

## Exploration on Strategies in Cultivating the Awareness of Tolerance for Ambiguity of Undergraduates in China

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**Abstract**—Ambiguity is a pervasive feature of language, which reflects the special relationship between structure and meaning. In verbal communication, unintentional ambiguity would lead to the failure of communication and should be disambiguated. But if speakers are encountered with intentional ambiguity which is positive, the best way is to cultivate the awareness of tolerance for ambiguity. In order to enhance undergraduates' communicative competence, teachers should apply different strategies to develop their awareness of tolerance for ambiguity.

**Keywords**- awareness of tolerance for ambiguity; verbal communication; foreign language teaching

### I. INTRODUCTION

Language competence is an important component of communicative competence. Ambiguity is an essential attribute of language, which indicates the special relationship between structure and meaning. Since various structures (phonetic, lexical, and grammatical structures) exist in language, there are inevitably different types of ambiguity in it, which push linguists to analyze the correspondence between form and content in depth. With the development of pragmatic function in foreign language teaching, the exploration on ambiguous language has become far more common. The unintentional ambiguity in language will hamper the effectiveness of verbal communication and make the speakers become confused. Whereas the intentional ambiguity is considered to be positive and the awareness of tolerance for intentional ambiguity would help speakers avoid pragmatic failure and achieve communicative success.

### II. THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF TOLERANCE OF AMBIGUITY

Ambiguity is a pervasive feature of language, which arouses various researches of the linguists from different perspectives, such as transformational generative grammar, case grammar and functional grammar. These researches focus on the understanding and explanation of ambiguity in language, and promote the development of the modern schools of linguistics. As the cognitive linguistics develops and computational linguistics establishes, linguists begin to shift their research into the generative mechanism of

ambiguity and its connection with unambiguous language. Based on the definition and classification of ambiguous language, linguists in China regard ambiguity as an error and strive to avoid and eliminate it in communication. While the study of tolerance for ambiguity is far less than the study of the ambiguous language, let alone the analysis of the tolerant behavior. In verbal communication, if the speakers are encountered with intentional ambiguity which is positive, the best way is to cultivate the awareness of tolerance for ambiguity in order to maintain a smooth communication.

The tolerance for ambiguity was first proposed by American psychologist Frenkel-Brunswik in 1949. He pointed out that intolerance refers to “a tendency to resort to black-and-white solutions, to arrive at premature closure, often at the neglect of reality”. (1949: 108) McLain (1993: 184) indicated that intolerance suggests “rejection” whereas tolerance suggests “begrudging acceptance”, and could “extend along a continuum from rejection to attraction”. During communication, when encountered with a sequence of unfamiliar, complex or incompatible information, speakers would be tolerant for the ambiguous stimulus or context. Ely (1989:437) adds that tolerance for ambiguity is a feature closely related to speakers' personality or cognitive style. Along with the continuous studies of tolerance for ambiguity, numerous attempts have been made to explore the relationship between tolerance for ambiguity and language acquisition. Jonassen & Grabowski (1993: 15) stated that when engaged in uncertain or complicated circumstances, learners with this kind of tolerance would exhibit better learning ability than those without tolerance, who are inclined to avoid or abandon learning tasks. Tolerance for ambiguity has played an increasingly significant role in both language acquisition and verbal communication. Based on students' different cognitive styles and learning strategies, cultivating moderate awareness of tolerance for ambiguity would help them understand and handle communication barriers that aroused by cultural diversity, and at the same time, improve their communicative competence.

### III. APPLICATION OF TOLERANCE FOR AMBIGUITY IN VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Ambiguity in verbal communication can be divided into linguistic ambiguity and nonlinguistic ambiguity, meanwhile, the former can be further categorized into phonological ambiguity, lexical ambiguity and grammatical ambiguity. Phonological ambiguity is mainly caused by homonymy,

variation of stress and tone, and liaison, etc. Lexical ambiguity is mostly connected with polysemy and homophones, which are the elementary features of a language's economy and efficiency. Grammatical ambiguity contains basically syntactic ambiguity and structural ambiguity. Nonlinguistic ambiguity only appears in a special context, because context is a major factor that would arouse the appearance of ambiguity. The same expression could imply different meanings under different contexts. Sometimes, cultural difference would influence verbal communication. The same word may derive different associative meanings in different cultures. Besides, the particular slang, satires, irony, oxymoron, metaphors and exaggerations could also bring about misunderstanding in communication.

