



# A Study on College English Teaching Strategies Based on Contextual Adaptation Theory

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**Abstract.** According to Verschueren's adaptation theory, language is characterized by variability, negotiability and adaptability, and the process of language use is the process of people's continuous adaptation to language. The classroom teaching process of college English is also a communicative process. Therefore, the classroom teaching of college English needs some adaptation from both parties in the teaching process. Contextual adaptation theory reveals the great influence of psychological world, social and cultural world and physical world on language selection in communicative situations. Complying with the law, teachers should adopt the strategies of emotional stimulation, situation building and space-time expansion to actively create specific and rich communicative situations in language learning, effectively stimulate students' interest in language learning, and finally achieve good teaching results.

**Keywords:** Context · Contextual adaptation · College English teaching · Strategies

## 1 Introduction

The theory of linguistic adaptation was first proposed in 1987 by Jef. Verschueren, secretary-general of the International Pragmatics Association. This theory has been fully elaborated in his *Understanding Pragmatics* [1]. The theory of linguistic adaptation has a firm philosophical foundation and a profound psychological foundation. It not only benefits from the theory of evolution by Darwin, but also absorbs the stimulation-response theory from Piaget's cognitive psychology. Verschueren pointed out that the process of using language is a process of making choices. Language selection is based on three characteristics of language use, namely, variability, negotiability and adaptability. Variability refers to the fact that language has a series of alternative possibilities. It is reflected

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in the diachronic and synchronic aspects of language and has dynamic characteristics. Negotiability refers to the fact that language selection is highly flexible. In other words, the selection of language is not mechanically in strict accordance with the rules, but highly flexible with appropriateness. Adaptability means that language users can make flexible choices from different language items available to meet the needs of communication as much as possible. Variability makes language choice possible and determines that choice must be limited to a certain range; Negotiation eliminates the mechanical expression of language and makes language use flexible. Adaptability enables people to reach ideal communicative goals through negotiation and selection. According to the adaptation theory, linguistic adaptation includes four aspects: the first is contextual correlates of adaptability, which refers to a variety of contextual factors to be considered in language choice; the second is structural objects of adaptability, which refers to adaptability involving different language levels and principles for structure; the third is dynamics of adaptability, which refers to the constantly changing adaptation in the process of language selection and negotiation; the fourth is the salience of adaptation, which refers to communicator's awareness of language choice. The four aspects of linguistic adaptation are interdependent and mutually restrictive.

Verschueren's adaptation theory provides a new approach for foreign language teaching and second language acquisition. Foreign language teaching and language acquisition is a process of language selection as well as adaptation. Verschueren believes that the use of language is a process of constant language selection, no matter whether the choice is conscious or unconscious, whether it is for internal or external reasons. College English teachers must have the consciousness of adaptation and create an environment for language adaptation in class, and the teaching content should also adapt to the real life of students. College English teaching is actually a process of language communication between teachers and students. Only by constantly adapting to each other's needs and their own needs, can the classroom teaching activities be carried out smoothly.

## 2 Context and Contextual Adaptation

Context is the foundation of language and plays a very important role in language application. Context can be divided into two categories, namely linguistic context and communicative context. Linguistic context includes linguistic channel and linguistic context. Linguistic channel includes natural channel and artificial channel. The former refers to the physiological speaking sound accompanied by gestures and other non-verbal means, while the latter refers to the various language symbols and forms created by human beings, as well as the cohesion and coherence of language context. Communicative context includes communicators, physical world (such as time, space, appearance, body language, etc.), social and cultural world (various social and cultural factors, interpersonal relations), and psychological world (such as cognitive and emotional factors, etc.) [2]. In short, context can be understood as all the factors surrounding the spoken language that conform to each other or all the factors that affect discourse processing. The use of language is not only a matter of choice and composition, but also a matter of adaptation to the specific context. Verschueren believes that people's different choices of language will form different dynamic contexts. Context is the basis of adaptation.

Without context, there would be no adaptation, and without adaptation, there would be no context at a higher level. It is mainly reflected in the process of speaker's choice of language, which is also a dynamic process of adaptation to oneself and the listener's psychological world.

### **3 The Theoretical Foundation of College English Teaching: Contextual Adaptation**

With the development of teaching reform, college English teaching in China has gradually changed from the idea of "using English as a tool to obtain professional information" to "students should be trained to have strong reading ability, good listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating ability, so that they can communicate in English". In 2003, the Ministry of Education promulgated "college English curriculum requirements (trial)", and it pointed that teachers should cultivate students' comprehensive application ability in English, especially listening and speaking skills, to make them able to communicate effectively both in oral English and written English in their future work and social activities, at the same time improve their ability of autonomous learning and improve the comprehensive cultural literacy". As a teaching goal in the new era, it was confirmed again in the "Curriculum Requirements" formally issued in 2007. Its core purpose is communicative ability, autonomous learning ability and comprehensive cultural accomplishment. The objectives for college English teaching in the new era realized the transformation of teaching from the "instrumental" goal to the "applied ability" and "cultural accomplishment" goal, which not only accords with the development of the times, but also meets China's requirements for high-level foreign language talents in the new century.

