

The Cultural Turn of Business English Teaching in Higher Vocational Colleges

Based on Pragmatic Failure Analysis

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Abstract—With the advancement of globalization, people from different cultural backgrounds are communicating with each other more and more frequently. Higher vocational students majoring in International Business and Business English are more likely to engage in foreign affairs after their graduation. It is necessary to develop their intercultural communication skills. However, the author has found that higher vocational students tend to make pragmatic failures in their daily English communication. This paper takes pragmatic failures in higher vocational college students' English communication as an example to explore the cause of pragmatic failures and put forward the suggestion that English cultural knowledge should be added to business English teaching in higher vocational colleges.

Keywords—business English teaching; higher vocational college students; pragmatic failures; intercultural communication

I. INTRODUCTION

A major feature of higher vocational education is cultivating skilled talents. The course of Business English in higher vocational education should highlight its professionalism and practicality. Business English courses in higher vocational colleges mainly offer to students majoring in Business English and International Business, with an aim to develop their English business communication skills and business negotiation skills, thus enabling them to communicate effectively in foreign trade, finance and other foreign affairs activities in the context of business and realizing cross-cultural communication. Business English courses in higher vocational colleges should not only cover the acquisition of business English language, but also practical training related to core business knowledge. The teaching of business English in higher vocational colleges usually sorts out and integrates relevant knowledge in the textbooks to form a comprehensive knowledge module, and carries out relevant practical training while teaching theoretical knowledge.

From her own experience of teaching the English language and instructing English practical training, the author has found out that higher vocational college students often meet with communication barriers when speaking English, due to their inability to effectively use the language and for lack of necessary knowledge about the basic language rules, in which circumstances pragmatic failures occur. Unfortunately most students do not realize such problems, and do not know that the real cause of pragmatic failures is a lack of knowledge about western cultural background. So it is necessary and possible to guide students to understand the cultural differences between China and the west in their Business English courses while learning the English language, which will help to improve students' intercultural communication skills, and eventually enhance their workplace competitiveness.

II. THE DEFINITION AND CLASSIFICATION OF PRAGMATIC FAILURES

A. The Definition of Pragmatic Failure

It is English Linguist Jenny Thomas who first proposed the notion of pragmatic failure. If people fail to achieve the expected communication effect, there may be pragmatic failures. Jenny Thomas pointed out that pragmatic failure refers to the failure to understand what is meant by what is said. Strictly speaking, Jenny Thomas did not give a clear definition to the notion of pragmatic failure, but Jenny's opinion became the theoretical framework for the study of pragmatic failure, which led to the follow-up study of this phenomenon by many other scholars.

Concerning the definition of pragmatic failure, Professor He Ziran, a linguist in China, states that if a speaker has used grammatically correct sentences in his verbal communication, but he speaks inappropriately in terms of context or the way he speaks, pragmatic failure occurs. Namely, the speaker unconsciously violates human norms and social convention, or the speaker doesn't pay enough attention to the identity

and statuses of the communicating parties, thus violating the target language cultural values, and making the communication interrupted or fail. As a result, communication cannot achieve the desired effect. This is when and where pragmatic failure happens.

From the above two scholars' research on pragmatic failure, it can be concluded that Jenny Thomas emphasizes that the listener fails to understand correctly the real intention of the speaker, thus resulting in pragmatic failures. However, Professor He stresses that the speaker fails to express accurately his real intention, thus resulting in pragmatic failures. Based on the studies of the two scholars, the occurrence of pragmatic failure may be caused by either the speaker's expression or the listener's understanding.

