A Concept-Based Instructional Design: 
Introducing Chinese Color Terms and Their Metaphorical Meanings at the Elementary Level

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Abstract

Metaphor is an indispensable part of human life. Scholars have argued that not only do we use metaphors to talk about abstract concepts that are hard to explain in concrete terms, but how we perceive and interact with our cultural reality is also influenced by a conceptual structure that is fundamentally metaphorical. As a sub-category of conceptual metaphors, color metaphors play an important role in human life and daily communication. Understanding the metaphorical implications behind the color terms will not only help us understand the rationale behind the choice and use of them, but also enable us to look into the conceptual structure of the language and culture in which these terms are rooted. The purpose of this instructional design is to investigate if classroom instruction inspired by the concept-based instructional approach could raise students’ conceptual awareness of the cultural implications behind certain Chinese color words and affect their metaphorical interpretation of certain Chinese color terms. Since few pedagogical reports have focused on the instruction of Chinese color terms as conceptual metaphors, this study will help us understand students’ learning process and provide useful pedagogical information and strategies for language teachers on this subject.

Keywords: Conceptual metaphor, Chinese color terms, Concept-based instruction, Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

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Introduction

Metaphorical concepts and expressions are indispensable parts of human life. According to Lakoff & Johnson, not only do we use metaphors to talk about abstract concepts that are hard to explain in concrete terms, but how we perceive and interact with our cultural reality is also affected or even shaped by a conceptual structure that is fundamentally metaphorical (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1993). As a sub-category of conceptual metaphors, color metaphors play an important role in human life and daily communication. Some scholars believe that the metaphorical use of color terms can reflect the cultural identity of language users (Rasekh & Ghafel, 2011). Hence, helping students understand the metaphorical implications behind the color terms will not only enable them to understand the rationale behind the choice and use of these terms, but also encourage them to look into the conceptual structure of the language and culture in which these terms are rooted.

The purpose of this instructional design is to investigate if classroom instruction inspired by the concept-based instructional approach could raise students’ awareness of the cultural implications behind certain Chinese color words (e.g. red 红色, white 白色, black 黑色) and affect their interpretation of the metaphorical meanings of certain Chinese color terms (e.g. “red person” 红人, “white eyes” 白眼, “black words” 黑话). Since few pedagogical reports have focused on the instruction of Chinese color terms as conceptual metaphors, this study will contribute to our understanding of students’ learning process of the cultural implications behind certain Chinese color words and color metaphors, and provide useful pedagogical information and strategies for language teachers on these subjects.

Literature Review

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (p.5). Understood in this way, metaphor is in fact a cross-domain mapping between the source and target domains (Bobrova & Lantolf, 2012). In this definition, the “source domain” can be viewed as a phenomenon, in terms of which another phenomenon is conceived and understood. The “target domain” is a phenomenon that is conceived and understood in terms of the source domain. “Mapping” is the basic, essential, and systematic conceptual correspondence between the source and target domains, the function of which is to project “specific properties of the source domain onto the target domain” (Bobrova & Lantolf, 2012, p. 33, 34). For instance, in the following sentence “他是学校里的红人” (Lit. He is the red person in the school), the person’s role/status in the school is understood metaphorically in terms of a Chinese color term 红人. In this color metaphor, the source domain is the cultural implications associated with the color of red in Chinese culture, and the target domain is the specific properties of “him” as a member of the school. Once we understand that the color red often signifies prosperity and popularity in Chinese culture, we will be able to project (mapping) these properties to the target domain and figure out the true meaning of the sentence, namely, “he is a popular person/rising star in the school.”
Conceptual Metaphor

Cognitive linguistics argue that metaphor exists not only in language but also in concept. The basic assumption of the conceptual metaphor theory is that human cognition process is structured and defined largely in a metaphorical way. In this theory, metaphor is no longer considered as “a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language,” or a rhetorical/ornamental device used only in literature and poetry (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3), but is regarded as an essential way of thinking, “a process by which we understand and structure one domain of experience in terms of another domain of a different kind (Johnson, 1987, p. 15). The reason we use metaphors in speech is not only because we want to make our expression more descriptive or accessible, but is because our “concept is metaphorically structured, our activity is metaphorically structured, and, consequently, our language is metaphorically structured” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p.5). In other words, what makes metaphors pervasive in language is its pervasiveness in human cognition. Metaphor is a figure of thought just as much as it is a figure of speech (Yu, 1995).

