The Research on Cultivating Cultural Empathy Competence of Non-English Major Students in Independent College from the Perspective of Pragmatic Failure

Shi Lei

Shaanxi Institute of International Trade & Commerce, Shaanxi, 712046

Abstract: During cross-cultural communication, participants always misunderstand each other due to different speaking ways, expressing habits or lacking knowledge of cultural background, thus causing pragmatic failures. In order to avoid pragmatic failure, it is essential for participants to improve their cultural empathy competence, which plays an important factor in cross-cultural communication. College English is a principal way for non-English major students in independent college to learn English culture, so how to improve their cultural empathy competence in teaching appears especially significant.

1. Introduction

The development of economic globalization makes cross-cultural communication more and more avoidable in people's daily life and work. The cross-cultural communication capability of employee is increasingly required in labor market. However, the cross-cultural communication ability of application-oriented talents at present is not good enough, therefore pragmatic failures occurs frequently during cross-cultural communication. Such cross-cultural conflicts caused by pragmatic failure not only affect international trade, but also damage the peace and development between countries in the world. Research shows that the reasons of cross-cultural communication failure can mostly be blamed on the lacking of the cross-cultural communication awareness, while such lack is only because of inadequacy of cultural empathy competence. So cultivating cultural empathy competence plays an important role in perfecting cross-cultural communication ability as well as in solving pragmatic failures. Currently, domestic scholars have already done a lot of researches on cross-cultural communication and pragmatic failure, obtaining great achievements. However, only a few researches focus on how to deal with pragmatic failure based on developing cultural empathy competence. Additionally, the research subjects are mainly chosen from public university, the situation of students in independent college, which accounts for a rather high proportion in high education in China as well as provides most application-oriented talents for local area, is always ignored. Actually, independent colleges are indispensable force to cultivate application-oriented talents needed by local area, and contribute more to local economic development, so cultivating cultural empathy competence of students in independent college seems especially necessary.

2. Pragmatic failure and cultural empathy competence

Pragmatic failure and empathy are important concepts in cross-cultural communication. Analyzing how to cultivate cultural empathy competence, it is necessary to learn the definition and connotation of the two concepts firstly.

2.1 Pragmatic failure

This notion is put forward by Thomas in 1983 in his paper *Pragmatic Failure in Cross-cultural Communication*. He argues that pragmatic failure is "the inability to understand what is meant by what is said." Chinese scholar clarifies this notion further, holding that pragmatic failure phenomenon is because of unclear expression and misunderstanding caused by lacking of exact understanding and effective ability to use language. Pragmatic failure includes two specific expressing ways, one is pragmalinguistic failure and the other is social pragmatic failure.

2.1.1 Pragmalinguistic failure

Pragmalinguistic failure means that learners use speech act correctly, while employ improper linguistic devices, namely, deviation of use of language form. Specific to using English, there are several situations in which pragmalinguistic failure often occurs. Firstly, it is deviation of using English form. Take response to tag questions for example, as for Chinese, if we use "yes" to answer tag question, it means affirmation to the question no matter it takes the negative form or positive from. However, as for English, positive answer "yes" only makes sure about the meaning of the verb, and this usage isn't suitable for negative structure. Therefore, pragmatic linguistic failures always happen when many Chinese students answer English tag questions wrongly due to being influenced by mother tongue. Secondly, it is understanding of vocabulary meaning in isolation. Specifically speaking, isolated understanding refers to understand the implication of utterance on the basis of literary meaning of each word in this utterance without considering context. Misunderstanding to polysemic words and failing to understand the implied meaning of utterance both belong to this type. Thirdly, it is inappropriate English expressing way. Usually, many students often speak English according to the structure and semantic meaning of their mother tongue. For example, facing a foreigner's thanks, they usually use "never mind" instead of "you're welcome". As known to all, we say "Never mind" when someone say "sorry" to you. The English basis of students in independent college is commonly not good enough. They always learning English vocabulary by mechanical memorization and their ability to native English expression is also not good enough. So, it is very common for students in independent college make such type of pragmalinguistic failure.

2.1.2 Social pragmatic failure

Social pragmatic failure is caused by incompetence to properly use language according to different cultural backgrounds, communicator's language habits and language features. In *Introduction to Pragmatics,* Scholar He Zhaoxiong(1989)pointed out that communicative participants must have same or similar world view and thinking ways besides using the same language in order to succeed in cross-cultural communication. That is to say, both participants need to have some common cultural knowledge or background knowledge, which is pragmatic presupposition. Pragmatic presupposition also includes people's outlook of value, local historical culture and even the system of country which the language used in cross-cultural communication belongs to, any lack of these pragmatic presupposition will result in social pragmatic failure. By comparison, social pragmatic competence requires language user to have a high level of cultural

awareness and wider range of knowledge. Consequently, to cultivate social pragmatic failure is not as easy as to develop language ability.

