Research on Chinese Learners’ Pragmatic Errors in Cross-cultural Communication

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Abstract. By means of research on cross-cultural communication in Chinese learners’ pragmatic errors, this paper analyzes and discusses the Chinese learners’ lack of cultural knowledge reflected in language and pragmatic errors so as to provide theoretical basis for teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

Preface

In recent years, with the increasingly frequent cross-cultural communication, research on Chinese learners’ pragmatic errors caused the attention of the linguists and teachers teaching Chinese as a foreign language at home and abroad. From the perspective of pragmatics, this article studies on lack of cultural knowledge reflected in language. We hope that this research can give some references for teachers of teaching Chinese as a foreign language, and it can promote the development of teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

Chinese Language Learners’ Lack of Pragmatic Knowledge in Daily Pragmatics

We usually say, language teaching can’t go out of the teaching of cultural factors, which refer to the cultural factors closely related to language comprehension and language expression. If Chinese learners do not understand cultural factors contained in Chinese when they are learning Chinese, and they don’t know social cultural conventions while using the language in communication, it is impossible to use Chinese to understand and express correctly.

It is a very complex problem that how to classify the cultural factors existed in the field of teaching Chinese as a foreign language and to make it more in line with the actual situation of teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Mr. Zhang Zhanyi put forward the concept of cultural communication for the first time. Mr. Lv Bisong, under the premise of the term of communication culture, gave the new definition communication culture: we can also understand the so-called communicative culture as a kind of special cultural factors that reflect a nation’s values, standard, social customs, psychological state, mode of thinking and so on, which is implicit in a language system closely related to the theory of language and language use.

As the new development and gradually expanding influence of communication culture theory, more and more scholars accepted and enriched the theory, which increased the breadth and depth of the study of the theory itself. Mr. Zhang Zhanyi made a new define on “communication culture” and “knowledge culture” later on. In his definition, the nonverbal cultural factors were also blended in them, thus corrected that taking communicative competence as only language ability. This makes the theory more comprehensive, more explanatory power. Mr. Chen Guang-lei investigated the three aspects of cultural content from language structure, semantics, pragmatics performance, and put forward that the “communication culture” is divided into language structure, semantic culture and pragmatic culture.

This classification not only can make the potential cultural content reflected in the language system reveal in language level, but can also facilitate in the teaching, also be easy for learners to understand and grasp. The so-called pragmatic culture refers to the language cultural conventions and the rules that people should abide by the language link together with social and interpersonal
relationships. Pragmatic culture embodies the more characteristics of “how to use language” than language structure, semantics and culture change, so we also should pay attention to it in the cultural introduction of the language teaching.

In the practice of teaching Chinese as a foreign language, we really need to focus on the pragmatic culture in the communication culture. Chinese learners appear errors in everyday language due to the lack of pragmatic cultural knowledge. We will talk about it in several ways according to the examples below.

**Example 1:** At one o’clock in the afternoon, you meet a Chinese you know along the way, how do you say hello to him?

A: How are you? B: Good afternoon!

**Analysis:** No matter in which country, greeting is one of common courtesy. Greetings are used mostly in acquaintance and getting to know each other between people, especially the colleagues, classmates and their own families. People see each other several times a day, and every time they must say “hello”. But for different time and occasions, people say “hello” in different ways. In daily Chinese, the common greeting at noon and in the evening for “How are you?” The example duplicate language form “How are you?” and “Good afternoon!” in English and then result in pragmatic errors.

**Example 2:** International student David wrote a letter to his Chinese teacher Li Yan. His age is almost the same as his teacher, and they also get along very well. At the beginning of the letter, David writes like this:

Li Yan: How are you?
I went to Yunnan last week, and this trip left a deep impression on me……

**Question:** Is it suitable for David to call Li Yan?

A: Yes. It shows kindliness.
B: Yes. We are of almost same age.
C: No. Li Yan is a teacher.

**Analysis:** The Chinese pay attention to respect the teacher to keep a certain distance. That is to say, to communicate with teacher, respecting-rule is more suitable than closing-rule. Writing is more formal communication, and we should use respectful way to call the teacher. Choice C is the correct answer. Chinese learners lack of comprehensive understanding of the pragmatic culture, so they mistakenly chose Choice A and Choice B.

**Example 3:** The author had the opportunity to be invited to the apartment of several Japanese students to taste the characteristics of Japanese cuisine. The cooking of rice was different from China, and the taste was very good. During the meal, a Japanese student saw my bowl running short of rice, so she said to me: “Ms. Yu, do you want rice or not?”

**Analysis:** I could totally understand the meaning of words of the students. Though she called me teacher, but I was not feeling well. The phrase of “want rice” had the meaning of begging something, but the Japanese students did not know the implied meaning of “wanting rice”. It is very impolite to say it to guests. When dining, some words like “eat vinegar or eat tofu” are not at liberty to say, because these words have their special pragmatic cultural meanings. It is so easy to produce misunderstanding in communication.

**Example 4:** One day, Mr. Wang went out to play with foreign students John and Mary, and he let them use Chinese in practice. John’s enthusiasm was very high, and he asked the way on the street: “I’m sorry, which bus goes from here to the department store?” Then he asked someone to help taking pictures: “I’m sorry, would you like to take a photo for us?” After that he asked someone out of the way: “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, let’s go over there.” In front of the car, Mr. Wang and John reached out a hand to Mary at the same time, John said, “Behind you”, and Mr. Wang said: “please”. They went to a restaurant for dinner; John said to Mary, “Help yourself!” Mr. Wang says: “Please!”

**Analysis:** John mechanically equated “Sorry” with “Excuse me”. Whenever he can use English expression “Excuse me”, he is to use the Chinese “I’m sorry”, so that the words appear unnatural. In English, if someone asks someone to help to do something, or interrupt others’ talk, he can say “Excuse me”. But in Chinese, “I’m sorry” just means apologize. When getting on and having a
meal, John applies “After you” and “Help yourself”, actually in these two cases if you just say it is ok. Most of Westerners’ habit is to ask a guest to help yourself with the meaning of the guests, eat what they like. According to the Chinese habits, it is very polite to let guests eat more, help guests add food into a bowl, and pour wine into the cup.

**Conclusion**

Chinese language learners’ pragmatic errors play an important role in cross-cultural communication. Only the teachers of teaching Chinese as a foreign language give in-depth study of Chinese learners’ lack of pragmatic knowledge in daily pragmatics, they can better communicate with Chinese learners, thus smoothly teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

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