

On the Spoken English Instruction from the Perspective of Intercultural Communication

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ABSTRACT

The current heightening of globalization has enhanced the development of intercultural communication, prompted the link between intercultural and international education, and led to the development of intercultural-related educational policies in countries around the world, thus highlighting the importance of intercultural communication. The purpose of the paper is to improve the quality of English teachers' instruction of intercultural communication through specific speaking methods, in tandem with the sociopragmatic failures in intercultural communication. Through this paper, we hope to cultivate English teaching talents with rich cultural knowledge and excellent communicative skills.

Keywords: *Intercultural communication, Spoken English, English instruction*

1. INTRODUCTION

Intercultural communication was first introduced by Edward Hall in 1959 [1]. Samovar, Porter & Stefani define intercultural communication as "communication between people with different cultural perceptions and symbol systems." [2] Deardorff argues that a generally acceptable definition of intercultural communicative competence among scholars is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriate communication practices [3]. It is generally accepted that intercultural communication is a way of communicating through language or non-verbal means established between individuals of different cultures [4][5][6][7]. Due to the different cultural backgrounds of the two sides of communication, cross-cultural customs, lifestyles, ways of thinking, and non-verbal communication become indispensable elements in the development of intercultural communication skills. With the deepening of internationalization, the opportunities for people to communicate across cultures have increased dramatically, and the cultivation of intercultural communication skills has gradually become an important part of language teaching and research [8][9].

A number of intercultural communication studies in recent years have made many empirical studies and theoretical discussions on English instruction; however, there are not many specific studies on activities to enhance intercultural communication competence. Many English teachers' intercultural communication

competence is still weak, as they have little exposure to foreign cultures and insufficient theoretical understanding of intercultural communication. Their inquiry into its teaching methods still needs to be deepened. Crucially, the reasons for English teachers' inability to focus on teaching intercultural communication may lie in the following two aspects. First, teacher training still lacks sufficient specialized courses in intercultural communication, thus many teachers have limited knowledge of intercultural communication. Second, teaching materials often lack culture and authenticity. The teaching content does not present the cultural communication context to a great extent.

Most recent research has described and analyzed theories regarding intercultural communication, but less explored the specific classroom practices. Accordingly, this paper proposes a few teaching methods for oral skills with the goal of cultivating intercultural communication skills to learners. The paper also discusses the socio-pragmatic errors that can easily occur in intercultural communication. It ends with further suggestions for teaching and training English teachers in intercultural communication.

2. TEACHING SPOKEN ENGLISH WITH A FOCUS ON INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

To teach intercultural communication successfully, teachers should first explain their teaching methods by introducing learners the concept and importance of intercultural communication, and thus learners can understand the primary purpose of the activity is aimed at developing their intercultural communication competence. In light of Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor and Scarino, what follows are practical methods to teach oral English with a focus on intercultural communication [10][11].

2.1. Asking questions of native speakers

Instructors can begin by asking learners to prepare questions in groups in order to ask questions of native speakers. The questions can include cultural topics that the students have prepared earlier, including the native speakers' food habits, education styles, and various life issues. At the end of the interview, the teacher's task is to lead a follow-up discussion so that the answers provided by the native speakers allow the learners to understand or reflect on them. In this way, learners also get a closer look at the accent, intonation, pauses and language strategies of native speakers, as well as the non-verbal communication devices of native speakers, such as body movement, facial expressions, eye contact, etc.

2.2. Culture related oral reports

At the higher stages of English learning, it is important to help students expand their horizons by developing their exposure to culture, strengthening their sensitivity to intercultural similarities and differences, and thus cultivating their intercultural communication skills. The materials can include: common idioms, proverbs, allusions and legends in different cultures. They also include experiences, achievements and contributions of major literary figures and artists. The comparisons between people in different cultures in terms of behavior and taboos should not be excluded. These can be done by having students read textbooks, newspapers, magazines, and even novels related to the above content. After the reading activity, instructors require the learners to give an oral report. For example, an instructor first tells the class about an American drama series, then has the students look up the relevant information after class, and in the next class encourage them to share what they have learned after class in English in front of the teacher and the class. By doing this, students not only consolidate what they have learned, but also deepen their competence to use their intercultural knowledge. Such oral presentations allow learners to reflect on issues of language and culture.

2.3. Role play

The activity is well suited to deepen students' intercultural behaviors in speech acts, such as apologies, advice, and compliments from native speakers. The instructor can draw up a story background in advance and later ask students to work in groups to perform role play. For example, ordering a meal at a restaurant is a common activity of intercultural communication. The instructor can arrange for two students to demonstrate the entire ordering process on stage and ask them to express the knowledge and details needed for the process in concrete terms. At the same time, he or she can encourage other learners to guess information about the participants, such as their social status, why the customer apologizes, and how the waiter suggests the customer order. Another method is to have two groups of students act out similar scenarios; for example, one group performs in American culture and the other in Chinese culture, so that learners can compare how the ordering process is presented in different forms in different cultures to deepen their intercultural communication competence and skills. The whole role-playing process also requires feedback and discussion between teachers and students in order to further help learners become aware of the similarities and differences of speech acts in their own culture and in others'.

2.4. Culture related competitions

Instructors can also increase students' speaking ability and intercultural knowledge by organizing culturally relevant activities in the classroom or outside the classroom, such as a speech contest on the topic of intercultural communication. Such activities not only help students extend their understanding of their own culture, but also develop intercultural communication skills. Similar activities include teaching intercultural songs in the classroom. Song instruction allows students to enjoy the music and understand the lyrics in a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere. In this manner, students not only enhance their understanding of different languages, but also gain appreciation for different musical forms. After learning the songs, students can introduce the common musical instruments, music performances, popular singers of their own culture, and compare the similarities and differences between their own culture and other cultures in singing songs.

