

Pragmatics and College English Teaching in China

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ABSTRACT: *This paper introduces some basic theory of pragmatics, then it makes a study on college English teaching combined with pragmatics. Through analyzing the relationship between pragmatics and college English teaching, and offering countermeasures to improve the students ability in applying pragmatics, it provides theoretical reference for college English teaching.*

Keywords: *pragmatics, college English teaching, pragmatic ability*

I. BASIC CONCEPT AND THEORIES OF PRAGMATICS

1.1 The concept of pragmatics

Pragmatics, one of the rapidly growing fields in contemporary linguistics, didn't become an independent subject until the 1970s. It is defined as the scientific study of meaning by virtue of language use. The central topics of inquiry are deixis, implicature, presupposition and speech act. This is known as the component view of pragmatics. It seeks to characterize the features of the speech context which contributes to determining what is expressed in a given sentence. One central theme running through pragmatics studies is: why do we not say what we mean and why do we not mean what we say? most theories in pragmatics intends to fill up the gap between "saying" and "meaning".

1.2 Pragmatic theories

We move next to some pragmatic theories: H. P. Grice's conversational implicature, J. L. Austin's Speech act theory, H.P. Firth's speech act theory.

1.2.1 H.P. Grice's conversational implicature

On a general Grice takes account of meaning and communication, there are two theories: a theory of meaning—non-natural and a theory of conversational implicature (Grice, 1989). In the theory of meaning, Grice emphasizes the conceptual relation between natural meaning in the external world and non-natural linguistic meaning of utterances. He develops a reductive analysis of meaning. In terms of the speaker's intentions, In the theory of conversational implicature, Grice suggests that there is an underlying principle that determines the way in which language is used maximally efficiently and effectively to achieve rational interaction in communication. He calls this governing dictum the co-operative principle and subdivides it into nine maxims classified into four categories. The co-operative principle and its component maxims ensure that in an exchange of conversation, the right amount of information is provided and that the interaction is conducted in a truthful, relevant and perspicuous manner. As sketchy and inadequate as it is, Grice's theory of conversational implicature has revolutionized pragmatic theorizing and has to date remained one of the cornerstones of contemporary pragmatics.

1.2.2 J. L. Austin's Speech Act Theory

According to English scholar J. L. Austin, language is used not only to describe things, but more importantly it is used to perform things, that is, some utterances are actually some kind of act. For instances: thanks, approvals, apologies in utterances are in fact performatives. There are overall three kinds of act: Locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. For example: I will go there next day. at the first level, literally it means I have said a sentence "I will go there next day." At the second level of illocutionary act, by saying "I will be there next day", The speaker is making a promise or a threat. At the third level of perlocutionary act, by saying "I will be there tomorrow, making a promise or a threat, the speaker assures you or someone else. The third level of perlocutionary act is the focus of J. L. Austin in his study.

So it can be seen that the performance of speech act is indirect, which was also found by Searle who first stated the Indirect Speech Act theory in 1969. Searle (1975) defined Indirect Speech Act theory as the kind of act performed indirectly by another speech act. He also held that In indirect speech act theory, the speaker communicates with the hearer to let him understand his intention behind the literal meaning, what the speaker depends on is their common background of knowledge and context, which includes linguistic and non-linguistic

context. Also he needs the hearer's ability of inference.

1.2.3 J. R. Firth's Context theory

Early in the 1930s, English linguist J. R. Firth raised the context theory in utterance meaning. Generally speaking, context is indispensable part in the study of pragmatics, it refers to the circumstances in which the language communication is carried out. There are mainly three kinds of context, namely, language context, social context and recognition context. Language context means context in articles or talks. Social context refers to the information about both the speaker and the hearer. (e.g. their age, sex, occupation or education background) recognition context is the different experience and knowledge which affect the recognition of both the speaker and hearer.

II. THE INFLUENCES OF PRAGMATIC THEORIES ON ENGLISH TEACHING

2.1 Situation of current Chinese English teaching

For a long time, English language teaching in China has been dominated by the audiolingual method and the traditional grammar translation method. Language teaching is mainly concerned with developing learners' linguistic competences, that is, the acquisition of linguistic forms of the language. In order to achieve this aim, the teacher places his focus of attention on imparting the knowledge of grammatical rules of the language and explain grammar through the materials which is removed from its total context of meaning. Moreover, he teaches the learners how to form correctly: how to manipulate the structure of the language easily without error. Furthermore, he selects and designs form — focused classroom exercises to encourage learners to practice and consolidate specific properties of the linguistic codes. The external factors of language was completely neglected.