Color Metaphors

In different languages, color words play an important role not only in describing the color appearance of different objects, but also in metaphorically expressing, through their extended and/or abstract meanings, people’s experience, thought and emotion towards the perceived reality. For example, the expression “he is in red” in English is a metaphorical expression used to mean “he is angry”, whereas the expression “他是个红人” (lit. He is a red person) in Chinese employs the metaphorical implications of the color “red” to describe the person’s popularity.

As mentioned before, all metaphors are fundamentally conceptual, because it represents an essential way of thinking, by which we understand and structure our perceived reality. Color metaphors are no exception of it. Scholars have argued that most of the extended and abstract meanings of the color terms develop from their original meanings by way of metaphoricalization or metonymerization (Xing, 2008). Once these meanings become established, they function just like other conceptual metaphors, in the sense that they have become an important aid to help people perceive, understand their cultural reality, and convey their perception and understanding in a by and large metaphorical way. Hence, in order to figure out the true implications behind a color metaphor, we will need to know not only the concepts usually associated with that color in a particular culture, but also how some or all of these concepts come into play when that color metaphor is employed in speech or communication.

How people in different languages utilize color metaphors to convey their perception and understanding of their cultural reality demonstrates both similarities and differences. Rasekh & Ghafel (2011) compare basic colors and their metaphorical connotations in English and Persian, and find that while there are overlaps to some extent, most of the color metaphorical expressions are culture-bound and specific to each language. On the contrary, Xing, in her comparative study of the basic color terms in English and Chinese, argues that an in-depth analysis and comparison of these terms in fact reveals more similarities than differences in terms of their metaphorical functions (Xing, 2008). In spite of their different findings, however, both studies have founded their arguments on the assumption that color metaphors reflect the close relationship between language and culture. They argue that color metaphors provide us with an invaluable source to
investigate and compare the cultural perceptions and beliefs in different languages and cultures. It is only when we gain a basic understanding of these perceptions and beliefs that we will be able to understand the rationales behind the linguistic choice of certain color metaphors in a given language and culture, and acquire the basic knowledge and skills to use these color metaphors in a more creative and accurate way.

**Concept-based Instruction**

In this study, the instructors design the instructional intervention primarily in light of the concept-based instruction (CBI) approach promoted by Bobrova & Lantolf (2012). Grounded in sociocultural theory, CBI is a pedagogical approach that proposes to use well-planned and well-organized instructional methods to introduce concepts to students, provide them with the cognitive tools, and help them develop their own understanding of the concepts through step-by-step guidance (Gal’perin, 1989). The ultimate goal of CBI is to help students internalize the concepts they have learned (Vygotsky, 1986). That is to say, students will not only just memorize and understand the definitions of the concepts, but will also be able to use their memory and understanding as a conceptual framework to transfer their knowledge and apply their comprehension skills to future learning tasks of other concepts in the same domain. In this particular study, the “concepts” that needed to be instructed were the cultural and metaphorical implications, which were not immediately perceptible if not explained by the instructor implicitly and/or explicitly, behind certain Chinese color words. The expected learning outcome was that the students could gradually build up a conceptual awareness of these implications, and could use this awareness to better interpret the metaphorical meaning of certain Chinese color terms in the future.

Gal’perin, one of the major figures in the sociocultural school of thought, proposed to use a four-step teaching procedure to help students achieve this goal of concept internalization (Haenen, 2001; Arievitch & Haenen, 2005). The four steps are: 1. Orientation, where the learning goal is explained and the learning contents are presented as a meaningful whole to students; 2. Materialization/Visualization, where students are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the concepts by hands-on manipulations with material objects or their symbolic representations; 3. Verbalization, where students are instructed to separate the concepts from their materialized props and start to talk about the concepts or apply them to their communicative activities. 4. Internalization, where students begin to internalize the concepts as a result of subsequent levels of abstraction (materialized–verbal–mental), and become more capable of using those internalized concepts to find solutions for future learning tasks without any material or verbal aids (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

