A Study on Pragmatic Errors in Intercultural Communication among English Majors in Chinese Colleges and Universities: Types and Causes

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Abstract: Discourse lapses in intercultural communication present a significant challenge for English majors in Chinese colleges and universities. Drawing on cross-cultural communication theory, pragmatics theory, and cultural difference theory, this study analyzes the types and causes of pragmatic errors. The findings indicate that such errors primarily occur at three levels: linguistic form, communicative function, and social culture. These errors are closely linked to differences in language systems, negative transfer from the native language, cultural cognitive disparities, insufficient cross-cultural awareness, and teaching-related factors. To address these issues, the study proposes improvements in curriculum design, teaching methods, material preparation, and assessment mechanisms. These measures aim to enhance the cross-cultural communicative competence of English majors, support the reform of English education, and foster the development of internationally-minded talent.

1. Introduction

In the context of economic globalization, intercultural communicative competence has become a key competitive advantage for English majors. However, English majors in Chinese colleges and universities often make pragmatic errors during intercultural communication, which can not only hinder effective communication but also lead to cultural misunderstandings. These errors span language use, the realization of communicative functions, and social and cultural cognition, highlighting deficiencies in both language application and cultural awareness. By analyzing the specific manifestations and underlying causes of these pragmatic errors and exploring effective teaching strategies, this study aims to improve the teaching quality for English majors and cultivate students with strong cross-cultural communicative competence. This paper examines these issues from the perspectives of pragmatics and intercultural communication.

2. Theoretical foundations

2.1 Intercultural communication theory

Intercultural communication theory focuses on the interactions and patterns that arise when people from different cultural backgrounds communicate. Originating from Hall's cultural research in the 1950s, this theory emphasizes the crucial role of cultural differences in communication. The cross-cultural communication process involves encoding, transmitting, and decoding messages, with information undergoing meaning reconstruction in different cultural contexts. For effective communication, both parties must possess cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity, recognizing how cultural backgrounds influence communicative behavior. The theory examines the intricate relationship between language and culture, shedding light on issues such as cultural conflict, cultural identity, and cultural adaptation[1]. In higher education, intercultural communication theory offers English majors valuable insights into overcoming cultural barriers, fostering cultural awareness, and improving intercultural communication skills. By studying this theory in depth, the cultural roots of discourse errors can be more effectively understood and addressed.

2.2 Pragmatics theory

Pragmatics theory examines the principles and rules governing language use, focusing on the contextual meaning in spoken communication. Rooted in Austin's speech act theory, Grice's theory of conversational implicature, and Leech's politeness principle, it emphasizes that language use must consider the speaker's intentions, the listener's interpretation, and the contextual factors at play. Pragmatics theory explains how communicators convey information and fulfill social functions through language, covering aspects such as direct and indirect speech acts, literal and conversational meanings, speech strategies, and polite expressions. In the context of cross-cultural communication, pragmatics theory serves as a powerful analytical tool for identifying and understanding pragmatic errors, highlighting the complex interplay between linguistic forms and communicative functions[2]. This theory is essential for guiding the analysis of pragmatic performance among Chinese English learners in cross-cultural interactions.

2.3 Cultural difference theory

Cultural difference theory examines the distinctions between cultural groups in terms of their thinking patterns, values, and behavioral norms. Key theories in this area include Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Hall's high-context vs. low-context culture theory, both of which highlight the profound impact of cultural differences on interpersonal interactions. Chinese and Western cultures, for example, differ significantly in aspects such as individualism vs. collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance, and these differences directly influence language use and communicative behavior. Cultural difference theory emphasizes the importance of understanding and respecting cultural diversity, acknowledging that each culture has its own unique communication norms and values[3]. This theory offers a valuable lens for analyzing pragmatic errors among Chinese English learners, helping to identify the cultural cognitive differences underlying language use, and providing both theoretical support and practical guidance for cross-cultural communication teaching.