Applied linguistics regard attitude, motivation and character as the decisive factors in language learning. Many linguists hold the view that learners who possess the positive attitude towards target language and its speakers would achieve success easily in the learning of this target language. Therefore, the inclusive attitude that language learners take towards their native language and other languages and variants would help them arrive at the communicative purposes. Ambiguity also requires us to have a general understanding of a language, its variants and the culture it represents. Speakers should evaluate a culture in its own cultural context and respect it for its reasonability and value. Only when the speakers admits the coexistence of cultures and choose the appropriate communicative strategies, can they complete the communication smoothly.

Based on the American philosopher Grice (1975: 45), both the speaker and the hearer need to follow the Cooperative Principle in order to keep the conversation going on smoothly, that is speakers should say things which are true, relevant, informative enough, and in a clear manner. When ambiguity occurs, speakers with the tolerance for ambiguity would react properly according to the Cooperative Principle. For example:

*"Is social equality permitted here, Boy?" shouted the white lady to a black man showing people to their seats. "This is social equality."*

*"No, madam," said the black man, "it is Beethoven's music."*

In this conversation, the black man observed the Cooperative Principle. He resorted to the tolerant attitude and fought back in a proper way in order to avoid the conflict with the white lady.

Under certain circumstance, speakers would respond to the ambiguous language with silence so as to be polite or achieve the goal of self-protecting. Silence can be seen as a demonstration of tolerance for ambiguity in verbal communication, because it offers feedback during the conversation, which provides enough time for both speakers to reflect on the clarity of the information and its significance. The speakers would adjust their emotions in time and ensure the ongoing of the interaction.

#### IV. CULTIVATION OF AWARENESS OF TOLERANCE FOR AMBIGUITY IN VERBAL COMMUNICATION

The awareness of tolerance for ambiguity has been widely used in Second Language Learning, Foreign Language Teaching, as well as verbal communication. The causes of tolerance for ambiguity are various, including unfamiliar with new words and complex sentences, lack of necessary background knowledge and misunderstanding in communication. Cultivating the awareness of tolerance for ambiguity in a proper way would help speakers comprehend and deal with barriers in communication, at the same time, would offer language learners better opportunities to enhance their communicative competence and learning effects.

##### A. *Developing Cross-cultural Awareness*

Cross-cultural awareness mainly refers to understanding the customs or conventions of the dominant culture that influence speakers' ideology and behavior. It could help learners recognize cultural differences and the ambiguity resulted from cultural factors and further fosters the cultivation of the awareness of tolerance for ambiguity. In the teaching of the target language, teachers need to develop learners' sharp insight into its social values and customs, encourage critical thinking and foster tolerance. Furthermore, as the principal transmitter of the target culture, teachers should have some acquaintance with the differences among various cultures. Learners are tend to be trained to strengthen their cultural sensitivity through the analysis of language errors due to the cultural factors in order to be conscious of that the mere grasp of language rules is incapable of acquiring successful communication.

