The Application of Intercultural Communication Context Theory in Oral English Teaching

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Absract

The fostering of intercultural communicative awareness, that is, full comprehension and mastering of the target culture background, values, customs and life styles on the basis of acquired language skills, is necessary in oral English teaching. A framework of intercultural communication context-based oral English teaching is designed. Two classes are involved in the study:one as the experimental class instructed with the intercultural communication context-based oral English teaching method; the other as the control class taught with the traditional teaching method.

The results of the independent T-test indicate that intercultural communication context-based oral English teaching method can improve students' oral proficiency. Moreover, the results of the questionnaire survey indicate that intercultural communication context-based oral English teaching method can increase students' interest in oral English learning, promote their active learning and improve their intercultural communicative ability.

Key words: Intercultural communication; Context theory; Oral English teaching

INTRODUCTION

People learn foreign languages in order to communicate. Therefore, communication is the ultimate goal of a foreign language learning and teaching. Everyone agrees that the purpose of the learning and teaching of a second or foreign language is to communicate effectively in certain situations.

Although college students in China have been studying English for many years, most of them still cannot express themselves well and their oral performance in English is rather poor. The knowledge of knowing quite a lot about what the rules of English grammar are, and how to form sentences in English can only provide an important foundation, but it is not enough to enable learners to speak English fluently. Moreover, the teaching of oral English in college is relatively uninteresting, which bores students and frustrates their enthusiasm. Students are required to recite the useful patterns and to do the exchange exercises that cannot remain in their memories for long. Little interaction is realized through this way, so more and more attention should be devoted to oral English and its teaching.

With the globalization, international communication is becoming frequent. Globalization brings people from different cultures into direct contact. In China, since the reform and opening up, the contact with outside world is happening with increasing frequency. Also, after China's entry into WTO, English is more widely used in commercial negotiation, acquiring professional knowledge, etc. These activities require good oral expression of English users. So, on the one hand, oral English is poorly mastered, on the other hand, it is being attached increasing importance. These two sides require us to put more emphasis on oral English teaching. Based on the literature review and some relevant theories, a framework of intercultural communication context-based oral English teaching is designed. The thesis also explores intercultural communication context-based oral language teaching model, its theoretical basis, and the teaching principles.

1. MAJOR PROBLEMS IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Appropriateness is a term, which has been frequently used in sociolinguistics, pragmatics and communication. Inappropriateness is simply the opposite of appropriateness. Appropriateness has a wide range of application when it has 'suitableness' or 'harmony' as its equivalent or substitution in meaning. In communication, it frequently appears to mean whether the communicator's behavior is suitable for or in harmony with the communicator himself and the situation in which the behavior occurs. Although behavior can be bifurcated into verbal behavior and nonverbal behavior, what we are mainly concerned with is the former. Then, by inappropriateness we mean that the speaker's verbal behavior does not fit to (1) the speaker himself (e.g. his sex, age, social status, race and religious belief), and (2) the situation in which the utterances occur. In our daily communication and interaction, inappropriate behavior tends to occur everywhere and at any time. It is not unusual that inappropriate behavior can result in misunderstanding. Compared with native speakers of a language, foreign learners are more likely to conduct inappropriate communication. This is, of course, partially because of their limited linguistic competence, but mainly due to the cultural differences.

Pragmatics is a newly-reclaimed realm of linguistics, which has obtained its independence just for one and a half decade. It was first introduced by Charles Morris, an American philosopher, in his *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* published in 1938. Since then pragmatics has been developing very rapidly, especially in the United States. Although it seems rather difficult or even impossible to give a definition unanimously agreed by all, Geoffery Leech's viewpoint (1983) that "Pragmatics can be usefully defined as the study of how utterances have meanings in situations" has been widely accepted and has been broadened to include the study of the two aspects— performing and interpreting a speech act.

The concept of pragmatic failure was first introduced by Dr. Jenny Thomas, a senior linguist and member of the editorial staff of Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2nd ed, 1987). He defines that "pragmatic failure is an area of cross-cultural communication breakdown..." (Thomas, 1983, p. 91). In intercultural communication, people from different cultures may speak the same language, but their communication may break down due to pragmatic differences in ways of thinking, rules of speaking, social values, lexical connotation and other factors. Pragmatic failure refers to inappropriately used language in a given context. It is the inability to convey one's intention or the illocutionary force with what is said in intercultural communication.

