

Encouraging Discourses and English Language Teaching in University Classroom Interaction

Wang Yiqiao

Harbin Normal University, Heilongjiang, Harbin 150025

Abstract—The traditional teaching mode is a teacher-centered pattern, in which teachers give lectures and students take notes without much expression and communication in classroom interactions. However, various classroom experiments have proved that the student-centered teaching pattern has so many advantages. It helps teachers design effective instruction for every member in the classroom, no matter what his or her diverse learning needs are. By nature, student-centered teaching is adaptable in meeting the needs of every student. It also promotes more communication in the classroom, by which students get improved in actively producing meaningful conversations and they take a more direct route to fluency than they would take.

Keywords- *encouraging discourses, teaching, learning, teachers, students, classroom, interaction*

I. INTRODUCTION

Encouraging discourses frequently happen in university classrooms. In order to create an effective learning environment, encouraging performers should know well the encouragement receivers and motivate them in a proper way. An encouragement has to be sincere, context-based and positively intended for a better performance in the future. It is both encouraging and emotive. To put it in a simple way, encouraging discourses are those verbal expressions which offer courage, confidence, or hope from speakers to listeners.

Encouragement has many precious characteristics. It offers specific feedback rather than general comments. It is teacher-initiated and private. Privacy increases the potential for an honest exchange of ideas and an opportunity for a student to talk about his or her work. Encouragement focuses on improvement and efforts rather than evaluation of a finished product. In addition, encouragement uses sincere, direct comments delivered with a natural voice. It helps students develop an appreciation of their behaviors and achievements. Encouragement can also avoid competition or comparisons with others. Encouraging discourses can bring a kind of pleasant feeling to our mind. They can sweep away all the negative feelings like discomfort and melancholy which one time of failure or fault may take effect on us. For example, a student will usually feel depressed when he fails an exam or a contest. At this moment, one of his teachers' encouraging words, like "You did your best. Keep going on", will definitely give him spiritual support and make him feel greatly encouraged.

With the development of education, the responsibilities of teachers should not be limited in teaching new knowledge and answering questions from students. Usually in a classroom a teacher has many roles to play. He can be an explainer, an involver or an enabler. He should have a good knowledge of his class and the course he teaches. He has a clear mind to know how to encourage different types of students in class—generally classified as excellent, average and poorly-performing ones. Usually these three types can also be subdivided into smaller ones. For example, poorly-performing students can be subdivided as self-abandoned students, "dilemma" students and self-righteous ones and so on, which will be dealt with in detail later in this thesis. Therefore teachers should teach them and encourage them according to their different performance. The result will be that poorly-performing students become excellent and excellent students improve for perfection.

II. SPEECH ACT THEORY

Pragmatics can be defined as the study of how speakers use the sentences of a language to affect successful communication. Speech act theory is an important one in pragmatics. It is proposed by J. Austin and J. Searle (1969). Basically they believe that language is not only used to inform or to describe things, it is often used to "do things", to perform acts. Typical utterances are: "I hereby name this Red Flag", "I promise to be here at nine o'clock", "I apologize", etc. These are called performative sentences and the verbs used as performative verbs. Speech act theory is the theory where the effect of an utterance is analyzed in relationship to the speaker and listener's behavior.

The theory of speech acts aims to do justice to the fact that even though words, phrases, and sentences encode information, people do more things with words than convey information and that when people do convey information, they often convey more than their words encode. Although the focus of speech act theory has been on utterances, especially those made in conversational and other face-to-face situations, the phrase "speech act" should be taken as a generic term for any sort of language use, oral or otherwise.

Speech acts, whatever the medium of their performance, fall under the broad category of intentional action, with which they share certain general features. An especially pertinent feature is that when one acts intentionally, one generally has a set of nested intentions. For instance, having arrived home without one's keys, one might push a button with the intention not just of pushing the button but of ringing a bell, arousing one's spouse and, ultimately, getting

into one's house. The single bodily movement involved in pushing the button comprises a multiplicity of actions, each corresponding to a different one of the nested intentions. Similarly, speech acts are not just acts of producing certain sounds.

Austin identifies three distinct levels of action beyond the act of utterance itself. He distinguishes the act of saying something, what one does in saying it, and what one does by saying it, and dubs these the "locutionary", the "illocutionary" and the "perlocutionary" act, respectively.

A. *Locutionary act*

A locutionary act is the simple speech act of generating sounds that are linked together by grammatical conventions so as to say something meaningful. It is the meaning of the statement itself. For example, if one says "step back", he just tells someone to step back, "It is raining" performs the locutionary act of saying that it is raining.

B. *Illocutionary act*

An illocutionary act is a complete speech act, made in a typical utterance, that consists of the delivery of the propositional content of the utterance (including references and a predicate), and a particular illocutionary force, whereby the speaker asserts suggests, demands, promises, or vows. It is the contextual function of the act. For example, when you tell one to step back, you are warning him of a falling object.