2.2 Cultural empathy

Above-mentioned two types of pragmatic failure are both inappropriateness of using languagecaused by cultural intervention. It is a lack of cross-cultural communication competence because language users employ expressing habits of his or her mother tongue mechanically, which is caused by the influence and restriction of social conventions and outlook of value of mother tongue. Cross-cultural communication competence is a general superficial concept, further study on this phenomenon shows that it is actually a lack of cultural empathy competence. During the process of cross-cultural communication, people are more and more aware of that cultural empathy competence is the most important component in the system of cross-cultural communication competence and is a key factor to directly affect the process, result and quality of cross-cultural communication. "Empathy" is a notion in western aesthetics at first; it is Japanese linguist Kuno who introduces this concept to the field of linguistics firstly. American linguist Ruben holds that "empathy" in speech communication refers to understanding a question from the angle of the other side, and it is one of seven factors of effective communication. In China, scholar He Ziran is the first person who introduces "empathy" concept into pragmatics. He maintains that language learners should understand and perceive the culture of target language country, and they need study and employ language under the backgrounds of target langue. Seen from the perspective of pragmatics, cultural empathy competence means a communicative strategy which can help cross-cultural communication move on smoothly and successfully when people can speak on the stand of language culture of other side, can adjust their own thinking ways and consciously can get rid of restriction and influence of their native national culture in their mind. Of course, achieving this level must base on the fact that communicators have a certain understanding about social historical culture of each other. Hence it is clear that cultivating cultural empathy competence is a key to eliminate pragmatic failure. In college English teaching, focusing on educating and training students' cultural empathy competence is indispensable content to develop their comprehensive capability.

3. Cultural empathy competence Cultivation in college English teaching

Cultural empathy competence is the core of cross-cultural communication ability, and it will directly influence the result of communication whether it is a success or failure. Therefore, English teacher should shift their efforts to cultivating students' cultural empathy competence through combing students' own characteristics in college English teaching in order to promote their comprehensive quality to meet the growing demands of labor force in local area. As we all know, the English level of students in independent college is poor, their English vocabulary is commonly not enough, and their competence to use English correctly is also limited, so they are more easily to be influenced by mother tongue, namely, using chinglish. Meanwhile, most students in independent college are not interested in studying English, and the quantity and the scope of their English reading are limited, so they lack western cultural knowledge and relative cultural sensitivity, which all lead to one result that students in independent college have a lower cultural empathy competence and have higher occurrence frequency of pragmalinguistic failure and social pragmatic failure. Then how to develop students' cultural empathy competence in college English teaching for English teachers in independent college?

3.1 Effective college English teaching models based on cultivating cultural empathy competence

The first step to develop students' cultural empathy competence is to build effective college English teaching models. Although domestic scholars in foreign language circles have already regarded cultivating cross-cultural communication ability as the final purpose of foreign language teaching, and have carried out fruitful research works on this topic, however, the research subjects are always students from public universities, what's more, the deep researches on developing cultural empathy competence is rare. As a matter of fact, students in independent colleges have strong self-esteem as well as lack confidence. They are usually earnest towards their professional courses, yet they lack interests and motivation in learning English, which is doomed to a weak cross-cultural awareness and a lower cultural empathy competence. Therefore single teaching model is not practical. To cultivate students' cultural empathy competence in college English class is gradual process. The first step to develop cross-cultural awareness is that English teachers inform language knowledge and cultural knowledge in class. With the increase of knowledge input, such cross-cultural awareness can be internalized into cross-cultural communication ability, thus, cultural empathy competence can be developed during this internalization process. Clearly, as for English teaching, cultural teaching way is a must. Usually, college English teachers can adopt the following teaching strategies to cultivate students' cultural empathy competence based on students' characteristics and teaching contents.

3.1.1 Project-based teaching

Project-based teaching is carried out through a complete project. It aims to combine theory and practice and fully release students' potential for the purpose of enhancing students' comprehensive ability to solve practical problems. Language study requires students to participate more and practice continuously. Studying English from primary school, most Chinese students have certain acceleration about English vocabulary, grammar and syntax. If teachers choose traditional ways to teach English, students must feel boring no matter how much such English knowledge they hold, especially for students in independent colleges. Generally speaking, students are more interested in studying cultural knowledge compared with studying vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure. Project-based teaching can make good use of students' initiative. In college English class, teachers can carry out project-based teaching through the way of assigning tasks to each group. Task oriented, the members of each group cooperates with each other to finish this task and complete the whole activity. During the process of project-based teaching, each student is assigned task based on their ability and expertise, which can fully give a play to their potential and do a favor for students' independent thinking. We must admit that students in independent colleges perform excellently if they are interested in something. By this teaching method, students' initiative is greatly increased and their study involvement also enhanced. In addition, during the process of completing personal task, every student in one group has to communicate with other members, so students will have a deep understanding about language cultural knowledge and better master it. Simultaneously, communicating with members in one group can make everyone express his or her own ideas and listen to others, which is a process of learning culture and practice it. Undoubtedly, project-based teaching is useful for increasing students' cross-cultural awareness as well as enhancing their cultural empathy competence.