College English teaching has two major characteristics. The first is the particularity of college students' psychological characteristics, which is determined by the socialization process of becoming the adult. As adults, college students' social interaction has far exceeded the requirements of primary and secondary school students, and they also have a higher level of desire for their non-cognitive development. The second is the particularity of second language acquisition, which requires the internalization of second language knowledge and the simulation of communicative situations to feel and experience language culture and behavioral rules.

Contextual adaptation requires the communicators to activate the physical world composed of referential relations of time and space, the social world composed of "principles and norms regulated by social occasions and social environments for communicators' speech acts" in specific context, and the psychological world composed of personality, emotion, desire, intention and other cognitive and emotional aspects of the communicators[3]. At the same time, it is necessary to choose various language means according to context factors. It can be seen that the contents of communicative context and linguistic context can meet and guide the actual needs of college English teaching in China.

## **4 Strategies for the Application of Contextual Adaptation Theory in College English Teaching**

As an organic combination of advanced cognitive activities and non-cognitive activities, college English teaching has a much better foundation for context adaptation than other non-language teaching and English teaching in the stage of basic education.

### **4.1 The Adaptation to Psychological World Under the Strategy of Emotional Stimulation**

In order to achieve good results of English teaching, students should mobilize all the rational and non-rational factors, such as knowledge and emotion. However, the high difficulty of English learning requires that the participation of students' emotional factors and active factors in learning must form an effective and normal operation mechanism. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to consciously construct and fully use emotional stimulation strategies to stimulate the positive effects of students' emotions on language use in specific contexts, which is in line with the law that language conforms to the characteristics of the mental world revealed by contextual adaptation theory. The psychological world adaptation refers to the adaptation of language to the mental factors of the speaker and hearer during communication. These psychological factors include personality, emotion, concept, desire, and motivation and so on. In the process of English learning, students' psychological factors have both positive and negative aspects, which require teachers to encourage students to overcome negative psychological factors and exert positive mental power through the application of emotional stimulation strategies, so as to achieve good learning results.

Firstly, language teaching contents should be selected according to the personality characteristics and learning habits of different students. Some students are cheerful, generous, and independent and have a strong sense of autonomy. They are willing to express themselves and prefer a challenging learning style. They like to complete difficult learning tasks alone. Therefore, in the face of such students, the teacher can choose a difficult language learning program for training, whether it is a memory task, the use of difficult vocabularies, or highly difficult speaking and listening task. Teachers can lead them into such scenarios, letting them participate in language training actively and independently. For some introverted students, who are fragile to frustrations with poor self-esteem, teachers should let them choose language exercises with simple content and form, such as simple conversational project, role play. In this way, students can gain learning confidence, motivation, pleasure and achievements, and become more interested in the future study.

Secondly, according to the differences in students' concept, motivation, knowledge, interest, etc. teachers can choose and create different language situations and provide differentiated language training content to activate the language knowledge that students are interested in and language expressions. The process of language use is a process in which users' inner ideology, values and cultural interests are deeply involved. Their ideological cognition and cultural taste often screen the range, content and way of language expression consciously or unconsciously, and give them the power or resistance to choose. Therefore, in college English teaching, teachers should pay full attention to the

influence of students' thoughts, motivations and other factors on promoting their learning results, and choose targeted and differentiated language content to ensure students' freedom, consciousness and enthusiasm in language choice in the learning process.

In addition, the use of learning concepts and learning habits is also one of the key elements of emotional stimulation strategy. Some students are accustomed to an orderly and rigorous learning mode, while others prefer an open, free and relaxed learning mode. Therefore, in the application of teaching strategies, teachers should adopt different language training contents and methods according to the differences of students' learning habits and psychological needs. For those students who like rigorous learning mode, teachers can often conduct inspection, retrospective questioning and training, so as to mobilize their learning enthusiasm and improve their participation. Inspection training should focus on language points that students tend to forget or make mistakes. For those students who prefer the free and divergent learning mode, teachers can use deductive questioning and conversation to enable students to choose and train freely in a divergent and broad background.

#### **4.2 The Adaptation to Social and Cultural World Under the Strategy of Situation Building**

According to contextual adaptation theory, the use and selection of language has obvious characteristics of adaptation to social world. Social structure and social relations not only affect the choice of deictic language, but also affect language style and content. The social world constraints of language include social scenes and public institutions, which define the social identity, status, rights and other social attributes of the communicative parties, and make language users subject to interpersonal relationships such as subordination and authority, power and affinity. In the teaching process, teachers need to take language projects with social scenes and institutional adaptation as important content of teaching and training. Moreover, in order to enhance the authenticity of language learning scenes, the construction and simulation of actual language situations should be strengthened to achieve good learning effects. Teachers should try to create an environment that is not only relevant to students' real life, but also close to native English language, providing external conditions for students' English language acquisition.