C. *Perlocutionary act*

A perlocutionary act is any speech act that amounts to persuading, convincing, scaring, enlightening, inspiring, or otherwise getting someone to do or realize something. When examining perlocutionary acts, the effect in the hearer or reader is emphasized. Unlike illocutionary acts, which stress some linguistic performance, a perlocutionary act's effect is in some sense external to the performance. It may be thought of, in a sense, as the effect of the locutionary act. For example, when one speaker alerts a listener to the falling object, he is in the sense that the listener became knowledgeable of the impending danger.

III. ABOUT CONTEXT

Context is essential to the pragmatic study of language. It is generally considered as constituted by the knowledge shared by the speaker and the hearer. The shared knowledge is of two types: the knowledge of the language they use, and the knowledge about the world, including the general knowledge about the world and the specific knowledge about the situation in which linguistic communication is taking place.

Context is virtually important not only in assigning the proper values to reference and implicature, but also in dealing with other pragmatic issues. Context is more than just reference. Context is action. Context is about understanding what things are for, it is also what gives our utterances their true pragmatic meaning and allows them to be counted as true pragmatic acts. For example, when the sentence "It's a long time since we visited your mother" was

uttered at the coffee table after dinner in a married couple's living room, it has a totally different pragmatic meaning than the same sentence, which was uttered by a husband to his wife while they are standing in front of the hippopotamus enclosure at the local zoo. It is this latter context that allows an innocent remark to be transmogrified into a pragmatic act of "mother-in-law bashing".

IV. WHAT ARE ENCOURAGING DISCOURSES?

A. *Definition of encouraging discourses*

In order to create an effective learning environment, it is necessary to know the language of encouragement. It refers to a nonjudgmental empathy and caring about how a particular one feels, choosing the words or phrases that he or she finds encouraging. To put it in a simple way, encouraging discourses are those verbal expressions which give courage, confidence, or hope from speakers to listeners. If students look more discouraged after what we have said, then try saying something else. When they smile and their eyes brighten up, we know we are reaching them. Likewise, we will smile and our own eyes will also brighten up, for our encouraging words take effect on them and inspire them.

B. *Social, cultural and psychological backgrounds of encouraging discourses*

1) *Social needs for encouraging discourses*

With the development of world economy and globalization, each society needs large numbers of talented people who can contribute to their career. As we all know, modern Chinese schools and universities have trained countless excellent students for china and for the remaining world. An undisputed fact is that many bright Chinese students can always get ranked on some international subject competitions. These students can choose where they would like to go to pursue their career after graduation. However, another phenomenon has risen up. Many companies and scientific research units have found that most outstanding students could not behave the same excellence as they did in school. They seem to lack some kind of creative and critical thinking and usually do not achieve too much in their work.

Why is that phenomenon so obvious in China? In my opinion, educational system should take the blame for it. We are good at training those who can get high scores in subject examinations, while not good at fostering those who will show creative capability or those who can be mature enough to handle various problems on themselves. These recent years there have happened an increasing number of cases of students' committing suicide in Chinese middle schools and universities. Several of them were even postgraduates and doctor students. The common reason they did it is that they could not deal with psychological pressure about study and life. They seemed not to have open mind towards the world around them. The fact is, however, the standard of evaluating whether or not a kind of educational system is successful is not that it can train large numbers of high-scored students, but that it can provide successive talents for the sustainable development of a society.

On the other hand, modern societies tend to have the characteristic of diversity. We need to be personalized on the basis of socialization to adapt to the increasing development of society. Schools should ponder over how to turn out students with the characteristics of personalization and socialization. The pity is that here in China many students can seldom get chances to be encouraged to express their own viewpoints or show their abilities in some other fields, but are often offered the questions which will reveal their shortcomings. This mode will do harm to the development of students and the society. Teachers take the great responsibility to reverse the above disadvantageous situations. They should more often encourage students to take an open mind with creative and critical thinking. They should give priority to students not textbooks. They should take time to listen to students and respect their ideas. Teachers need patience in communication with those poorly-performing students and try to inspire them, making them believe that society needs every one of them. Chinese teachers should especially think more how to teach skillfully and technically.

2) *Cultural needs for encouraging discourses*

The advent of global economy means that we are no longer constrained by state boundaries but have become all part of an interdependent international network. We need to communicate effectively with different people from different countries in different languages. Cross-cultural communication is a necessity, while the key to effective cross-cultural communication is awareness. It is now recognized that linguistic and cultural knowledge are two of the most vital areas of knowledge that organizations must come to acquire if they are to integrate, progress and succeed in the marketplace. Dealing with materials and people from foreign countries is a daily occurrence for them. Obviously, encouraging discourses are like catalysts during the period of communication. They can help people from different cultural backgrounds chat or discuss smoothly.

In my view, on the other hand, encouraging discourses can have the effect of protecting cultural heritages of different countries. For example, when foreigners show their appreciation to our Beijing Opera or the terra-cotta soldiers and horses in Xi'an, we will undoubtedly feel proud to have that cultural heritages and will definitely try all ways to protect them and make them spread down from generation to generation.