The learning of culture could promote language learning. Thus, the familiarization of the target culture could provide a better opportunity for learners to play active roles in verbal communication. The best approach to develop cross-cultural awareness is the direct contact with the target culture. Teachers should incorporate the training of cultural knowledge and cultural awareness into language teaching, establish authentic cultural situations and make full use of the available authentic materials to assist learners to discover the cultural elements of the target culture during the early phase of language learning. Besides, teachers are supposed to design various class activities according to varying communicative purposes. It would accelerate and strengthen learners' tolerance for ambiguity during their active participation. For instance, in reading and listening classes, questions could be raised to help learners grasp the gist, distinguish facts and viewpoints, orientate writer's stance and attitude, and explore the implied value and conclusion of the article. While in writing and speaking classes, learners should be trained to demonstrate these abilities in the form of productive output. In addition, teachers should encourage learners to take part in activities related to foreign culture, such as celebrating foreign festivals on campus. Learners will engage in the target culture and experience the cultural atmosphere through performances of foreign songs, dances, dramas, movies and lectures given by foreign experts. If learners are familiar with the origin of the foreign culture and

its customs, they can make a comparison between the similarities and differences between Chinese culture and foreign culture, so as to deepen their cultural awareness.

### B. Promoting Vocabulary Learning Skills

In foreign language learning, most learners have slim chances to get access to the real language environment. The traditional classroom teaching, book reading and grammar studying still remain to be the primary ways of language learning. The current teaching plans could hardly meet learners' requirements to the actual verbal communication. Passing examinations or mastering grammar knowledge are still perceived as focus by learners, which leads to the low tolerance for plenty of unknown words. This low tolerance for lexical ambiguity will result in the failure of cross-cultural communication. Therefore, it is necessary to improve learners' skills of mastering vocabulary.

Top-down model, naturalistic, and communicative approaches advocate that vocabulary should be learned implicitly and incidentally. Learners should be encouraged to use monolingual dictionary, recognize and the word's meaning by identifying its clues in the context, so as to avoid defining its meaning with its bilingual equivalents. During the teaching process, a series of clear and easy words should be constructed to help learners interpret complex and difficult ones. Associating and inferring capacities should be cultivated in order to comprehend the various meanings of the basic vocabulary, including polysemy and homonym. Besides, teachers should facilitate learners' command of both denotative and connotative meanings of a word, which would further simplify their understanding of the existence of word gaps between the completely different cultures and foster the awareness of tolerance for ambiguous vocabulary.

### C. Adjusting Teaching Strategies Directed at Different Learning Styles

Learning style is the customary pattern that an individual takes to organize and represent information, which is also an inherent automatic reaction that an individual holds to handle information. It is universally acknowledged that field dependence and field independence are the main application of styles to language learning. The field independent learners seldom or never be influenced by the surroundings. They are tend to rely on the internal reference, good at analyze information and solve problems without outside assistance. Therefore, they appear to be more active, autonomous, self-motivated and task-oriented in their learning activities. On the contrary, the field dependent learners are more easily to be dominated by the surrounding field. They are sensitive to the social cues and external stimuli. When ambiguous information appears, field independent learners would impose their own cognitive style on it, while field dependent

learners would attempt to process the information as it is presented without restructuring it. Therefore, teachers should adopt different strategies to cultivate learners' awareness of tolerance for ambiguity based on their learning styles. Teachers should guide learners to realize their learning styles critically, provide learners with opportunities to cooperate with others consciously.

Generally speaking, field independent learners have high tolerance for ambiguity and are not easily affected by environment. Whereas, field dependent learners have low tolerance for ambiguity for they can hardly get rid of the interference of the environment. Teachers could design more analytical tasks for the field independent learners, such as reading an article within a certain period of time, identifying topic sentence, key words, completing adaptation or translation exercises in order to form their habit of accumulative learning. The teaching targets for field dependent learners, on the contrary, should focus on specific and direct language exercises, such as finding out the meaning of a particular word, revealing the scheme of an article, etc. Teachers should offer abundance of materials full of personal emotions to the field dependent learners so as to foster them to learn in an organized way.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

Tolerance for ambiguity is an inevitable outcome in the process of language learning, which is also a necessary in verbal communication. In communication, speakers should take positive attitudes towards it, that is to say, speakers should adopt tolerant strategy and develop appropriate tolerance so as to improve their communicative competence. In language teaching, teaching should know how to apply the tolerance for ambiguity scientifically with the purpose of enhancing learners' language skills and communicative competence.

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