3.1.2 Situational teaching method

Adopting situational teaching method means that teachers design situation with purpose based on

teaching contents and teaching objectives. It is a role-play teaching method that students act out different roles in a scenario simulation, in which students can obtain knowledge and gain ability. In the scenario simulation of English culture teaching, at first, teachers need choose students and set communicative context and background for students' role-play, then students make a preparation for relative roles according to the requirements of context, finally, they act out in front of the whole class. When playing role, performers need to observe every word and action of the other role players and give corresponding response, which is a process of experiencing another cultural value and a process of reflecting on own one. As for other students who don't participate in role-play, they can also have a deep impression on western culture by watching the situational performance. Without much more teachers' intervention, students have larger space and more opportunities to give a full play to such practice, so situational teaching method is necessary for developing students' cultural empathy competence.

3.1.3 Case analysis teaching method

This teaching method is originated from college of business administration of Harvard University, and it is later applied to cultural teaching. Instead of dull theoretical preaching, teachers may select typical examples to demonstrate and illustrate teaching contents in college English teaching. Teachers firstly provide certain explanation about cases to students, and enlighten students to discuss cases, find problems and possible proposals to tackle them. Usually, students will analyze and discuss given cases from different aspects in groups. This type of cooperative discussing way can make students discover and solve problems caused by cultural differences with the collective wisdom, thus cultivating students' capability to deal with problems through different strategies. Case analysis teaching method can inspire students' English learning interests and reduce learning difficulties. Moreover, during the process of discussing, participators need pragmatic presuppositions, such as other communicators' emotional factor and cultural backgrounds, which can deepen understanding about knowledge, and enhance students' cultural empathy competence.

Of course, in consideration of characteristics of students in independent colleges, teachers should adjust their teaching methods according to teaching contents, and teachers sometimes even need combine different teaching methods together.

3.2 Development of extracurricular activities

Depending on in-class teaching to cultivate cultural empathy competence is far from enough, and college teachers should pay more attention to the development of extracurricular activities. First of all, the present undergraduates are "electronic generation", they spend too much time using mobile phone and computer too much. Considering this feature of today's college students, college English teachers may recommend some classic movies even some typical micro-videos on network which can better reflect western culture to students to watch, such as"Gua sha", "The Joy Luck Club", and "DuJiao Show" etc. students watch films or micro-videos with guided questions given by teachers in advance, then they will give an open discussion about a certain cultural setting, or they can act out roles in situational context, finally, teachers need ask students to compare different responses to the same situational context between their own culture and western culture, deeply analyze the different values, social conventions and thinking ways caused by different cultural differences. It is a imperceptible way to enhance students' sensitivity to cultural difference and cultivate students' cultural empathy competence. Secondly, foreign teachers in Chinese universities can help students organize English corner, English salon or give cross-cultural lectures, by which American and British profiles, cultures and social conventions can be introduced to Chinese students. As known to all, practice makes perfect, students need all kinds of activities to practice themselves, such as

English party, English festival, cross-cultural knowledge contest, debate competition, English broadcast and English drama etc. Students can practice their application ability by immersing in English cultural atmosphere. Finally, students should be encouraged to take part in foreign business activities, to listen to VOA, BBC or to surf the internet so that they can learn native English expressions. In conclusion, extracurricular activities can greatly arouse students' interests of learning English, make them apply the knowledge to practice by all kinds of forms, thus reinforcing what they have learned in class and strengthening their cultural empathy competence.

3.3 Improving cultural empathy competence of English teachers

It is the improvement of English teachers' cultural empathy plays an important role in cultivating the same capability of students. As disseminators of knowledge, English teachers need to read more books about professional knowledge and cross-cultural communication, attend more relative academic forums in order to promote own professional and cultural qualities. At the same time, English teachers should pay much attention to American and British politics, economy and human development, continuously learn and accumulate cultural backgrounds of western countries for the purpose of enriching cultural knowledge reverse. In addition, English teachers can choose foreign-related tourism, business, and cultural media to carry on short-term practical training, which can provide first-hand valuable materials for English teachers' teaching. It is especially useful for teachers in independent colleges because of the following two points, firstly, such practical trainings can help them to select proper textbooks or compile teaching materials which better fit students by themselves. Secondly, it can help English teachers to efficiently design teaching procedure and organize more interesting extracurricular activities.

4. Conclusion

As for independent colleges, cultivating cultural empathy competence of students decides the quality of application-related talents and also is related to the quality and competitive force of colleges. Fully realized this point, cultivating cultural competence should be put into the first place in English teaching in independent colleges. Furthermore, students should not only learn to express themselves properly and clearly in the process of cross-cultural communication, but also bear in mind that they can't lose themselves because of too much "empathy". Being a mature participator with emotional awareness is the most important thing.

Acknowledgements

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