In the process of intercultural communication, pragmatic failure occurs so often that the necessity for attaching great importance to it is pressing. Thomas (1983, p. 96) comments on the seriousness of pragmatic failures. According to her idea, grammatical failure may impede communication. But once the hearer is alert to the fact that the speaker is not fully grammatically competent, native speakers seem to have little difficulty in making allowances for it. But pragmatic failures are otherwise. If a non-native speaker appears to speak fluently, a native speaker is likely to attribute the apparent impoliteness not to any linguistic deficiency, but to ill will.

No matter it is inappropriateness or pragmatic failure leading to misunderstanding or breakdown in intercultural communication, the deep reason behind them is invariably the lack of knowledge about cultural awareness between two languages. In this sense, we can say intercultural communicative competence is the combination of communicative competence and cultural awareness.

2. NEW FRAMEWORK

Intercultural communication context-based language teaching is absolutely not the kind that the focus is only on language while ignores the learner. It's the approach that puts the students' actual desire at the first place. To meet the needs of improving the students' ICC competence and oral language ability, it requires the language learning to be set up on the basis of the anxiety in exchange of information and emotion between teachers and students. Therefore the creation of relaxed and harmonious atmosphere in class, the use of authentic language materials, activities on solving problems, role-play principles result from the communications in exchange of emotions and information. Under this kind of language teaching framework, the objective is to help learners not only to improve the oral proficiency but also to foster the intercultural communicative awareness by interacting listening, reading and writing with speaking. In general, it is to help learners to output efficiently according to different situations.

From a communicative, pragmatic view of the language classroom, listening and speaking materials are closely connected. Oral practice can and should be integrated with listening, either through pre-speaking or follow-up activities.

Because of the lack of opportunity in foreign language settings to interact with native speakers, the need for exposure to many kinds of situations is particularly critical. This need can be met by audiovisual materials, such as videotapes, appropriate films, and soap operas. "They can provide (a) the motivation achieved by basing lessons on attractively informative content material; (b) the exposure to a varied range of authentic speech, with different registers, and (c) language used in the context of real situations, which adds relevance and interest to the learning process" (Carrasquillo, 1994). Through these materials, students can observe interaction between

people from different cultures, compare their cultures with students' own culture, and practice diverse interaction skills which help students to cope successfully in another culture. Subsequent practice of dialogues, role-play activities, and dramatizations will lead to deeper learning.

In designing activities for cultural instruction, the basic consideration should be: to what extent the study of culture and the study of language are integrated. The following principles are the major concerns:

1) Cultural lessons and activities should be carefully planned and presented in conjunction with related thematic units. Use cultural contexts for language-practice activities.

2) Use a variety of techniques for teaching culture that involve speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. Do not limit to lecture.

3) Use small-group activities, such as discussions, brainstorming, and role-play, for cultural instruction.

4) Use the target language whenever possible to teach cultural content.

5) Test cultural understanding as carefully as language is tested.

Students and the teacher together make the evaluation of the activities and the discussion about the topic.

What's more, it is important for teachers to correct mistakes made during speaking activities in a different way from the mistakes made during a reading exercise. When students are repeating sentences trying to get their pronunciation exactly right, then the teacher will often correct (appropriately) every time there's problem. But if the same teacher does the same thing while students are involved in a passionate discussion, the effect might well be to destroy the conversational flow. Constant interruption from the teacher will destroy the purpose of the speaking activity.

Many teachers watch and listen while speaking activities are taking place. They note down things that seem to go well and times when students couldn't make themselves understood or made important mistakes. When the activity has finished, they then ask the students how they thought it went before giving their own feedback. They may say that they like the way Student A says this and the way Student B is able to disagree with her. They will then say that they does hear one or two mistakes and they can either discuss them with the class, with them on the board or give them individually to the students concerned. In each case, they will ask the students to see if they can identify the problem and correct it. As a result, the theme of the topic is appreciated naturally by the students themselves.

In sum, the framework of intercultural communication context-based oral English teaching mainly includes the following steps:

1) Integrating listening work with oral English teaching;

2) Constructing the knowledge of context for the teaching activities;

3) Integrating the cultural factors through interactions;

4) Discussion and improvement.

3. A SAMPLE LESSON

After the presentation of the methods of oral language teaching, a sample lesson is designed accordingly.

First, in the preparation part of the textbook *New College English*, one situational scene was designed for students to organize and have a role-play. For example, when I teach "Culture" (*New College English*, Book1, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press), the teaching and learning process are carried out in the genre of role-play.

Scene 1. Visiting a foreign teacher in China. Then the teacher sets aside 10 minutes for each group to discuss what kind of manner is appropriate for the scene and get ready for the performance. Different students play the roles of the student and the teacher. The following is one group's performance:

Student A------the visiting student

Student B-----the foreign teacher

S: (knocks at the door) Teacher, may I come in?