In designing this instructional intervention, the instructors took inspiration from Gal’perin’s four-step teaching procedure. But since the nature of this study is more pedagogical than research oriented, the instructors also made necessary modifications to the procedure to make the intervention more suitable for the students’ language level and the original teaching plan. In particular, the instructors decided to replace the “Orientation” part in Gal’perin’s model with a pre-survey questionnaire, which was used to introduce certain Chinese color metaphors to the students and to gauge their initial awareness and knowledge of the cultural concepts behind these metaphors. Because the instruction of the color words constituted only a small part of the original teaching plan and the color terms were not even on the teaching agenda, the instructors...
adopted this alternative orientational approach in order to minimize its interference with the original teaching plan. The instructors also combined some activities suggested in the Materialization/Visualization and Verbalization stages in Gal’perin’s model. In the Materialization/Visualization stage, for example, the instructors helped the students gain a better understanding of the cultural concepts/functions of some Chinese color words not only with the help of materialized props (pictures and videos), but also through teacher-student interactions and student-student communications. In the Verbalization stage, the students were asked to conduct, with visual prompts or aids, a series of in-class speaking activities and group performance tasks, in order to test if they were able to apply the conceptual knowledge that they had learned before to their daily communication. Towards the Internalization stage, a post-survey questionnaire was used to evaluate if the students had established basic conceptual awareness of the cultural and metaphorical implications behind certain Chinese color words and if this conceptual awareness could positively affect their interpretation of certain Chinese color metaphors. It is worth pointing out here that although a basic awareness of the metaphorical concepts behind certain Chinese color terms could be established after only one instructional intervention, a true “internationalization” of these color metaphors demands more time and effort from both the students and the instructors. The discussion of that kind of “internationalization” is beyond the limited scope of this paper and shall wait for a future study.

While this instructional intervention by no means interfered with, but rather served as an integral part of, the traditional instruction that the instructors used in teaching the Chinese color words in the past, it differed from the traditional approach in at least the following two ways: (1) In teaching the simple Chinese color words, the instructors’ traditional approach would focus on drills and rote learning, and the primary goal was to help students memorize the words and their linguistic usage. While this instructional intervention by no means abandoned drills and rote learning, it added implicit and explicit instructions in order to gradually raise the students’ conceptual awareness of the metaphorical implications behind the color words, thereby encouraged them to learn and understand the words’ cultural functions in addition to their linguistic meanings and usage. (2) In the instructors’ traditional approach, even when the metaphorical implications of the color words were explained, the explanation depended largely on the instructors’ spontaneous reaction, which was contingent on the questions or the learning tasks at hand. This instructional intervention aimed to provide a comparatively more systematic explanation of the metaphorical implications behind some of the Chinese color words. The purpose of doing this was to help the students establish a very basic conceptual framework that could enable them to better understand the Chinese color concepts, which hopefully could enable them to transfer their knowledge and comprehension skills to the study of other Chinese color metaphors in the future.

Methodology

This section describes the pedagogical and research methods used for this study, including participants and settings, instructional design, instruments, data collection and data analysis plans. It is worth noting that since this study is intended to be a report on pedagogical designs rather than on research findings, (1) it will focus more on the details of the instructional activities that were designed to be an integral part of the original teaching plan; (2) its data
collection and analysis might not be as thorough and rigorous as one would expect in a formal research paper.

**Participants and Settings**

This instructional design was implemented at a private university in Pittsburgh area. Most of the students have science and technology backgrounds. The small student-teacher ratio provides a good opportunity for close interaction between students and the faculty. The Chinese program in the university offers a full range of courses from Elementary Chinese (1st year) to Advanced Chinese (4th year). Both Chinese major and minor are offered in the program. 23 students from Elementary II Chinese (1st year, second semester) have participated in the study. There are 19 students who have completed the instructional hours, and the pre- and post-surveys. Those students who have not completed the instructional hours are excluded from this study.

**Instructional Design**

This instruction on the Chinese color words and their metaphorical implications was designed to last for four days, roughly 10-20 minutes each day. Since the original teaching plan for those four days was on the Chinese words for colors and clothes, and their linguistic use and cultural significance in China, this instructional design was suitable for the teaching plan and could be seamlessly incorporated into the regular classroom instruction. The instructors used different pedagogical methods to *implicitly* and *explicitly* inform students of the metaphorical implications behind some of the colors in Chinese culture. Pictures, lecture notes, videos, and a variety of classroom activities were used to raise the students’ awareness of the cultural concepts behind certain Chinese color words and improve their skills in interpreting the metaphorical meanings of certain Chinese color terms.

**Instruments and Data Collection**

Evaluations of the instructional intervention include in-class assessment, a pre-survey and a post-survey. In-class assessments were carried out as an integral part of the regular classroom instruction, and evaluated afterward by the instructors based on their observation and reflections. The findings will be presented in the In-class Assessment Findings section of this paper. The pre-survey was conducted right before and the post-survey immediately after the instructional intervention.