B. Classification of Pragmatic Failure

Regarding the classification of pragmatic failures, the most widely accepted method was also proposed by Jenny Thomas: pragma-linguistic failure and socio-pragmatic failure. Pragma-linguistic failure is closely related to language itself and is usually caused by language differences and their mutual effects. If a language learner applies the pragmatic meaning of a word or structure in his mother language to a foreign language, pragma-linguistic failure occurs. Chinese people often use English under the influence of Chinese language habits, and use Chinese thinking to organize English expressions, which will result in pragma-linguistic failure. Pragma-linguistic failure is most common when both languages have the same expression, because foreign language learners may use "synonyms" in a wrong context. For example, in Chinese, the answer to "thank you" can be "mei guan xi or bu yao jin ", the literal English translation of which would be "never mind". In Chinese "mei guan xi" or "bu yao jin " can be used to answer either thanks or apologies, but its English literal translation "never mind" can only be used to answer apologies. When people use "never mind" to answer "thank you" in English, pragma-linguistic failure occurs.

Social-pragmatic failure refers to the failure to understand the cultural background of both parties in cross-cultural communication, which leads to the failure in language form selection. If foreign language learners misunderstand the communicative context of the target language, or fail to pay attention to the social status of the target speaker, thus causing social-pragmatic failures. In addition, if language learners apply improperly the way they communicate in their mother tongue to the target language, social-pragmatic failures occurs. For example, when a Chinese lady is wearing a beautiful dress and then a foreign friend says "The dress looks really beautiful on you", the Chinese lady may reply in a typically Chinese way by saying "No, no. It is not beautiful at all. ". In westerners' opinion, such answer is too modest and even a bit hypocritical. They may mistake the Chinese for not being grateful, or even for not having a scientific opinion of beautiful clothes. The listener fails to truly understand the speaker's intention, and the communication position between the two parties couldn't achieve the desired effect, resulting in pragmatic failures.

III. COMMON PRAGMATIC FAILURES OF HIGHER VOCATIONAL COLLEGE STUDENTS

When higher vocational college students express themselves in English, they will inevitably be influenced by the way of thinking of their mother tongue and transfer some Chinese semantics and grammatical structures into English expressions. The improper transfer on the lexical level or the cultural level leads to the cross-cultural pragmatic failure.

A. Pragmatic Failures out of Improper Use of Words

As a basic element of language, vocabulary is an indispensable part of a language. When people express an idea, they choose the words first. Pragmatic failures at the lexical level are mainly reflected in the meaning of words. For lack of total understanding the meaning of some words, higher vocational colleges students tend to cause pragmatic failures, especially when encountering words for colors, numbers, appellations, euphemisms and idioms. Words that represent colors have different associative meanings in different cultures. For example, when students do the translation exercise and meet with the following sentence "Tom was "Yan Hong" when he saw his colleagues make a lot of money by investing in the stock market", they may translate "Yan Hong", which means "envy", into "red-eyed" literally. In fact, similar expressions of "Yan Hong" in the English language should be "green-eyed" or "to be green with envy". Although "red-eyed" is the literal translation of "green-eyed", it cannot convey the meaning of "jealousy" in the English language, thus resulting in pragmatic failures.

B. Grammatical Pragmatic Failures

Questions about right and wrong are common in both English and Chinese languages. Differences in those two languages lead to different answers to questions. I once asked one of my students the following question, "Lucy, didn't you hand in your homework last Friday?" Lucy replied, "Yes, I didn't." this is obviously based on the Chinese language expression rules. But such an answer would confuse native English speakers. In this case, the correct expression is "Yes, I did." / No, I didn't. "Lucy's answer directly brings Chinese language habits into English language, resulting in pragmatic failure.

C. Pragmatic Failures in Addressing People

In the English language culture, people can address each other by names regardless of their age or status. However, Chinese culture emphasizes respect and comity, especially addressing people. One of the most common pragmatic failures in addressing people among higher vocational students occurs in their interaction with teachers before class. In response to the teacher's greeting "Good morning, everyone", the students will say "Good morning, teacher." The use of teacher here is from the students' Chinese thinking, but the word "teacher" in the English language are not commonly used to address people, only for the profession of teacher.