3. Analysis of the types of pragmatic errors

3.1 Errors in linguistic form

Pragmatic errors at the level of linguistic form are primarily evident in areas such as pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary choice, and grammatical structure. English majors in Chinese colleges and universities often exhibit noticeable influence from their native language in pronunciation and intonation, struggling to accurately master English stress, rhythm, and intonation patterns. This can negatively affect communication effectiveness. Regarding vocabulary, students frequently encounter issues such as improper word collocations, mixing synonyms, and misusing stylistic tones, which can distort their intended message. Grammatical errors typically involve incorrect sentence structures, improper tense usage, and mistakes in word order. These issues result in expressions that lack authenticity and can even create communication barriers[4]. Such errors reflect gaps in students' mastery of the English language system, underscoring the need for systematic language training to enhance both their linguistic accuracy and communicative competence.

3.2 Errors in communicative functions

Pragmatic errors at the level of communicative functions involve the execution of speech acts, the interpretation of conversational meanings, and the application of communication strategies. Students often express requests, apologies, and refusals in ways that are either too direct or too subtle, failing to align with the conventions of native English speakers. When it comes to understanding conversational meanings, they tend to focus on literal interpretations and struggle to grasp implied meanings or contextual cues. In terms of communicative strategies, errors include awkward turn-taking, rigid topic shifts, and inappropriate use of corrective techniques. These errors reflect gaps in students' understanding of language functions in real-life communication, affecting both the effectiveness and appropriateness of their interactions. The occurrence of these errors is largely due to limited experience in intercultural communication and a lack of pragmatic awareness.

3.3 Errors in socio-cultural understanding

Pragmatic errors at the socio-cultural level are primarily seen in violations of cultural taboos, social etiquette, and conflicts of values. Students often unintentionally address sensitive topics such as religious beliefs, racial issues, or other culturally delicate matters during cross-cultural communication. In terms of social etiquette, they may fail to use honorifics, polite expressions, or appropriate pleasantries, violating the communication norms of English-speaking cultures. Additionally, differences in values can lead to inappropriate verbal behaviors when students express personal opinions or navigate interpersonal relationships[5]. These errors highlight the profound impact of cultural differences between China and Western countries on language use and expose students' lack of cross-cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity. Mistakes at the socio-cultural level can lead to more significant communication barriers, which can be mitigated through comprehensive cultural learning.

4. Analysis of the causes of pragmatic errors

4.1 Differences in language systems

Chinese and English, belonging to different language families, exhibit significant differences in phonology, vocabulary, and grammar. English, an Indo-European language, is an inflected language

that conveys grammatical meanings through changes in word forms. In contrast, Chinese, a Sino language, is analytic, relying on function words and word order to express grammatical relationships. These fundamental differences present major challenges for Chinese learners of English in language use. Phonologically, the stress and intonation patterns in English are radically different from the tonal system of Chinese, making it difficult for students to grasp the rhythmic features of English. In terms of vocabulary, the richness and variability of English word meanings, fixed word collocations, and subtle stylistic distinctions contrast sharply with the more straightforward lexical features of Chinese[6]. Grammatical differences further complicate matters, as English emphasizes morphological changes and syntactic rules, while Chinese relies more on ideograms and ideational expressions. These systematic differences lead to numerous errors in students' pragmatic use of English, errors that can be mitigated through a deeper understanding of the structural features of both languages.

4.2 Negative transfer from the native language

Negative transfer from the native language is a significant cause of pragmatic errors, primarily manifesting in the unconscious transfer of Chinese language habits and expressions into English communication. In terms of thinking patterns, Chinese students are accustomed to the circular, spiral structure of thought and expression in Chinese, which contrasts with the linear, more direct structure of English. When expressing themselves, students often follow Chinese word order and phrasing, resulting in sentences that sound unnatural in English. In terms of communicative strategies, students tend to rely on Chinese euphemisms and indirect expressions, which are ill-suited to the more direct communication style in English. Furthermore, in terms of pragmatic assumptions, students frequently apply Chinese communication norms, disregarding the expectations of English-language contexts. This transfer of native language thinking and expression patterns negatively impacts the accuracy and appropriateness of English communication[7]. The prevalence of this issue indicates that students have not yet developed an independent English thought process. Overcoming this requires extensive immersion in English-language environments and consistent practice.

