

Application of Multimodal Discourse Analysis in Intercultural Communication Teaching

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Abstract

Multimodal discourse analysis as a term flourished in 1990s in western countries (Zhu Yongsheng, 2007) and in the following years, multimodal approach has been hotly discussed especially in the field of foreign language teaching. In recent years, Chinese scholars also have begun to pay attention to it and put it into teaching practice, but mostly focus on how to make use of this new approach in reading class. This paper discusses the importance and great significance of multimodality in intercultural communication. After the analysis of the current teaching situation, the author suggests methods to strengthen the function of multimodality in intercultural communication teaching in order to improve college students' intercultural communication competence.

Key words: Multimodality; Intercultural communication; College English teaching

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INTRODUCTION

In the process of communication, human being not only use the verbal symbols, non-verbal symbols, gestures and facial expressions, but also use visual, aural and

spatial aspects of interaction to construct meaning in order to achieve the purpose of full communication. Since 1990s, van Leeuwen, Kress and some other scholars began to focus on the research of multiliteracy and multimodality. Van leeuwen(2005) thinks, "multimodality means the combination of different semiotic modes--for example. language and music--in a communicative artifact or event." Baldry & Thibault(2006) proposes, "multimodality refers to the diverse ways in which a number of distinct semiotic resources systems are both codevelop and co-contextualized in the making of a text-specific meaning".

In recent years, multimodality has attracted more attention in China. Li Zhanzi introduced the social semiotic work of image by Kress and van Leeuwen in 2003. After that, Hu Zhuanglin, Zhang Delu and some other scholars have made comprehensive research on the theoretical foundation of multimodal discourse analysis and application in practices. The primary significance of multimodal discourse analysis lies in its combination of language with other relative meaningful resources (Gibbon, 2000), through which not only can we make clear the role that the linguistic system plays during the exchange of information, but also we can see the effect of other semiotic system such as image, color and so on (Zhu Yongsheng, 2007). Limited by scientific technology, few people carried research on multimodality before, but with the development of multimedia and corpus, the study on multimodality becomes more and more practical (Zhu Yongsheng, 2007). When it comes to language teaching, we can realize that it is far from satisfaction if we only reply on monomodal discourse—the language itself, and we should pay due attention to other ways of communication such as color, image and movement and so on. With the development of information technology, we should cultivate the students' multiliteracy. So we should introduce multimodal discourse analysis to our English class to make it possible to let the students

experience the multimodality of communication, improve their ability of reading all the media, and eventually help them to enhance their multiliteracy to meet the challenges from economic globalization and cultural diversity.

1. STATUS QUO OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION TEACHING

The term “intercultural communication” was first put forward by American anthropologist Edward T. Hall in *The Silent Language* (1959). Later, some other scholars give their understanding of the term. For example, Samovar, Porter and Stefani propose that intercultural communication is “communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event”.

With the globalization of economy, more and more people will be exposed to intercultural communication. However, due to different social customs, people from different countries hold different values, different ways of thinking and different behaviors. All these would bring barriers to communication. Therefore, how to improve the intercultural competence becomes an urgent topic, especially for the college students.

Under such circumstances, Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China proposed in the *College English Curriculum Requirements* in 2007 that our English teaching goal is “under the guidance of theories of foreign language teaching, College English has knowledge and practical skills of the English language, learning strategies and intercultural communication as its main components.”

Generally speaking, we have not given appropriate attention to intercultural awareness that it deserves during our College English teaching. The reasons contribute to the situation include:

First, some teachers only teach cultural knowledge but seldom talks about cultural awareness. As we know the cultivation of cultural awareness is a long process of accumulation and the accumulation of cultural knowledge does not necessarily lead to cultural awareness, for these are two different things.

Secondly, we do not have a systematic way of cultivating students’ cultural awareness. Although some teachers can do this cultivation actively, we do not have a complete, accurate and systematic description regarding how to improve students’ cultural awareness at the level of teaching syllabus.

Thirdly, in our assessment system, cultural awareness is not a separate element. Consequently, neither the teachers nor the students will regard cultural awareness as an important task during teaching and learning.