D. Pragmatic Failures in Greetings and Farewells

In Chinese culture, the casual way of greeting on the road is often by asking "Have you eaten?" or "Where are you going?". When asked, the questioner is not very concerned about the answer, but only as a form of greeting. The answer is basically a simple "yes" and a short; vague "I'm just going out." When a student runs into a foreign teacher, he sets up a Chinese greeting by asking "Have you eaten?" or "Where are you going?" Such questions will be regarded by native English speakers as a snoop for privacy, achieving semantic and syntactic equivalence but failing to achieve functional equivalence. In English culture, greetings usually talk about the weather, or brief greetings, such as "Good weather, isn't it?", "How are you?" "Good morning", "What's up?" and so on.

E. Pragmatic Failures in Replies to Compliments

The different definitions of modesty in Chinese and western cultures also result in pragmatic failures. There are many examples of pragmatic failures caused by the lack of cultural knowledge in higher vocational students. The teacher praised the student, for example, "You've done a good job, and the student replied "No, there are many defects.". Compared with western culture, Chinese culture pays more attention to the attitude of humility, so Chinese people always adhere to the attitude of "modesty and humility". Whereas modesty in the western culture, as Leech's Politeness Principle illustrated, refers to avoid boasting oneself.

IV. REASONS AND STRATEGIES FOR HIGHER VOCATIONAL STUDENTS' PRAGMATIC FAILURES

A. Reasons for Pragmatic Failures

1) *Ignorance of the differences between Chinese and Western cultures:* It is essential to understanding its social and cultural knowledge while learning a language. Every language and culture has its historical background, national psychology and the influence of human development. A nation that uses a language has its own values, way of thinking and moral standards. They all have their own rules or habits of speech. For example, when receiving foreign guests, Chinese people often say things like "poor entertaining" and "insufficient preparation". This is mainly because Chinese people tend to be reserved and modest to show politeness. However, due to cultural differences, when these words are translated into English, the feelings of the English audience and the Chinese audience will be quite different, and sometimes even completely opposite. Language, culture and communication influence each other, and cultural difference is the root cause of pragmatic failure in intercultural communication.

Most of the higher vocational students have not been exposed to the common knowledge of western culture, and often ignore or even fail to realize the existence of the cultural differences between China and the west. When they use English, they often use Chinese expressions. Most

Chinese people are reserved and introverted, often euphemistic. Therefore, we often use vague words in communication, such as maybe, perhaps, probably, about and almost, which can make western people feel ambiguous, thus affecting their communication.

2) *The influence of mother tongue on the second language learning:* Pragmatic failures hinder the effective intercultural communication. It has much to do with the interference of language learners' native language. People tend to follow their native language habits automatically while using their second language. As for higher vocational students, their English is relatively poor, and their Chinese expression habits have a certain influence on the acquisition of English, namely, as non-native English speakers, they tend to use their native language wording rules while talking with English native speakers. This will result in the emergence of Chinese English, which is also a common pragmatic failure in intercultural communication.

3) *Lack of Intercultural consciousness studies in class:* Most higher vocational students have never attended the course of British and American culture, and their understanding of western culture is extremely limited. The English modules they attend at college mainly include College English, and those who major in International Business attend the course of Business English. Students under Business English, international business and other foreign-related study programs are likely to be engaged in foreign-related work after graduation, and work with partners of western English-speaking countries. It is very necessary to teach intercultural knowledge in the course of business English. However, due to the exam-oriented education system in China, most English courses are mainly about grammar, with the main goal of only guiding students to speak complete sentences, thus ignoring the context of sentences and the real communication situation. Without the cultivation of intercultural awareness in class, higher vocational students lack the intercultural communication ability, which makes them meet with pragmatic failures in their English communication.

B. Cultural Strategies in Business English Teaching

Chinese higher vocational students lack real English environment and the real understanding of western culture, so it is inevitable for them to cause pragmatic failures while learning English. But higher vocational education offers students practical training, in an effort to provide students with a full English communication platform, with an aim to cultivate the students' cross-cultural communication ability, thus promoting their competitiveness at the workplace. The introduction of western culture in teaching can make students avoid or reduce pragmatic failures in intercultural communication. Intercultural communication competence includes the following two aspects: language competence and pragmatic competence. Language competence consists of speech, vocabulary and grammar. Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to choose appropriate language expressions in specific contexts or to

use English appropriately in social interactions. In traditional Business English teaching in higher vocational colleges, teachers emphasize the cultivation of students' language ability but neglect the cultivation of pragmatic ability. Therefore, while paying attention to English knowledge teaching, business English teaching should also pay attention to cultural differences and cultivate students' awareness and ability of intercultural communication.