In college English teaching, there are various forms of constructing natural language environment, including role-play, communicative scene simulation, story plot construction and so on. The purpose of constructing language situation is to provide an environment relatively close to reality for language use and choice. In this environment, students can accurately understand and use language knowledge and language communication norms in the face of specific social relations and institutional norms, so as to improve the efficiency of language learning. Verschueren's contextual adaptation theory emphasizes the consistency of language choice with communicative environment, communicative object and communicative goal".

Teachers should try their best to create the foreign language teaching situation, highlight the situational teaching, stimulate students' interest in speaking and cultivate their language sense. Organizing various extra-curricular activities can stimulate students' interest in language learning and make students' English communicative ability develop continuously. For instance, let students have more contact with natural language, such as

watching original English movies and listening to English radio programs such as VOA and BBC; participate in English corner and other activities; learn to sing English songs and hold English parties; hold an English speech contest. In order to enhance students' understanding and application of polite language in different situations, teachers can set up specific role-playing situations [4]. For example, in class teaching, they can set up a reception scene and dining scene where Chinese students go to the airport to meet foreign guests.

### **4.3 The Adaptation to Physical World Under the Strategy of Space-Time Expansion**

Space and time are important elements of the material world, and also the basic conditions for the formation of human thinking structure and mode of thinking. Therefore, the adaptation theory expounds the adaptability of language choice to the space-time world in discourse communication. Space and time in the physical world affect the choice and use of temporal indicators, spatial indicators and tenses. In English language, a certain time indicator or a spatial indicator is often associated with a specific event, and there are always different time indicators and spatial indicators corresponding to different events and their progressing stages. In college English teaching, many students are prone to confusion and misuse when using time and space indicators, and it is difficult to express and use time and space indicators accurately in oral expressions and writing. Therefore, teachers should construct language situations and environments related to different time and space, so that students can improve their ability to use time indicators, space indicators and tenses under the background of spatio-temporal migration and spatio-temporal expansion. In addition to time expansion, teachers can also carry out the spatial expansion of learning situation in a variety of ways. Through the spatial expansion of language environment, students' ability to grasp the rules of using spatial deixis will be well exercised. The spatial extension training is based on the spatial adaptation law of language. The specific physical space needs the corresponding language content and form to match it. Therefore, teachers need to create a more diversified and three-dimensional space environment in the limited physical space of the classroom to provide favorable physical conditions for students' language learning.

With the rapid development of modern educational technology, multimedia teaching platform, network teaching platform and other modern teaching means have formed the indispensable technical basis of college English teaching. The English classroom has changed from planarization, simplification and abstraction to three-dimensional, diversified and visualization via multimedia technology and network platform [5]. In the teaching process, English language unfolds in a more concrete and situational physical space through the use of video, picture, PowerPoint presentation, and online video. The physical characteristics of language events such as time and space can be accurately presented by rich and intuitive multimedia and network resources, which plays an important role in promoting students to fully and meticulously observe and apply the spatial adaptation rules in language acquisition.

In the use of language, different contexts do not exist in isolation, but often interlace to influence the selection of language. College English teaching is a bilingual process in

essence. The language of the teacher and the context of language use are mutually adaptable. Teacher's speech is of great significance to college English teaching. At present, it is widely advocated that English teaching environment can create a good atmosphere and achieve the ideal English teaching effect. However, due to various reasons, such as students' uneven English level, the specificity of courses, teachers' ability to use foreign languages, code-switching at appropriate time is also a teaching strategy adopted by teachers to adapt to the special context. It can enrich the verbal skills of teachers and students, enhance the communicative effect in class, activate the learning atmosphere, improve the efficiency of class, and deepen students' understanding of some knowledge points [6]. For example, English teachers explain in English in class and communicate with students in Chinese after class. The purpose is to close the relationship between themselves and students, achieve the purpose of maintaining a good relationship between teachers and students, and then improve students' enthusiasm for learning. But at the same time, attention should be paid to the negative transfer of mother tongue in English learning.

## 5 Conclusion

To sum up, contextual adaptation theory is very suitable for college English teaching. How to integrate contextual adaptation theory into college English teaching is an important aspect that college English teachers need to further study. Contextual adaptation theory highlights the dependence and correspondence between language choice and the psychological world, social and cultural world and physical world of language communication because language use is always placed in a complex context and related to that context in a variety of ways. The implications to college English teaching lies in the fact that teachers can make full use of the adaptability of communicative context to choose language content and form. Teachers can construct and develop a series of vivid and realistic communicative contexts with the strategies of emotional stimulation, situation building and space-time expansion. In this way, students can take initiative to understand and use relevant language under the stimulation of specific context, and finally obtain good learning effect.

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