3) *Psychological needs for encouraging discourses*

With the implementation of reform and opening-up, many Chinese now plunge into the learning of English, from government officials to the ordinary. As for Chinese students, they begin to learn English at the first grade of elementary school. However, the fact is that most Chinese schools are good at teaching those who will be capable of reading and writing but have little ability for listening and especially speaking. One phenomenon which is very common here is that many graduates who have passed the college English tests band-4 and band-6 actually can not express their ideas in fluent English.

The reason for that boils down to their psychological obstacles in learning English. Their self-consciousness can be a mighty obstacle to learning English. They seldom open their mouths for being afraid to make mistakes. We know that a language is acquired by continuous practice. If we study by silent reading, we draw only upon our visual memory. But if we study out loud, we double our efficiency by adding auditory memory and we make our mouth work, helping with pronunciation and speech. Actually we can get inspiration from one phenomenon that small children readily acquire languages for they are not afraid of making mistakes.

Therefore, school teachers take the leading role to encourage students to speak out English loud. They should devise various ways to help students overcome their psychological obstacles and dare to open mouth. Teachers should take students as the center, always listening to them patiently, encouraging them to express their own ideas and judging them positively. Encouraging discourses are just like lubricants which are very useful not only for establishing a healthy teacher-student relationship, but also for enlightening students to acquire the essence of a language.

V. MICROCOSMIC AND MACROSCOPIC EFFECTS OF ENCOURAGING DISCOURSES

Encouragement has many precious characteristics. It offers specific feedback rather than general comments. For example, instead of saying "Terrific job", teachers can comment on specific behaviors that they wish to acknowledge. It is teacher-initiated and private. Privacy increases the potential for an honest exchange of ideas and an opportunity for a student to talk about his or her work. Encouragement focuses on improvement and efforts rather than evaluation of a finished product. In addition, encouragement uses sincere, direct comments delivered with a natural voice. It helps students develop an appreciation of their behaviors and achievements. Encouragement can also avoid causing competition or comparison with others.

From the microcosmic aspect, encouraging discourses can bring a kind of pleasant feeling and inspire confidence or hope within humans. They can sweep away all the discomforts and melancholy feelings which even a little setback may bring on them. As Sidney Madwed, a great philosopher, once said, "The finest gift you can give anyone is encouragement. Yet, almost no one gets the encouragement they need to grow to their full potential. If everyone received the encouragement they need to grow, the genius in most everyone would blossom and the world would produce abundance beyond the wildest dreams. We would have more than one Einstein, Edison, Schweitzer, Mother Theresa, Dr. Salk and other great minds in a century"(1991). Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, a German poet, novelist, playwright, and natural philosopher, also said, "Correction does much, but encouragement does more. Encouragement after censure is as the sun after a shower" (Teacher Quotes, 2004).

From the macroscopic perspective, encouraging discourses have the long-term and decisive influence and significance on the whole development of education. Education comprises infrastructures, principal participants,

useful policies, etc. With the advance of the main body of educational participants--students and teachers, the whole educational circle will definitely get developed healthily, while the key roles of encouraging discourses should not be overlooked, which played on students as well as on teachers.

Therefore, we can safely make a conclusion that those who are good at encouraging others are those who are smart and have a clear knowledge of others' psychology. Another celebrity, Elizabeth Harrison, the third of three children of the former U.S. president Benjamin Harrison, once said, "Those who are lifting the world upward and onward are those who encourage more than criticize"(The Complete Book of Presidents, 2001, p. 332). Encouragement is such a fabulous weapon for our spirit when we are faced with all kinds of difficulties that we have no reason to refuse its great strength when the time is coming.

VI. THE PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE ENCOURAGING DISCOURSES

A. *The constitution of an encouraging discourse*

With the obvious advantages of encouraging discourse in class, teachers are encouraged to use them time and again. Among the three parts of a speech act, the illocutionary act is intentionally applied more often than the other two acts by teachers when encouraging others. When a teacher utters some encouraging discourses like "Good job" or "It looks like you put a lot of work into this", his intention is to judge positively what a student has done and give him the confidence to keep it up to make greater progress, rather than just uttering some sounds. The illocutionary force of these acts, the encouraging words themselves—locutionary acts, and students' responses towards those encouraging discourses—perlocutionary acts, together constitute a complete communication activity.

B. *Contexts under which encouraging discourses happen*

The intention of the above encouraging discourses is to affirm the efforts the specific students have made and encourage them to keep going on. Whether or not an encouraging sentence from a teacher can possess definite force or can exert the speakers' intentions, it needs both sides

of participants' understanding their common intercommunicative environment--context, while this context is controlled by locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts together.

Two kinds of context are recognized: the situational context and the linguistic context. Teachers utter different encouraging discourses according to different needed contexts and situations. Students should have different understandings towards what teachers have said. For example, when a teacher says "You really outdid today", he may be praising an average or a low-ability student who had better performance in the answering-question section and hoped this student would keep going; or he may be comforting one of his students who failed the today's speech contest. It means, "Although you failed, you performed better than what you had done previously. You're actually a winner."

Teaching practices show that one of the biggest obstacles of foreign language learners is how to understand and express the illocutionary meaning of speakers. It requires that students should try to exactly grasp the real intention of speakers under various contexts, so that they together can help form a benign teaching-learning situation.

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