1) *Introducing culture while teaching english vocabulary*: Vocabulary learning is the foundation of business English learning, but most teachers put too much emphasis on students' business English vocabulary, spend a lot of time explaining business terms, and ignore the cultural connotation included in the vocabulary. Culture has an influence on the phonetic, lexical, syntactic and textual aspects of language. In terms of vocabulary teaching, the lack of understanding of the cultural background of relevant words may lead to the students' abuse of vocabulary, thus causing misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication.

Words have two meanings: denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to the literal meaning or the basic meaning of a word. The connotations of a particular word or name are the ideas or qualities which it makes you think of (including culture, emotion, attitude and belief). Most teachers only teach the denotation of words, while neglect its connotations. In order to avoid students' pragmatic mistakes and help higher vocational students to effectively communicate in foreign affairs, it is necessary for teachers to explain the cultural connotation of words when explaining them. For example, the word "red" has different meanings in Chinese and western cultures. The word "red", which is often used in business English articles, means debt in western culture. Because negative numbers are often marked in red notes, the word "red figure" means deficit and the phrase "in the red" means loss. "Red" in Chinese culture represents good luck, for instance, the red envelop (containing money). In English, the word "blue" means strong power and a high social status. So in business English, "Blue chip" refers to a stock with good performance, large capital stock and stable stock price. However, "blue" has no such connotation in Chinese.

Vocational students learn business English in order to be able to communicate effectively in foreign affairs in the future. Learning the denotation and connotation of words at the same time can enable students to understand vocabulary more profoundly and avoid pragmatic failures.

2) *Improving intercultural awareness by changing the thinking mode*: Many teachers have found that the biggest problem in the use of English for higher vocational students is the interference of English and Chinese thinking modes. Students use Chinese thinking mode to express in English, causing pragmatic failures and comprehension obstacles. The biggest difference between Chinese and western mode of thinking is that Chinese people tend to adopt induction, that is, from the individual to the general mode of thinking, while westerners, on the contrary, are better at deductive, that is, from the general to the individual. Higher vocational students would like to introduce background information

while communicating with foreigners and then express their real intention. In contrast, westerners starts from the theme and gives the support. So it is necessary for teachers to introduce this difference to the students. It will be helpful for students to develop their ability of intercultural communication by gradually cultivating their literature reading and writing in the western way of thinking and improving their awareness of intercultural communication.

3) *The cultivation of cross-cultural business etiquette*: Business English teaching should also include business communication, such as the reception of foreign businessmen, business negotiations and other related activities. In business activities, people from different cultures follow their social etiquette, which sometimes leads to communication barriers and even friction. Therefore, it is very important to guide higher vocational college students to pay attention to business etiquette in business English class. Using the practical training in business English teaching, teachers train students' intercultural communication etiquette by directing their attention to the differences between Chinese and western business etiquette, thus helping to reduce pragmatic failures in intercultural communication.

V. CONCLUSION

For higher vocational college students, the study of business English is not only to master Basic English language knowledge, but also to be able to properly communicate with foreign investors in business activities. In addition to the teaching of theoretical knowledge, more attention should be paid to practical training. The pragmatic failure of students in using English impedes effective communication, and the root cause of pragmatic failure is lack of intercultural awareness and lack of understanding of relevant cultural background. Traditional business English teaching in higher vocational colleges focuses on the acquisition of five basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, and ignores the learning of relevant cultural background knowledge. The teaching of western culture can help students to reduce or even avoid pragmatic failures and improve their competitiveness in the workplace.

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