4.3 Differences in cultural cognition

Cultural cognitive differences are deeply rooted causes of pragmatic errors, manifesting at various levels of thinking, values, and behavioral patterns. Traditional Chinese culture emphasizes collectivism, relationship harmony, and subtlety, whereas English-speaking cultures prioritize individualism, direct expression, equality, and openness. These fundamental cultural differences significantly influence students' language use and communicative behaviors. In interpersonal communication, Chinese students often adhere to traditional etiquette, focusing on hierarchical relationships and face-saving. However, such practices can appear overly formal or inappropriate in English communication. In terms of value judgments, students tend to interpret and evaluate cultural phenomena in English-speaking countries through the lens of traditional Chinese values, leading to misunderstandings and communication barriers. Moreover, in the process of cultural adaptation, students struggle to grasp the cultural practices and social norms of English-speaking countries, resulting in further pragmatic errors[8]. These cultural cognitive differences hinder students' ability to accurately understand and use the target language in cross-cultural communication. Overcoming these challenges requires the development of heightened cultural awareness and sensitivity.

4.4 Insufficient intercultural communication awareness

Insufficient intercultural communication awareness is a key factor contributing to pragmatic errors. It reflects students' limited understanding of the complexity and importance of intercultural communication. In actual interactions, students often overlook the cultural context of language use and fail to recognize the differences in communication norms and expectations across cultures. During communication, they lack sensitivity to cultural differences and struggle to identify and respond to potential cultural conflicts. In terms of language use, students tend to focus on the correctness of linguistic forms while neglecting the appropriateness and effectiveness of communication. When selecting communication strategies, they often fail to adapt their expressions to suit specific contexts, leading to less effective communication. This lack of intercultural communication awareness results in discomfort and confusion in cross-cultural settings, preventing students from achieving their communicative goals[9]. Developing intercultural communication awareness requires systematic education and practical experience, enabling students to cultivate a deeper understanding of cross-cultural communication and its nuances.

4.5 Teaching-related factors

Teaching factors play a significant role in the development of pragmatic errors, encompassing aspects such as curriculum design, teaching methods, and material selection. Currently, English language instruction for English majors tends to focus heavily on language knowledge, with insufficient emphasis on cultivating pragmatic skills and intercultural communication abilities. The curriculum often prioritizes grammatical structures and vocabulary acquisition, while lacking real communicative scenarios and cultural experiences. Teaching methods predominantly rely on traditional lecture-based instruction, leaving students with limited opportunities for practice and interactive learning. As a result, students struggle to develop practical communicative competence. Furthermore, teaching materials often fail to connect with real-life situations, offering little insight into the social and cultural contexts of contemporary English-speaking countries, which can dampen students' motivation for learning and cultural exploration. Additionally, the evaluation system places too much emphasis on language accuracy, overlooking the importance of appropriateness and communicative effectiveness. These teaching-related limitations contribute to the persistence of pragmatic errors in students' actual communication[10]. To address these issues, teaching reform must be innovative, targeting improvements in curriculum design, teaching methods, and material preparation to establish a more effective and scientifically grounded approach to English language instruction.

5. Implications

5.1 Curriculum design

The curriculum for English majors in colleges and universities should establish a systematic framework for cultivating pragmatic competence and integrate intercultural communication skills throughout the teaching process. Specialized courses on pragmatics and intercultural communication should be incorporated into the core curriculum to systematically introduce students to the theoretical foundations of these areas. These courses should emphasize the integration of language skills and cultural knowledge, embedding cross-cultural communication training within courses such as listening, reading, writing, and translation. In addition, practical courses, such as simulated business negotiations and cross-cultural project collaboration, should be offered to provide students with real-world cross-cultural communication experiences. International exchange programs should be established in cooperation with universities in English-speaking countries,

utilizing both online and offline methods, so students can directly engage with native speakers. Elective courses focused on the social cultures and customs of English-speaking countries should be included to broaden students' cultural perspectives. By creating a well-structured and scientifically grounded curriculum, we can promote the simultaneous development of linguistic proficiency and cross-cultural communication skills, helping students build a comprehensive system of linguistic knowledge and cultural awareness.