It is the same with Chinese college English teaching, which always takes languages as knowledge and lays emphasis on the explanation of language points such as grammar and vocabulary items. Consequently, the students master a lot of vocabulary and grammar rules which help them get high marks in written exams. However, in actual communication, they can not perform the function or express their notions properly with correct sentence form. They use inappropriate words that lead to pragmatic failure and also misunderstanding or obstacles in communication. So it is a great need for college English teaching to focus on pragmatic study in order to improve students' pragmatic ability and also cultivate the applicable talents adaptable to the international communication.

2.2 Application of Pragmatics in College English teaching

College English teaching is a multi-layer and complete system, with all segments linked together, so it is necessary to carry out the pragmatic principle throughout the whole college English teaching.

2.2.1 Combine pragmatic knowledge with grammar teaching

One linguistic form can be used to perform many functions, while one function can be expressed by different linguistic forms. So teachers should put language rules and pragmatic principles into grammar teaching, and also link linguistic form with linguistic function, so as to improve the students pragmatic ability. For example: there are a lot of usage for the word "before":

- 1) It will be three months before we get together again. (emphasis on the long time)
- 2) She got home before it began to snow. (emphasis on the unfinished state)
- 3) Tom had not waited long before Jane arrived. (emphasis on the short time)
- 4) Hold on before the doctor came back. (emphasis on persistence)
- 5) I will try my best before I give up. (emphasis on resolution)
- 6) The sun will rise in the west before he will love her. (emphasis on conditions)

From the above examples, we can see that the context of subordinate clause or phrase guided by "before" is sometimes real, sometimes not real, it has rich implications. When giving explanation, the teachers should analyze the language phenomenon from the perspective of pragmatics to impress his students on grammatical understanding.

2.2.2 Teach vocabulary in cultural context

When teach college English vocabulary, the teacher should not only enlarge the students common vocabulary volume, but also help them grasp the extended meaning of words. Teachers should pay more attention to the words' social-cultural meaning than their lexical or grammatical meaning. Students should be taught how to choose proper words in real context. For example, the word "ambitious" means aspirant, which is commendatory term in America, but we Chinese often link its meaning with that of "greedy" or "ruthless". Take

another example “dog”, Chinese and English have total different meaning for it. In China, “dog” is used for derogatory sense such as henchman or son of a bitch, but in English, “dog” is used in expressions for commendatory sense such as “Love me, Love my dog”, “top Dog”, “lucky dog”.

All of the above examples show that the teacher should focus on the connotation of culture and strength students’ awareness in cultural differences. He should instruct the student for correct and appropriate use of vocabulary so as to communicate effectively in real context.

2.2.3 Using Contextual Analysis to Instruct Reading Comprehension

On contextual analysis, the use of language in context by speakers / writers is investigated, the relationship between the speaker and the utterance is more concerned with. Listeners or readers pay more attention to the particular occasion of use, than the potential relationship of one sentence to another, regardless of their use. That is, in using terms such as reference, presupposition, implication inference, people are describing what speakers and hearers are doing, and not the relationship which exists between one sentence or proposition and another.

Pragmatically, the structure and cohesion or sentence pattern of an article is changing with its topic. What the article expresses is certain semantic purpose which lies in the relations of sentences or paragraphs.

So, in teaching reading , the teacher should start from the whole layout of the reading materials, teach the students how to perceive and comprehend them as a whole. The ideas and structure of the reading materials should be considered first. In teaching reading skills, the teacher should guide students how to get useful information quickly, at the same time grasp the deep meaning correctly. Students are taught to get the gist and general meaning of reading materials, meanwhile, they should know the facts and clues of the reading materials, so they can make right references or guesses. It is also necessary for the student to figure out the author’s attitude and emotions, all of which need the help of pragmatics.

2.2.4 Pragmatics in the teaching of listening

Some theories of pragmatics such as context, cooperation principles and conversational implicature are widely used in the teaching of listening, which contribute to strengthen students’ comprehensive linguistic competence. In listening comprehension, students should know how to make up the missing but known information, for most utterances tend to be effortless and avoid repetition. For instance:

A: I hope it will not rain.