T: (Opens the door) Hi, Wang. Come in please. (The student begins to untie his shoes).

T: No need. Just come in with your shoes on.

S: But-but you've got a carpet on your floor.

T: Doesn't matter. Please come in.

(Half an hour later, they begin to dine together.)

T: Wang, would you like some drink? Tea or coca-cola?

S: Tea, please. Thank you!

T: You are welcome. Help yourself with some beef.

S: Thank you. (At the end of the dinner, the student leaves some tea in his cup and some beef on his plate.)

People in different countries have different standards for appropriate manners. In China, it is considered appropriate manners to take off one's shoes before entering a house or leaving something in one's cup or bowl when drinking or eating at a friend's place. But these rules of behavior are not observed by their European counterparts, who are expected to keep their shoes on even though they are very muddy, and always finish their drink or food to show their hosts that they have enjoyed them. In this scene, we can feel the Chinese student unconsciously follows the Chinese good manners.

After the class, a written summary about the text is handed in. In the further development part, a discussion is held about the learning of the whole unit. Such a teaching arrangement can greatly arouse the interest of language learning and avoid the boredom caused by the traditional grammar-translation method. On the one hand, students practice their oral English in a very relaxed way. On the

other hand, students understand the cultural differences and similarities of the target culture and their own culture, and they are also creating a new culture.

4. METHODOLOGY

Two classes are involved in the study: One as the experimental class instructed with the intercultural communication context-based oral English teaching method; the other as the control class taught with the traditional teaching method.

Tools Used

Two instruments are employed in the present study. They are the oral English tests and the questionnaire for students. The experiment involves four parts, the pretest, the teaching treatment, the posttest and the questionnaire survey.

Table 1
The Analysis of the Post-Test

Class	N	Mean	SD	T	Sig.(2-Tailed)
1	37	10.3243	1.26500	-2.581	0.012
2	34	11.0588	1.11983		

(1= the control class, 2= the experimental class)

Results from the analysis of the post-test indicate that there is significant difference in the achievement of oral English between the students in intercultural communication context-based teaching class and those in the traditional teaching class (T=-2.581, P=0.012). It is believed that intercultural communication context-based language English teaching has improved students' achievement of oral English significantly.

In order to see the difference more specifically, close analysis about the pretest and the posttest of the two classes was made from the three aspects of the assessment criteria: accuracy and range, size and discourse management as well as flexibility and appropriacy.

Table 2
Close Analysis about the Pretest and the Posttest of the Two Classes

Criteria	Class	N	Mean	T	Sig.(2-Tailed)
Accuracy& Range	1	37	3.5270	-2.139	0.036
	2	34	3.7353		
Size & Discourse Management	1	37	3.4459	-3.233	0.002
	2	34	3.8088		
Flexibility & Appropriacy	1	37	3.4595	-2.045	0.045
	2	34	3.6912		

(1= the control class, 2= the experimental class)

The results indicate that there is significant difference between the experimental class and the control class in the three aspects. We also did the questionnaire survey during this period. The purpose of the questionnaire survey is to investigate students' perceptions of the oral English teaching in their classes. The subjects of the questionnaire are the 71 students from the two classes.

The questionnaire consists of four parts. The first part includes students' improvement of oral proficiency and interest (Q1-Q5). The second part concerns students' active participation in the oral English class (Q6-Q9). The third part focuses on the interaction and cooperation in oral English class (Q10-Q11). The fourth part is about the teaching methods on students' improvement of learning abilities (Q12-Q13). The fifth part covers the other elements in oral English teaching, such as meaningful activities and teaching environment (Q14-Q15).

All the questions are on five-point Likert scale. The questionnaire is written in Chinese, because it is easier for students to read in their native language. Thus completion of the questionnaire will take less time, and misunderstanding of the questions can also be avoided.

CONCLUSION

The present study is of an application of intercultural communication context theory in college oral English teaching. It employs pre- and post-tests. A questionnaire is given to investigate the effects of the intercultural communication context-based teaching on students' oral English learning compared to the traditional teaching. 34 students in the experimental class and 37 students in the control class are involved in this study. The major findings are summarized as follows:

1) Intercultural communication context-based language teaching is helpful to the promotion of learners' oral English proficiency.

2) Intercultural communication context-based language teaching improves learners' interest and motivation.

3) Intercultural communication context-based language teaching model promotes students' active learning.

4) Intercultural communication context-based language teaching model helps to improve students' intercultural communicative ability.

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