The Development of the Pragmatic and Communicative Competence of Non-English Major Postgraduates

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Abstract:
This paper intends to analyse the present situation of English teaching for non-English major postgraduates and explore the ways to increase the learners’ pragmatic and communicative competence of the English language.

Key words: pragmatics; communication; competence

1. Introduction
To study a language does not only mean to understand it, but also to apply it properly. Therefore, to study a language is a process of developing the students’ pragmatic competence of this language. According to Bachman (1990), language competence is made up of the competence of organizing the language and that of pragmatics. Leech (1983) proposed the theory of differentiating between pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics, thus pragmatic competence can be classified into pragmalinguistic competence which is based on grammar rules including the applying principle of grammar and socialpragmatic competence which refers to the competence of using the language in appropriate terms by following the social rules to apply language, so it is the higher level of pragmatic competence. According to cognitive theory, language learning is a process of communication-----from input of the language to processing of it and then the output-----in which there are language understanding and expressing in each stage. The understanding of a language is influenced by such factors as context and social culture, etc. The language should not only be expressed accurately, but more importantly, it should also be expressed appropriately. However, the present situation of English teaching for non-English major postgraduates is not so satisfactory. The teachers pay more attention to the accuracy of using the language than the appropriateness of it. As a result, there are frequent occurrence of pragmatic failures and lack of cultural and pragmatic knowledge among the students. Pragmatic failures refers to the errors made in language communication, which has not achieved the purpose of communication. The failures are not caused by the misusage of the grammar, but by speaking in improper terms. According to Thomas (1983), there are two kinds of pragmatic failure, one is the failure in pragmalinguistics, the other is in the sociopragmatics. As far as the English language is concerned, the former means that the English spoken is not what is spoken by the native speaker; the latter means that the form of language is wrongly chosen by the speaker because he or she does not know the cultural background of the English language. Therefore, I think that in order to avoid pragmatic failure and increase the communicative competence of the students, we should do the following in the English teaching for the postgraduates.
2.1. To clarify the wrong thinking on the side of the students that the mastery of large English vocabulary and grammar is a symbol of high level of English

A survey was done on about 50 students of Zhengzhou University. The results show that about 85% students think that the mastery of large English words and grammar rules; good marks in the English tests are a symbol of high level of English. For a long time and because of various reasons, college English teaching is not so satisfactory, which should absolutely not exist in the teaching of English for postgraduates. Teachers should not focus on how the textbooks are advanced and academic, but on the principle of the learning for the purpose of use. To direct the students to be aware of the purpose of learning English language becomes a foremost business for the teachers. Moreover, some theories by famous linguists should also be known to the students. For example, Hymes (1972) put forward the concept of communicative competence that a person’s language competence does not only include how he can make grammatically correct sentences but include how to use the language properly.

2.2. To narrow the cultural difference in communication

Different psychology between Chinese and westerners result in cultural difference in cross-cultural communication. Just as Dai Manchun said (2002): The reason for one’s inability to read and write is the lack of the basic skill of language. However, it is even worse to read and write fluently but not in an appropriate term. Generally speaking, the westerners would think that one who can use the language fluently must know communicative principles. Sometimes, accidental pragmatic failure will be understood as intentional harm. Therefore, in the teaching of English, the teacher should guide the students to pay attention to the following:

2.2.1. Avoid misleading caused by cultural difference in the process of getting information

In communication, the speaker tends to pass an idea with an implication of some cultural factors through literal expression. In this survey, I used a sentence by He Ziran (1996) to test the students’ sense of pragmatic knowledge. “Do you think the translation of “高高兴兴上班去,平平安安回家来” (gao gao xing xing shang ban qu, ping ping an an hui jia lai.) into “Go to work happily, and Come back safely!” proper?” 95% students said “Yes”. 5% students didn’t know how to answer. In fact, The English translation will influence those foreigners who know little about Chinese culture in their process of getting the right information. Thus, the purpose of communication can not be achieved. On the other hand, cultural difference can mislead one in his process of getting information. The reason for this is that people from different cultural background have different thinking. Therefore, they will infer in their way of thinking. If a Chinese student does not have some knowledge of cross-culture, they will not understand such a phrase as “脖子疼” (bo zi teng)

2.2.2. To clear up the language barrier caused by cultural differences

Different social system and cultural background between Chinese and English peoples result in their different thinking and inferring in communication and thus arises the language barrier. For example, in this survey, there is a sentence “Tom is a black guard, so everyone tries to avoid
him.” Only 5% students chose the correct answer “无赖” (wu lai). I think as far as the students are concerned, esp, students majoring in medicine, science and technology, they don’t have enough time to read plentiful of literary works and enjoy colorful cultures of various kinds. So the teachers should supplement relevant cultural information to the text so as to enlarge their cultural knowledge of the western countries. Only by doing this, can the misunderstanding in communication caused by cultural difference be cleared up.

2.2.3. To stress the purpose of learning the English language and focus on the understanding and expression of the language according to the context in order to avoid pragmatic failure and increase the communicative competence of the students.

The understanding of a language is a complicated cognitive psychological process. To accomplish this process, the listener should have the ability to assume and infer according to the given communicative context. According to He Zhaoxong (2002), in language communication what helps the listener to understand the speech is not the environmental factors of the given communicative context, but the series of assumptions that form the cognitive context of the listener. According to Wilson’s theory of relevance, the standard for language understanding is the cognitive assumption, we tend to find some relevance between the new information and the contextual assumption. Therefore, in the teaching of English, the teachers should guide the students to look for relevance based on speech information under a certain context, if proper relevance is found, a desired contextual effect can be achieved. Thus, a successful communication can be made.

3. Conclusion

In language expression, I think teachers should pay careful attention to the students’ use of words, focusing more on the their proper expression of themselves under certain language context than their accurately used words and correctly made sentences. Hymes (1972) has the idea that Grammar rules will be useless if one does not know the applied principle of language. In China, students learn English mainly in the classroom. Teachers should create a relaxed and interesting environment for the students to decrease their control and increase their use of communicative strategies. On the other hand, the teachers should help the students to adjust themselves and develop their sense of pragmatics, so as to increase their communicative competence.

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