The pre-survey included a number of questions on certain Chinese color terms, which the students had not learned before. The sentence included in the questions were in proper English, but the Chinese color terms were presented only in their literal English translations. The English sentences were designed as such so that they could only provide minimal, if any, clues for the students’ interpretation of the color terms, and the students were specifically instructed to interpret the color terms only from their reading of the terms, not from the context of the sentences. The purpose of the pre-survey was to gauge the students’ initial understanding of the metaphorical meanings of these color terms. The absence of the Chinese original words gave the students the freedom to interpret these color terms based on their previous knowledge about the terms, or, if they had no previous knowledge, their first impression of the English literal
translations of them. In other words, what the pre-survey wanted to find out was not so much the correct interpretations of these color terms, but rather the primary conceptual framework that dominated the students’ initial interpretations of them.

The post-survey utilized the same questions in the pre-survey, but added the Chinese characters and pinyin to the English literal translations of the color terms. The presence of the Chinese characters and pinyin served to remind the students that they should use what they had learned in class to interpret the metaphorical meanings of these color terms within Chinese cultural context. The post-survey result was then collected and compared with that of the pre-survey to see how effectively the instructional intervention had changed the students’ dominant conceptual framework used in interpreting the Chinese color terms in both surveys.

Survey Data Analysis

The instructors used a 5-point scale to rate all the answers given by students in the interpretation tasks in the pre- and post-surveys, with 1 being the lowest and 5 the highest. The major criteria that we used to evaluate the accuracy of students’ answers included, but were not limited to: 1) whether the students could correctly determine the positive or negative undertone of the color term; 2) how close the students’ interpretation was to the accurate meaning of the term. For example, if a student interpreted the "red person" as "angry person" in the survey, he/she would only receive 1 point, because of the incorrect understanding of both the term’s undertone and its meaning. If the interpretation was “lucky person,” then the student would receive 3 points because he/she correctly understood the term’s positive undertone but the interpretation of the meaning was off. 4 points would be given to an answer like “prosperous person,” because the interpretation of the meaning is very close to the correct one. 2 points would be given to an answer like “nice person,” because though the positive undertone was understood correctly, the interpretation of the meaning was too vague for us to tell if the student truly understood the term or not (see Table 1 below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Interpretations of “red person” (红人) and grading criteria</th>
<th>Sample Answers</th>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Closeness of Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Angry person</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Incorrect understanding of term’s undertone</td>
<td>Very inaccurate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nice person</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Correct understanding of the term’s positive undertone</td>
<td>Too vague to determine if the student truly understands the meaning or not.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lucky person</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Correct understanding of the term’s positive undertone</td>
<td>Far-fetched from the accurate meaning, but more specific than “nice.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prosperous person</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Correct understanding of the term’s positive undertone</td>
<td>Close to the accurate meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Popular/beloved person</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Correct understanding of the term’s positive undertone</td>
<td>Very close to the accurate meaning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1
The instructors read, discussed and agreed on the points assigned to each answer, then calculated the average point for each color term, and compared the changes of the average points in the pre- and post-surveys. The preliminary results of this comparison will be shown in the Survey Findings section of this paper, which focuses primarily on 5 sample color terms selected from the surveys (please refer to the Appendix for sample color terms and survey questions).

### Instructional Intervention

The instructional intervention was designed to last for four days. The instructors used both implicit and explicit pedagogical methods to inform the students of the metaphorical implications of the chosen Chinese colors. Pictures, lecture notes, videos, and a variety of classroom activities were used to inform, enhance, challenge, shape or reshape the students’ awareness and knowledge of the metaphorical implications behind certain Chinese color words. Different strategies were adopted in the teaching of different color words. Sometimes the instructional invention was purposefully designed to see if conflicting or lack of instruction would cause adverse impact on the students’ understanding of the metaphorical meanings of certain color terms.

#### Day 1

A series of color words, with primary focus on the five ones listed below, were introduced to the students along with other new vocabulary such as the Chinese words for clothes. A group of deliberately chosen and designed pictures and sentence patterns were used to implicitly affect students’ understanding of the metaphorical implications of these color words (See Table 2 for the details in the instruction).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Instructional Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Red   | 1. A picture of a good-looking young man wearing a red shirt was selected to represent this color. The purpose was to give the students an overall positive impression of this color.  
2. This positive impression was further enhanced with the practice of the following sentence pattern:  
他今天穿了红色的衬衫，我觉得很好看。 Today he wears a red shirt. I think it looks good.  
The word “好看 looks good” was purposefully highlighted in red, to encourage the students to transfer the positive connotation associated with the word to the color of red. |
| White | 1. A picture of a beautiful young lady wearing a white skirt was selected to represent this color, which was again used to give the students an overall positive impression of this color.  
2. This positive impression was further enhanced with the practice of the following sentence pattern: |
She today wore a white skirt, I think it is quite nice. (Today she wears a white skirt, I think it is quite nice.)