In order to understand the students’ intercultural communicative competence, the authors give his students a test, which includes aspects from English culture

learning, cross-cultural awareness to actual application in daily life. 77 valid questionnaires are returned.

The questionnaire results show, in the cultural learning, all the students think that language and culture are closely related and culture learning is helpful to English study. 56.6% of students conform that English teachers often give culture teaching, but mainly in the introduction of a new text. Most of the students admit that, besides the teachers’ instruction, their access to British and American cultural knowledge mainly comes from film, novel and information on the internet.

In the cross cultural consciousness, 44.16% of students think they can be aware of the different cultures when communicating with people from different countries. 46.75% students express they know clearly that their values would influence the resolution in cultural conflict. 42.86% of students think they could evaluate the foreigners’ behavior objectively. Thus, most of the students have intercultural awareness and they are clear when communicating with foreigners, both parties should objectively evaluate the other’s behavior.

In the intercultural knowledge application, students know answers to etiquette problems, but in case study, students could not give the correct answer. Through the questionnaire, the author find that the students’ intercultural awareness have greatly improved than before, their cultural learning is relatively more active, but the intercultural communication ability in practice is not so good, which can be seen from the following three aspects: value, way of thinking and non-verbal communication.

2. MULTIMODAL APPLICATION IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION TEACHING

Intercultural communication ability is one of our teaching goals, but intercultural communication is not an independent course, College English teachers should combine cultivating students’ intercultural communication ability with College English teaching process. In order to give students deep impression, teachers should do as follows:

- The first step of an English class, usually teachers will give students cultural background information. They should prepare some relevant stories or historical knowledge beforehand and give new words and phrases related to it. When displaying the cultural background information, teachers can make good use of multimodal approach. For example, when introducing Thanksgiving Day, teachers can firstly ask students to listen to a tape and answer some related questions: which day is Thanksgiving Day? Who called Thanksgiving Day the one holiday that is purely American? And then, teachers can illustrate the origin of Thanksgiving Day, the customs and celebrations with some pictures or videos to reflect the historical

events and American life. After the explanation, teachers can compare the Thanksgiving Day with our Mid-Autumn Day, because both are days for family reunion despite different origins. And through such comparison, it is easier for the students to have a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the festival.

- When turning to details of a text, teachers should give students important vocabulary, phrases and expressions because these are the basics for students to learn English well. In this step, teachers may explain sentences with some pictures and voices which can make students have the feeling of being on the spot. For example, when teachers want to mention the different parts of a car, it is impossible to drive a car into the classroom. Under such circumstances, teachers can display a car picture. When teachers explain the brake, a brake noise can be used, and meanwhile, a video of a man's braking can also be played. With such method, students can have a good understanding of the function of the brake and also can remember the word "brake" clearly. After explaining the different parts of a car, teachers can mention the different driving rules in different countries. For example, in China, America, Canada, Cuba, Brazil, Germany and Greece, etc, you should drive right, but in Britain, Japan, India, Singapore, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, and some other countries, you should drive left. Some other regulations can also be mentioned: in Italy, no vehicles are allowed to move in the historical and cultural scenic. Or else, you will be fined. In America, according to law, any children below 12 years old should sit in the back seat. All these can help students have a clear understanding of the saying: do in Rome as Rome does.

- In the detailed reading, teachers should pay special attention to Western value explanation, and compare western and Chinese traditional values. In intercultural communication, value is a crucial problem to culture. Because the cultural differences caused by values will influence all aspects of life. For example, when reading a text about the educational differences, teachers should make students understand that the American parents cherish individual rights and freedom. They treat their children as individuals, focusing on children's independence, which is quite different from Chinese. The deep root is that Chinese people are greatly influenced by Collectivism. People count on their in-group (relatives, clans, organizations) to look after them, and in exchange for that they believe they owe absolutely loyalty to the group.