B: I don’t care.

From context analysis, we know that what B omits is I don’t care whether it will rain or not.

Look at another example:

A: Do you like noodles?

B: I come from North of China, you know?

If A knew northerners in China like noodles, he will at once understand what B tends to tell him is “yes, sure.”

So on one hand, the teacher should introduce some pragmatic principles closely related to listening comprehension, help the students to see the rich implication and get the real intention of the speaker; on the other hand, form using abundant listening materials, students can get to know the life style, cultural background and customs of different nations, combine pragmatics with vocal materials to improve students’ listening comprehension.

III. COUNTERMEASURES IN CULTIVATING PRAGMATIC ABILITY IN COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING

3.1 Fostering students’ pragmatic ability

Taking into account of current situation of college English teaching in China, Quality-oriented education should be placed first, instead of the excessive attention paid to CET4 or CET6 by both the teacher and the students. English teaching should care both basic knowledge and pragmatic ability.

3.2 Making good use of all kinds of teaching sources

3.2.1 Aids to object teaching should be used in English teaching

Teachers can take slides, films, TV, multi-media or internet to assist their teaching, especially the use of films and internet are rich and varied which is most helpful in getting access to the culture of English speaking countries and improving students’ listening and speaking.

3.2.2 Regarding Foreign teachers as another effective teaching source

From their classes and interaction, students can have deeper and tangible impression the culture or customs of English language.

3.2.3 Using authentic materials

Authentic materials mean texts or materials which are written by the native experts and professionals for the native speakers and language learners. Authentic materials can help learners grasp the usage of language in real situation, that is to say, it is beneficial for learners to proper language in proper social context. Generally, authentic materials show directly or indirectly the target language speakers' beliefs, values, and artifacts that the members of the society use to cope with their world and with one another. Authentic materials are in fact culturally based. Therefore, they are beneficial for developing the students' cultural awareness.

3.2.4 Creating real communicating situation

In the course of college English teaching, the teacher should mainly focus on the function of the language but not just the form of it. Since there is no real language environments and the students have few chances to talk with the native speakers. The teacher may create real situations for the students to play the role. It is vital for the teachers to realize that sometimes the dialogues in the textbooks are distinct with the real social interaction. Also his negative transference to English learning should not be neglected. So, in order to improve the students pragmatic ability, the teachers need to realize the cultural differences between English and Chinese. This may help the language learners to avoid pragmatic failure in communication.

3.3 Developing the students' cultural awareness in college English teaching

To a large extent, the appropriate use of language depends on the students' sociolinguistic knowledge, specifically, other nation's culture. Communicative competence or pragmatic competence includes one important aspect of sociolinguistic competence, which is the knowledge of the social cultural rules of language and discourse. This competence is vitally important, which makes culture teaching necessary. Therefore, it is essential for both teachers and students to realize the social linguistic functions of language and take steps to increase their culture awareness. Language is a part of culture, and culture is a part of language. Culture patterns, customs, and ways of life are reflected in language. Culture is the way of life. Culture is the context within which we exist, think, feel, and relate to others. Culture and language are not only interrelated, but also interact one another.

3.4 Realizing the cultural differences to avoid social pragmatic failure in communication

Pragmatic failure means pragmatic inability with actual references to inappropriate use of language. According to Leech (1983: 10), "Social pragmatic failure stems from cross culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behavior." Thus, in college English teaching, both the teacher and students should be aware of the characteristics of the two language systems and cultures. As Lade (1957: 44) states, "the teacher" who has made a comparison of the foreign language with the native language of the students will know better what the real problems are and can use them for teaching." And also, by doing so, the student can know the differences and similarities between English and Chinese, and then find a more effective way to learn English.

IV. CONCLUSION

The importance of mastering pragmatic knowledge is no less than the proper use of grammatical rules, which exert powerful influence on the making of successful communication among people. An increasingly great number of English language teachers who keep a unique interest in pragmatics have already started to adopt the pragmatic teaching so as to develop the students' communicative competence. Therefore, college English teachers must pay attention to the importance of pragmatics in the teaching process, so that the goal of improving students' communicative ability could possibly be achieved. Only in this way can college students be guided to use language correctly and properly in context.

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