The word “不错, quite nice” was highlighted in white, to encourage the students to transfer the positive connotation associated with the word to the color of white.

### Black
1. A picture of the grim reaper wearing a black robe was selected to represent this color, in order to reinforce the students’ overall negative impression of this color.
2. This negative impression was further enhanced with the practice of the following sentence pattern:
   
   He today wore 髒色的衣服, 我觉得很难看 Today he wears a black robe, I think it is bad-looking.

   The word “难看, bad-looking” was highlighted in black, to encourage the students to transfer the negative connotation associated with the word to the color of black.

### Green
1. A picture of the Green Lantern wearing a green costume was selected to represent this color, to give the students an overall positive impression of this color.
2. This positive impression was further enhanced with the practice of the following sentence pattern:
   
   他今天穿了绿色的衣服, 我觉得很酷 Today he wears a green costume, I think it looks very cool.

   The phrase “很酷, very cool” was highlighted in green, to encourage the students to transfer the positive connotation associated with the phrase to the color of green.

### Yellow
1. A picture of a cute little girl wearing a yellow sweater was selected to represent this color, to give the students an overall positive impression of this color.
2. This positive impression was further enhanced with the practice of the following sentence pattern:
   
   她今天穿了黄色的衣服, 我觉得很可爱 Today he wears a yellow sweater, I think it is very adorable.

   The word “可爱, adorable” was highlighted in yellow, to encourage the students to transfer the positive connotation associated with the word to the color of yellow.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
</tr>
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</table>

**Day 2**

The five color words were reviewed and practiced with the grammatical instruction on Chinese measure words for clothes. Two instructional strategies were used to implicitly or explicitly reinforce, change or challenge the metaphorical understanding that the students had built up towards the five color words during the first day of class.

**Strategy 1.**

Three pictures of a U.S. dollar bill (US$20), a Chinese yuan (¥100), and a Hong Kong dollar bill (HK$1,000) were selected to represent the color of green, red, and yellow. The Chinese words for the U.S. dollar, Chinese yuan, and Hong Kong dollar were also new words.
that the students needed to learn. The students were asked to say the color of the currencies and choose whether they like it or not, using the following sentence patterns.

美金是绿色的，我很喜欢 or 不喜欢 (The U.S. dollar is green, and I like or dislike it.)
人民币是红色的，我很喜欢 or 不喜欢。(The Chinese yuan is red, and I like or dislike it.)
港币是黄色的，我很喜欢 or 不喜欢。(The Hong Kong dollar is yellow, and I like or dislike it.)

As expected, all students chose to “like” the three currencies. This had fulfilled our primary purpose of asking students to make this choice, namely, to encourage them to transfer their “fondness” of money to the colors of green, red and yellow, thus to reinforce the positive impressions that they have established towards these three colors.

But it was also understood that the introduction of the concept of money might also adversely change students’ original “positive” perception of the three colors, if they held a negative attitude towards money. In that case, students would be made aware that the metaphorical implications of the color words were not always fixed or stable. How a color is metaphorically perceived and interpreted in a society is closely connected to the items, things, and notions that it has been regularly associated with, as well as how those items, things, and notions have been perceived and understood in that society.