5.2 Teaching methods

The improvement of teaching methods should prioritize enhancing the practicality and interactivity of classroom instruction, adopting a variety of teaching strategies to engage students and spark their enthusiasm for learning. The contextual teaching method can be employed to create real-world cross-cultural communication scenarios, allowing students to practice language use in specific contexts. The case-based teaching method should be used to analyze and discuss typical intercultural communication errors, helping students develop pragmatic awareness and cultural sensitivity. Incorporating a task-based approach, teachers can design cross-cultural communication tasks that allow students to acquire pragmatic strategies and communication skills through task completion. Modern educational technologies, such as virtual reality, can be leveraged to create immersive intercultural experiences, enhancing student engagement and learning. Role-playing and simulated dialogue activities should be organized to enable students to practice communication norms in different cultural contexts. Additionally, extracurricular learning platforms like English corners and cultural salons can be established to offer students more opportunities for language practice outside the classroom. Innovation in teaching methods should center on students' active participation, fostering their independent learning and problem-solving abilities.

5.3 Teaching materials

The development of teaching materials should move beyond traditional approaches of simply explaining language knowledge and instead establish a comprehensive system that integrates language skills, pragmatic knowledge, and cultural content. Textbooks should be contemporary and practical, reflecting the social, cultural, and linguistic characteristics of modern English-speaking countries. They should incorporate a wide range of authentic materials, including daily conversations, business meetings, academic discussions, and other real-world examples of language use. Materials should be designed with targeted pragmatic exercises and cross-cultural communication tasks that help students master language strategies in various contexts. Cultural notes and background information should be included to help students understand the cultural implications behind language use. Additionally, multimedia teaching resources—such as audio and video materials, online exercises, and interactive learning platforms—should be developed to enhance engagement and accessibility. The design of teaching materials should follow a principle of gradual progression, starting with simple, everyday communication and advancing to more complex cross-cultural scenarios. At the same time, materials should be flexible and adaptable, allowing instructors to adjust or supplement content based on specific teaching needs and contexts.

5.4 Assessment and feedback mechanisms

The development of assessment and feedback mechanisms should employ diverse evaluation criteria, focusing on a comprehensive assessment of students' linguistic competence and cross-cultural communication skills. A formative assessment system should be established to evaluate students' learning outcomes through various dimensions, such as classroom performance, homework completion, and participation in activities. A scientific testing program should be

designed to assess language proficiency, incorporating situational dialogues, role-playing, cultural understanding, and other forms of assessment. Regular intercultural communication competence evaluations should be conducted, testing students' ability to apply communication strategies and adapt to different cultural contexts through practical tasks. A self-assessment and peer-assessment mechanism should be established to help students develop reflective skills and critical thinking. The involvement of foreign teachers and native English speakers in the assessment process will provide more objective and diverse feedback. A timely and effective feedback system should be implemented to guide students in correcting language errors through individual counseling and group discussions. Assessment results should be promptly communicated to the teaching management department, providing a foundation for curriculum reform and teaching adjustments. Improving the assessment and feedback mechanisms will enhance teaching quality and support the holistic development of students' skills.

6. Conclusion

This study systematically analyzes the types of linguistic lapses English majors in Chinese colleges and universities encounter in cross-cultural communication, categorizing them into three levels: linguistic form, communicative function, and socio-cultural understanding. The main causes of these lapses include differences in linguistic systems, negative transfer from the native language, cultural cognitive differences, insufficient intercultural communication awareness, and pedagogical factors. To address these issues, reforms and innovations are needed in curriculum design, teaching methods, material development, and assessment mechanisms. By establishing a well-structured system for developing discourse competence, enhancing the practicality and interactivity of teaching, creating teaching materials that meet real-world needs, and improving assessment and feedback mechanisms, students' intercultural communicative competence can be significantly improved. These findings offer both theoretical insights and practical recommendations for enhancing the teaching practices of English majors, ultimately fostering the development of internationally-minded talents with strong intercultural communication skills.

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