as childhood friends (Chinese-Tools, 2020).

Another important crop and indispensable product for the Chinese is tea, that is reflected in the number of chengyus, for instance: 宁可一日无食, 不可一日无茶 – you can live a day without food, but you can not live a day without tea. Much attention is paid to the agricultural activities about it: time of gathering – 七掏金, 八掏银 · 十月掏掏平平心 – tea in July is golden, the one in August is silver, the one in October is a good tea; taking care of tea bushes: 茶季施化肥, 冬季培生泥 – to fertilize a tea bush in summer and to add clay to it in winter; the process of gathering tea: 茶树早采早发 · 越采越发 · 迟采迟发 – the sooner tea is gathered the quicker tea leaves emerge on the tea bush (Chinese-Tools, 2020).

Tea has also essential position in the British culture; it is displayed in many idioms, but they mostly show its connection with business and social relations spheres, for example: “not somebody’s cup of tea” – means that it doesn’t belong to somebody’s interests or ways of profiting; “to take tea with somebody” – means: to have business with somebody. The idiom “not for all the tea in China” – not for all treasures in the world – displays also the long time tradition of tea trade between Great Britain and

China (The Free Vocabulary, 2020).

For Ukrainians, the tradition of tea-drinking does not have such symbolic meaning; the notion of well-being and honest life is betokened by the concept of “bread”, as in the idiom “to have a piece of bread”, that means “to earn a living” (Bilonozhenko et al., 2008, p. 379). Its analogy is found in English – “somebody’s bread and butter”, that means somebody’s mode of profiting. The proverb “Хліб – усьому голова”, (bread is a head to everything, meaning “bread is the main food”), has also its direct analogy in English: “Bread is the staff of life”, meaning “bread is the main food” (The Free Vocabulary, 2020).

The data collected in the process of the linguistic-ethnographic study was systematised in the Table 1.

Table 1: Similarities and divarications displayed in Ukrainian, English and Chinese idioms of the conceptual sphere “Agriculture”

Formation factor	Similarities	Divarications
Geographical and economic conditions.	Numerous Ukrainian and Chinese idioms of the conceptual sphere “Agriculture” describe hard work on the land that is the basis of the economy of these cultural-ethnic groups.	Big part of the phraseological fund in English consists of the nautical idioms reflecting life of sailors and sea-traders more common in Great Britain.
Agricultural plants bearing symbolic meaning.	Both Ukrainian and English phraseology funds have numerous idioms with the concept of “apple”, as a wide-spread fruit in these regions, but also bearing biblical symbolism, that is the most common religious background for both of them. The concept of “bread” means every day food for Ukrainians and British.	The concept of “plum” is the most important concept in the Chinese chengyus describing aesthetic features rooted in Chinese legends. The source of food for Chinese is symbolised by the concept of “rice”. The concept of “tea” is essential for Chinese and English, but bearing different shades of meaning. It is an agricultural plant for Chinese, but a subject of trade for British.
Perception of agriculture	Ukrainians, Chinese and British have deep respect to the work in agriculture.	Agriculture is perceived as a “source of life” (in the Ukrainian phraseology); “art” and “philosophy” (in the Chinese chengyus); “cognition of good and bad” (in the British idioms).

Outcomes:

1. The participants concluded that people engaged in agriculture in Ukraine, China and Great Britain have much in common regarding morality, deep respect to nature and their work. All of that can be a good potential for their mutual understanding and collaboration.
2. Most differences are caused by such factors, as geographical positions, economic conditions, historic and religious backgrounds, but they cannot avert effective intercultural communication since the participants have gained knowledge and recognition of them.

The qualitative stage of the experiment was focused on finding out the stereotypes impeding intercultural communication amid multi-cultural academic groups. The data collected during series of the interviews before the study was processed to single out the most common stereotypes that students had had about people with culturally different backgrounds that had been under review (Ukrainian, Chinese, and British). It was revealed that most Chinese students before coming to Ukraine had considered Ukrainians to be mostly gladly singing and dancing but not working hard (77%); and to neglect their land (75%). Most Ukrainian informants had thought that the Chinese had treated agriculture as something second-rate, comparing to industry or trade (73%), the most important crop for them had always been rice and they had been drinking tea all the time (80%). Both Ukrainian and Chinese informants being asked about the British responded that agricultural works were not so highly

appreciated as fishing and sailing (86%), a favourite fruit of the British was an apple and a drink was tea (88%).

After the experiment the situation with the stereotypes intruding into effective intercultural communication of students changed tremendously as the majority of the participants altered their views on the stereotypes concerning agricultural patterns of culturally different background. Only 3% of Chinese respondents thought that the Ukrainians preferred entertainment to hard work; minority of them kept on believing that Ukrainians did not care much about their land (7%). Having learnt about the Chinese culture and Chinese agricultural idioms most Ukrainian students realised that the Chinese have deep appreciation for agriculture (only 3% of the participants haven't changed their mind); rice is not the only significant crop in China (7% of the participants kept on their views). Ideas about the British perception of agriculture have also been changed greatly. Only 7% of the participants still doubt about importance of field works for the British. Nevertheless, most respondents (87%) continue viewing an apple as the most symbolic fruit for the British. The majority of the informants (87%) also consider tea to be the most valuable drink in Great Britain as well as it is in China.

The findings of the qualitative study are demonstrated in the Table 2.