**Strategy 2.**

A similar teaching strategy, like the one used on the first day of class, was used to reinforce or challenge the students’ metaphorical interpretations of the five colors. But this time, *explicit* instructions were given on how these colors were generally perceived and understood metaphorically in Chinese society and culture (See Table 3 for the details in the instruction).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Instructional Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Red       | 1. A picture of a good-looking Chinese young lady wearing a red wedding dress was selected to represent this color, to reinforce the positive impression that the students had built up toward this color on the first day of class.  
2. This positive impression was further enhanced with the expected affirmative answer that the students would make for the following choice:  
她穿了一条红色的裙子，我很喜欢 or 不喜欢。She wears a red dress, which I like or dislike very much.  
3. After the students, as expected, chose to like the picture, the instructors explicitly explained that the color of red usually carried a positive connotation in Chinese society and culture, because it was often associated with prosperity and celebration. This association has given the color of red an overall positive metaphorical implication. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| White  | 1. A picture of a ghost-like woman with a very pale face was selected to represent this color, in order to challenge the positive impression that the students had built up toward this color on the first day of class.  
   2. This negative impression was reinforced with the expected negative answer that the students would make for the following choice:  
   她有一张白色的脸，我很喜欢 or 不喜欢。She has a white face, which I like or dislike very much.  
   3. After the students chose to dislike the picture, the instructors explicitly explained that the color of white sometimes could carry a negative connotation in Chinese society and culture, especially when it was associated with body parts like the face or eyes. This has given the color of white a rather mixed metaphorical implication, because while it is often associated with cleanness and purity, it could also be used to represent death or unhealthy looking. |
| Black  | 1. A picture of a scary witch wearing a black hat was selected to represent this color, to reinforce the negative impression that the students had built up toward this color on the first day of class.  
   2. This negative impression was further enhanced with the expected negative answer that the students would make for the following choice:  
   她戴了一顶黑色的帽子,我很喜欢 or 不喜欢。（She wears a black hat, which I like or dislike very much.  
   3. After the students chose to dislike the picture, the instructors explicitly explained that the color of black usually carried a negative connotation in Chinese society and culture, because it was often associated with death and evil. This has imbued the color of black with an overall negative metaphorical implication. |
| Green  | 1. A picture of a green Angry Bird was selected to represent this color, to encourage the students to perceive this color positively, as they did in the first class.  
   2. This positive impression was further enhanced with the expected affirmative answer that the students would make for the following choice:  
   今天我看见一只绿色的小鸟,我很喜欢 or 不喜欢。 （Today I saw a green bird, which I like or dislike very much.  
   3. After the students chose to like the picture, the instructors explicitly explained that the color of green usually carried a positive connotation in Chinese society and culture, because it was often associated with nature or unpolluted environment. This association has given the color of green an overall positive metaphorical implication. |
| Yellow | 1. A picture of a beautiful young lady wearing a yellow jacket was selected to represent this color, to reinforce the positive impression that the students had built up toward this color on the first day of class.  
   2. This positive impression was further enhanced with the expected affirmative answer that the students would make for the following choice:  
   她穿了一件黄色的毛衣，我很喜欢 or 不喜欢。（She wears a yellow jacket, which I like or dislike very much. |
3. After the students chose to like the picture, the instructors explicitly explained that the color of yellow usually carried a positive connotation in Chinese society and culture, because it was often associated with imperial wealth and dignity. This has imbued the color of yellow with an overall positive metaphorical implication.

Table 3

**Day 3**

A teacher-student communicative activity was used to test the students’ linguistic gains from the instructional intervention conducted in the first two days of class. Four pictures, each with a Chinese person wearing a dress in a specific color (black, white, red, and yellow), were presented to the students. The students were asked to answer the following questions.

1. 你喜欢/不喜欢什么颜色? 为什么? (What color(s) do you like/dislike? Why?)
2. 你觉得他/她喜欢/不喜欢什么颜色? 为什么? (What color(s) do you think he/she [the person in the picture] may like/dislike? Why?)

**Day 4**

A short animated video was used to summarize the instructions that the students had received in the past three classes about the metaphorical implications behind certain Chinese color words. Some new information was introduced for the first time in the video. Through the video, students were informed that:

1) Colors have positive or negative implications, which vary from culture to culture.
2) In Chinese culture, red gains its meaning from fire, and it is often used as a symbol for prosperity and happiness. Black has a hint of formality and solemnness, and it has symbolic implications that include evil, morbid, illegal, corrupted and/or greedy. White has a mixed connotation in China. It is a symbol of purity and clarity, but it is also the color used in funerals and is often associated with death. Yellow/gold was associated with emperors in the past, thus is often used to symbolize nobility and wealth. But yellow can mean “pornographic” when used in connection with publication or media. Green is associated with plants or vegetables, which represent clean, thriving and free of contamination. It is usually a good choice of color, except for hats.
3) People may become really happy if you play the color right, or really mad if you play it wrong.

The new information regarding the negative metaphorical implications of yellow and green were particularly emphasized in this video. The words about the “pornographic” connotation associated with the color of yellow were put in larger fonts and placed in a very obvious position in the video. The negative connotation associated with “green hat” in Chinese culture (meaning one’s wife has committed adultery) was explicitly explained to the students. These emphases aimed to help the students gain a better understanding of some color terms included in the pre- and post-surveys, whose metaphorical meanings were very difficult to figure out because of their association with particular Chinese historical events or anecdotes.

The video was followed by an oral assessment, which asked the students to decide whether a color had good, bad or mixed metaphorical implications in Chinese society and culture.
After that, the students were asked to pick the appropriate colors for four different social occasions: a Chinese wedding ceremony, a funeral, a meeting with the mafia boss, and a Chinese New Year Gala. The four scenarios were purposely selected to test if the students had established basic conceptual awareness of the metaphorical implications associated with the colors of red, white, black, green and yellow in Chinese culture, and if they were able to apply their conceptual knowledge and interpretive skills to a real life situation.