2.5. Filling in the information

The activity requires students to work in groups to get all the information and complete the information content. First, the teacher collects stories or historical events related to a culture (e.g., American Civil War), provides and explains only part of them, and then gives each group the responsibility of describing what is going to happen subsequently with a particular piece of information (e.g.,

a picture). After each group gives its own view of what is about to happen in the picture, learners are required to organize and elaborate all the information into a complete text in speech, and the teacher then gives appropriate feedback. This promotes learners' cohesion and coherence, cultural knowledge, and cultural imagination.

2.6. Culture related interview

Learners are asked to work in pairs to interview each other in English and exchange their views on a cultural activity, say Chess. The learners convert the information from the interviews into complete text and organize it into an oral summary. The teacher does not interfere during the interview process, but only gives feedback to the students to correct them after the activity is completed (especially in terms of cultural misunderstandings). In addition to strengthening students' knowledge of intercultural communication, this activity is an effective way for students to revise and summarize their interviews and practice their speaking skills.

In addition to the pedagogical methods described above, teachers can also require students to collect information related to what they have learned in class at the end of the lesson. Through materials such as pictures, videos, online resources, learners' self-cultural background knowledge is stimulated. Learners compare their learning experiences and the cultural knowledge materials they collect after class to reflect on the authenticity of their intercultural communication. This approach encourages them to adopt a reflective and critical attitude towards the intercultural communication activities they have learned.

It is worthwhile to note that the instructions of nonverbal communication skills should not be ignored. Nonverbal communication refers to the communicative act of using nonverbal methods to express ideas and convey information. Nonverbal communication is formed when people are in a specific cultural environment for a long time, and its expressions include eye contact, standing posture, gestures, actions, expressions, physical contact, conversation volume, and distance between the two sides of communication. For example, eye contact is an important part of nonverbal communication. English speakers make eye contact longer and more frequently than Chinese speakers, who consider the absence of eye contact as disrespectful to each other.

3. SOCIALPRAGMATIC FAILURE

Language learners are often prone to commit sociopragmatic failure when communicating across cultures [12]. In the vein of Thomas (1983), sociopragmatic failure is caused by sociocultural differences. For example, this kind of failure is caused by the different sociocultural rules, social distance, taboos,

values, etc. Linguistic errors generally only affect whether the purpose of communication is achieved; however, sociopragmatic failure not only leads to communication failure, but also tends to hurt others in interpersonal communication. Sociopragmatic failures include at least the following two aspects:

3.1. Influence of thinking differences

Take Chinese and Westerners for example. They have different ways of thinking. Chinese native speakers tend to think in a roundabout way, while Westerners tend to think in a linear way. If Chinese students do not understand the characteristics of Westerners' thinking and apply the rules of Chinese communication or discourse to English expressions in intercultural communication, it will often lead to communication failure. For example, Chinese people have a strong ambiguity in their thinking, while precision is a characteristic of the recent Western way of thinking. Chinese people do not have a precise understanding of the nature of things, and focus on intuition and perception, describing things with little precision and clarity. Western modern science focuses on the classification of things, quantitative analysis and precise calculation, which led to the establishment and development of mathematics, astronomy, biology, chemistry, physics and other disciplines.

3.2. Influence of cultural differences

In cross-cultural communication, due to the cultural differences, the language habits and discourse styles are far varied, and people more often than not understand each other's culture according to their own way, which gives rise to misunderstanding. For instance, Western culture is greatly influenced by the concept of independence, freedom and equality. Chinese culture is more influenced by Confucianism, which emphasizes the obligations between monarchs and subjects, parents and children, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, and friends and friends. Thus, Chinese culture has a stronger class concept (e.g., 'class' refers to the system of ordering a society in which people are divided into sets based on perceived family, social or economic status) and strict requirements in terms of titles. In Western societies, it is preferred to call people by their first names regardless of their status, position, seniority and motivation, while in Chinese societies, children often have fixed terms or ways of addressing their parents, relatives and even superiors.

The following are two specific suggestions on how to avoid sociopragmatic errors: First, Intercultural communication instruction should be associated with practical intercultural communication and creating an intercultural atmosphere. Language expressions have different communicative effects depending on the

context, and for someone who lacks knowledge of pragmatics, it is easy for them to transfer the corresponding words and grammatical structures from their native language to the foreign language, resulting in sociopragmatic errors. Second, instructors should elucidate idioms and taboos that are highly culturally related. Introducing idioms and taboos in the context of intercultural communication and English instruction is highly praised. English idioms are closely related to contextual factors, but existing dictionaries and textbooks often lack the necessary commentary to them, leading to misunderstandings or misuse in cross-cultural communication. Every culture has its own taboos. Talking about privacy is often a taboo for Westerners, but it is not uncommon for Chinese people to ask people their age and salary. Instructors should take more opportunities to account for the taboos of different cultures to reduce learners' sociopragmatic errors.

Specifically, English instructors can develop learners' awareness of intercultural communication in two ways. One is to have a profound understanding of students' own culture. On the basis of understanding their own culture and respecting the culture of other countries can they improve their own intercultural awareness and thus overcome the sociopragmatic errors. Second, instructors should improve students' sensitivity to cultural differences. For example, they can infiltrate cultural contents in the process of instruction, have students feel different cultures through multimedia materials, and create real contexts for them to experience cultural differences as much as possible.

4. CONCLUSION

To install intercultural communication awareness and literacy to learners, English teachers are welcome to employ the teaching methods discussed above when teaching oral and verbal English, and efficiently achieve the integration of English instruction and intercultural communication.

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