Table 2: Stereotypes impeding the efficiency of intercultural communication between Ukrainian and Chinese students

Stereotypes about Ukrainians	Participants believing in them, %	
	Before the study	After the study
The Ukrainians prefer singing and dancing to hard work.	77%	3%
The Ukrainians neglect their land.	75%	7%
Stereotypes about the Chinese		
The Chinese do not respect the work of agrarians.	73%	3%
The Chinese eat rice only.	80%	7%
Stereotypes about the British		
The British do not value work in the field as much as they do fishing and sailing.	86%	7%
The British prefer apples to any other fruit and tea to any other drinks.	86%	87%

Outcomes:

1. The participants had both negative and positive stereotypes about the representatives of other cultural-ethnic groups that stimulated their false images and didn't promote effective intercultural communication but led to misunderstanding and breakdowns.
2. The learning of agricultural idioms in the course of target language studies and intercultural trainings enabled gaining much knowledge about the outlook, cultural background, moral values and style of life. It resulted in promoting effective interaction amid students' groups preventing interpersonal misunderstanding and creating a fruitful collaboration between students.

5. Discussion

Finding ways to overcome difficulties in intercultural communication is important. Certain complications in intercultural interaction may happen if the people who are involved in it lack cultural awareness of divergent values and beliefs. Evidently, the participants of such ineffective interaction assume that only what they believe is correct because they have been brought up considering their patterns to be the best (Zhang, 2008). Numerous studies reviewing the issues of seeking similarities, uncertainty reduction and withdrawal proved that only an inconsiderable number of participating students were ready to set closer contacts with culturally diverse group-mates or those who had

different linguistic backgrounds. The causes of failures in intercultural interaction were supposed to be striking differences in their worldviews, as well as ethnostereotyping of other peoples (Antonopolulos, Cimaroli, Moran & Power, 1997; Ko, 2008).

Ethnostereotypes are created by the mass consciousness. They are superficial because they often emphasize the insignificant features of ethnic groups. Autostereotypes as perceptions, assessments and judgments of an ethnic community about itself as a rule which are formed in contrast to heterostereotypes, which can be both positive and negative depending on the historical experience of ethnic interaction (Shyprykevich, 2010).

Negative ethnic stereotypes complicate interethnic understanding and provoke interethnic tensions due to the following factors: prevailing stereotyped beliefs are assumed as being true even if they are false; gradually adopted stereotyped beliefs are resulted in their reinforcement and may affect the stereotyped people's behaviour as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Jandt, 2004).

Nevertheless, stereotypes can also be conceptualized as positive serving as the first step to the contact between cultures as getting across to each other and people of different nations find out similarities of life experience and thinking modes (Shi, 2015).

Indicated cultural similarities enable tracing the correspondence of languages under review and reveal the correspondence of phraseology proving that "idiomatic expressions are a reflection of a nation's culture" (Shi, 2015). Comparative linguistic surveys have proved that the essential national cultural features can be examined with the help of idioms from different languages with equivalent connotations stem displaying their respective cultures, common or uncommon histories, ways of thinking, religious beliefs, traditions, customs, social modes, values, styles of life, etc. (Kong, 2014).

So, apparently when teaching a target language phraseological materials that reflect the features of other peoples' worldviews should be systematically introduced by educational programs and in the course of extra-curricular activities (Morozova, 2014). The potential for working with cultural representations contained in learning materials is illustrated by many experiments taken within the field of intercultural language teaching. (McConachy, 2018). It is essential as a language preserves only the phraseological material that is directly or indirectly correlated with the standards and stereotypes of national culture. Phraseological layer clearly reveals the character of an ethnic group and transmits the original national cultural values from generation to generation reflects the cultural identity of its representatives (Telia, 1999).

It was noted that the target language learners perceived the foreign culture not only as information about distinct nations and their life style, but also what was more essential: realised "contextual framework that people used to exchange meaning in communication with others and through which they understood their social world" (Scarino, 2010). The comparison of two cultures and analysis of various processes that have taken place in different societies permit students to assess adequately the target language culture phenomena, "leaving them the right to be different from phenomena in their native culture" (Holubnycha et al., 2019).

Idioms as a major component of native-like communication enables a target language learner to understand the thoughts, emotions and views of the target language native speakers. For this reason, learning idioms provides learners with a significant chance to acquire information about the underlying parameters of a language (Yağiz & Izadpanah, 2013). The communicative interaction between culturally diverse individuals marked with their own language code, modes of behaviour, values and traditions supports the process of international students adaptation to the academic environment of the university abroad (Fomenko, et al. 2019).

This survey proved that preventing negative stereotyping in the intercultural communication in frames of target language teaching has resulted in promoting the interaction of international students with the academic environment; gaining knowledge about cultural background of other students averts interpersonal misunderstanding and interethnic isolations amid academic groups.

6. Conclusion

Thus, the study revealed that successful intercultural communication can be impeded by certain complications such as negative stereotyping, seeking similarities, other cultural and linguistic barriers between multicultural interlocutors. These problems can be prevented by learning culturally and ethnically marked materials in the course of target language studies and trainings. Idioms are of the greatest interest in this regard; after all, they directly reflect the extralingual reality and have a figurative symbolic basis.

Linguistic-ethnographic research of Ukrainian, Chinese and English idioms of the conceptual sphere "Agriculture" allowed its participants to identify similar and different characteristics of mentality of people engaged in agriculture and their worldview, the system of moral norms and values. Qualitative study showed that gaining knowledge of a target language culture while participating in intercultural communication experiment, enabled students to get rid of negative stereotypes that resulted in avoiding misunderstanding and stimulating fruitful collaboration amid a multicultural academic group.

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