**Survey Findings**

As mentioned before, the purpose of this instructional design is to raise the students’ conceptual awareness of and improve their interpretive skills of the metaphorical implications of certain Chinese color terms. The effectiveness of the instructional design was measured primarily through the comparison and analysis of the test results in the pre- and post-surveys. The chart below shows a side-by-side comparison of the average scores that the students have received for their answers on the metaphorical meanings of the five color terms that represent the five color words covered in the instructional intervention (See Figure 1).

![Color Terms Chart](image)

**Figure 1**

1. *Red Person* 红人: The color of red was presented as a “positive” color throughout the instructional intervention. The term “red person” in the pre- and post-surveys also possesses a positive implication in accordance with the instruction given in class. The students’ interpretations of the metaphorical meaning of this color term were expected to become more accurate after the instructional intervention. As shown in Figure 1, the average score that the students had received for their interpretations of this term in the pre-survey was a relatively high score of 3.2, which indicated that many student might already know that red is a good “color” in Chinese culture and therefore could roughly guess the meaning of the term. In the post-survey,
the score increased to 4.3, which indicated that the students could interpret the term more accurately after the instructional intervention.

2. Black Word 黑话: The color of black was presented as a “negative” color throughout the instruction. The color term “black word” also has negative connotations, which conform to the instruction that the students have received in class. Since the color of black also carried a general negative connotation in English, the average score that the students had received for their interpretations of this term in the pre-survey was also relatively high (3.1). Interestingly, from the pre-survey to the post-survey, the average scores increased very insignificantly from 3.1 to 3.4. Judging from the two scores, it is possible that the students had correctly grasped the negative undertone of the term but failed to accurately interpret its meaning.

3. White Eyes 白眼: The students were informed, implicitly and explicitly, that the color of white had both positive and negative metaphorical implications in Chinese society and culture. However, the negative connotation of the term 白眼 (supercilious look), as well as the historical anecdote associated with it, was not explicitly explained to the students in class. The purpose was to see whether the students would generate mixed interpretations of this color metaphor due to inadequate instructions. The survey results showed that the average scores increased from a low score of 1.6 to another low one of 2.5, which indicated that though the accuracy of the students’ interpretations of this term improved from the pre-survey to the post-survey, many students still could not figure out the exact meaning of this term.

4. Yellow Joke 黄色笑话: The color of yellow was presented as a “positive” color in most parts of the instruction. The color term “yellow joke,” however, has a very negative connotation associated with pornography. This negative connotation was emphasized in the short video shown on Day 4, but was not explicitly explained by the instructors. The purpose was to see how the conflicting messages given in the instruction and the video would affect the students’ interpretation of this color metaphor. As shown in Figure 1, the students’ average scores for this color term increased from 1.8 to 3.3. This increase indicated the effectiveness of the video emphasis, but the mediocre scores that the students received in the post-survey suggested that an explicit instruction by the instructors might still be necessary for the students to accurately interpret the metaphorical meaning of this term.

5. Green Hat 绿帽子: Like the color of yellow, the color of green was presented as a “positive” color throughout the instruction, except in the short video shown on Day 4, in which the students were informed that the term “green hat” had a negative connotation in Chinese culture. But unlike the case with the color term “yellow joke,” this time the instructors explicitly reiterated the importance of this negative connotation and explained its historical origin. With this double emphasis, the students were expected to make correct interpretations about the negative meaning of this term in the post-survey, in spite of the overall “positive” impression that they might have gained about the color green during the first three days of instruction. As shown in Figure 1, the average scores for this term increased significantly from 1.3 in the pre-survey to 4.9 in the post-survey. It is evident from this result, as well as from its comparison with the survey results about the “white eyes” and “yellow jokes,” that the most efficient way to teach a color metaphor that has specific historical or cultural references is through clear and emphasized classroom instruction.
In-Class Assessment Findings

In addition to the pre- and post-surveys, an in-class assessment was also used as an important measure to test the effectiveness of the instructional design.

The in-class assessment was conducted in the forms of teacher-student interaction and group activity on Day 4. As mentioned before, after watching the short video on the Chinese color metaphors, the students were asked to decide whether a color had good, bad or mixed metaphorical implications in Chinese society and culture. The result of this oral assessment showed that all students had correctly grasped the information provided in the video. In the following group activities that required the students to pick the appropriate color(s) to wear for different Chinese social occasions, 90% of the students picked the right color(s) based on what they had learned in class. For instance, when asked to choose the wedding gown, the students would choose the right color of red (happiness) or white (purity), and when asked to meet with their mafia boss, the students would choose the appropriate color of black (illegal and solemnness). This indicates that the students had established a basic conceptual awareness of the metaphorical implications behind certain colors in Chinese culture, and known how to use this conceptual awareness to deal with issues in a real life situation.