- After reading the text, students should be required to do various exercises. In the role-play section, teachers can create a context, choosing related social problems as background and making all students involved. For example, after reading a text about traffic, teachers can create a context of traffic accident, and several students can be required to play the role of parties involved in the traffic accident. Talk will be expanded around why the

accident happened, who violated the traffic regulation, which parts of the car were damaged, who was the casualty and how the policemen coped with the accident. In this way, on one hand, students will review the different traffic rules in different countries and remember them clearly. On the other hand, students have become the main participants in the communication, gained more experience to achieve effective communication and their learning motivation and learning interest would be greatly aroused.

But in the whole process, teachers also should pay attention to the following tips:

- Multimodality is important in supplementing the traditional classroom teaching mode. Nowadays, many College English reading and writing courses still take the traditional teaching mode, which mainly depends on teachers' instruction. Under such circumstance, students generally think learning English is boring. Therefore, in order to arouse students' English learning interests, it is urgent to build new multimodal teaching mode.

- Teaching methods should be changed according to different teaching aims. For different majors, the same materials can be taught in different ways. Teachers should play the leading role well with combination of instruction and interaction, taking the best advantage of diverse means with the use of multimodal modes to overcome the traditional single teaching method and improve students' learning interest. Only if students gain great self-confidence, the ultimate goal of improving their English level can be achieved.

- Teachers should make students understand the ultimate goal of College English teaching is to cultivate their communicative competence. After class, teachers should require students to read English newspapers, magazines and novels, listen to English songs, watching English movies and so on. Students should be required to find out the cultural differences between China and English-speaking countries and share them in class. In addition, English club activities such as English corner and some other extracurricular activities should also be fully used to create English communication environment to improve the students' interest in communication.

- Nonverbal behavior also can present different cultural characteristics. Teachers must pay attention to the use of nonverbal behaviors in classroom. The interpretations of the same nonverbal behavior in different cultures, sometimes, will lead to misleading or disgust responses. For example, when greeting children to come up to adults, English-speaking people may greet with palm down to his/her own direction, but in China it is quite on the contrary, such behavior is often used when calling adults. Because of the different cultural background, significant cultural differences exist in the nonverbal communication between China and English-speaking countries. In the teaching process, if teachers can combine verbal language with the nonverbal behavior to make

students aware of these differences, in daily intercultural communication, students can understand the implied meaning of the behaviors to achieve the goal of successful intercultural communication with others.

- At the same time, the evaluation of the multimodal teaching is also important, which means we need pay attention to the effect of the teaching. Because if the teacher handles the different teaching methods harmoniously, it would strengthen the construction of meaning to make the content vivid and easier to be understood, otherwise it would bring contradiction, even make the students confused. It is a good way for the teacher to reflect on his own teaching video in order to find somewhere that is not reasonably done and improves it in the future. The students' comment is also an important factor through which the teacher can find which part is well explained and which is not. The teacher should often listen to the students' advice, and through this interaction the teacher can better improve his teaching.

- When it comes to the students, they should also learn multimodally. During lecture, they should learn to understand the meaning conveyed by all the media such as image, letter, color and even nonverbal communication. The students should also learn how they function coordinately in constructing any specific meaning. But the more important thing is that the students should put what they have learned into practice, which means they should actively take part in the activities organized by the teacher either during class or after class such as question answering, debating, speech, group discussion and role playing and so on, for these activities are designed to train the students ability of multimodal information expressing and eventually help them to express themselves accurately and completely by using each possible modality in order to achieve successful communication.

CONCLUSION

Multimodality emphasizes the multiple forms of literacy, information exchange and some other related factors. The New London Group advocates that classroom teaching should help students to be bravely confronted

with the challenges brought by the cultural pluralism and diversification. For a long time, English teaching has mainly aimed at reading skill; the intercultural communication competence has been ignored. But the ultimate goal of English learning should be to help students communicate with other countries to meet the requirements of globalization. Multimodality brings image, video, audio and so on for students to understand the meaning of words and know more customs of foreign cultures as if being personally on the scene, which the traditional teaching mode can not compare. Only through this method, can students really be interested in English class and really attain the goal of improving the intercultural communication competence.

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