Discussion

As mentioned before, this study was intended to be a pedagogical report, focusing primarily on how to seamlessly incorporate the teaching of the metaphorical concepts behind some Chinese color words into regular classroom instruction. Hence, its data collection and analysis were not strictly emphasized and its time frame could not exceed what was specified on the course syllabus (4 class hours). But even with the limited data and time duration, the preliminary findings in this study still show that proper instructional intervention can help students establish, reinforce, or adjust their conceptual awareness of the cultural and metaphorical implications behind some Chinese color words.

One big issue that the instructors have encountered during this study is how to achieve a balance between language training and concept teaching. For a Chinese class at the elementary level, language training is of paramount importance. Will the teaching on concepts recommended by the CBI approach interfere with the language training in a L2 class? How many concepts should the instructor introduce to the students at one time and how far should the students explore into these concepts? When teaching about Chinese color metaphors, should the instructor present the students with all the cultural and metaphorical implications of the color words from the very beginning, or rather adopt a sequential and incremental approach to break down the instruction into different levels and phases? These are the questions that demand the instructors’ constant attention when designing and conducting this study. As mentioned above, during this instructional intervention, the instructors have tried their best to seamlessly incorporate the teaching of the color metaphors into the regular classroom instruction, in order to help the students learn both the language and the concepts at the same time. The classroom activities have been carefully thought-out and designed, so that they could raise the students’ conceptual awareness of Chinese color metaphors while at the same time improve their language skills. The instructors have also used different instructional methods, sometimes even deliberately holding back information or offering conflicting information, in order to experiment and search for the
best pedagogical strategies and methods for this subject. Finally, the instructors also understand that the pedagogical approach and methods tried out in this study are still very experimental, and need to be carefully refined in future studies.

Another issue is regarding the assessment methods used in this study. The in-classroom assessments could have adopted a questionnaire form like the pre- and post-surveys, instead of being conducted on the basis of the instructors’ observation and reflections. However, although this would make the assessment results more quantitative and objective, what needs to be considered is the possible inference that this form of assessment might have caused to the regular classroom instruction. Another outcome that the CBI approach wishes to assess is the students’ ability to develop a conceptual framework based on what they have learned in class, which they can use to facilitate their learning and interpretation of other similar concepts in the future. For this study, this assessment could have been accomplished by conducting a postponed survey, which could include new interpretative tasks on similar Chinese color metaphors.

As discussed above, color metaphors play an important role in people’s life and daily communication. To help Chinese language learners understand the metaphorical implications behind the Chinese color terms at an early stage of learning will not only help them comprehend the rationale behind of the choice and use of those terms, but also encourage them to look into the conceptual structure of the Chinese language and culture, where those color metaphors are rooted. As shown in this study, this learning goal can be achieved by properly adapting the concept-based instructional approach to make it more compatible with and conducive to other pedagogical approaches used in L2 learning and teaching.

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References


Appendix A: Sample Color Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Lexical Item</th>
<th>Literal Translation</th>
<th>Figurative Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>红人</td>
<td>red person</td>
<td>favorable person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>黑话</td>
<td>black words</td>
<td>slang used by robbers and thieves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>白眼</td>
<td>white eyes</td>
<td>treat with disdain and impatience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>黄色笑话</td>
<td>yellow joke</td>
<td>pornographic joke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>绿帽子</td>
<td>green hat</td>
<td>wife has an affair with someone else</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Sample Pre-Survey Questions

1) Context: She is the red person in the theatrical troupe.
   Expression: red person
   Interpretation: In your opinion, what does “red person” mean?
   
   Reason: Please explain the reason for your interpretation.

2) Context: They all understand the black words.
   Expression: black words
   Interpretation: In your opinion, what does “black words” mean?
   
   Reason: Please explain the reason for your interpretation.
Appendix C: Sample Post-Survey Questions

1) Context: She is the 红人 in the theatrical troupe.
   Expression: 红人 hóng rén (red person)
   Interpretation: In your opinion, what does “红人” mean?

   ________________________________
   Reason: Please explain the reason for your interpretation.

2) Context: They all understand the 黑话.
   Expression: 黑话 hēi huà (black words)
   Interpretation: In your opinion, what does “黑话” mean?

   ________________________________
   Reason: Please explain the reason for your interpretation.