The Impact of Cultural Transfer on

Cross-cultural Communication

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Abstract

The core of cross-cultural communication is to improve the cross-cultural communicative competence of English learners. Cultural transfer of first language is the most influential element on cross-cultural communication. This paper mainly discusses the impact of cultural transfer on cross-cultural communication, and practical and effective methodology to improve the cross-cultural communication and to do research on this subject.

Keywords: Cross-cultural communication, Cultural transfer, Communicative competence

1. Cross-cultural Communication

Cross-culture communication is a subject which concerns many other subjects. As an independent academic subject, the history of cross-cultural communication is not so long, but as a social phenomenon, its history is as long as the human history and it can be dated from the era of tribes. In modern society, we all take the book of Hall, The Silent Language, as the beginning of cross-cultural communication. And from then on, anthropology, sociology, psychology and linguistics started to do research on cross-cultural communication and gave their own idea on it. So the study on cross-cultural communication became more and more popular.

As for the concept of cross-cultural communication, there are kinds of opinions. We define cross-cultural communication as a subject which focuses on the communicative activities of people from different cultural background and the essence and rules of the communicative activities (Jia, 1997, 563). And we must understand that "cross-cultural" not only means the communication of different countries, but also the communication of people from different nations, different social status and so on.

Cross-cultural communication became mature with the depth of the study, and in 1970s, some scholars give the concept of cross-cultural communicative competence on the base of cross-cultural communication, so we can regard cross-cultural communicative competence as the practical usage of the cross-cultural communication theory.

1.1 Origin and Concept of Cross-cultural Communicative Competence

When referring to the origin of cross-cultural communicative competence, we should mention Chomsky and Hymes because they two first raised the concept of "competence". In 1965, Chomsky gave a detailed and strict distinction of two important concepts—competence and performance. He believed that competence indicates the speaker's and the listener's internalized linguistic knowledge, so the practical usage of language doesn't interfere. While performance means the practical usage of language in a specific situation or indicates everybody's practical usage of language in a unique linguistic "society". He also pointed out that linguistic theory must firstly focus on the speaker and listener in a homogeneous linguistic "society". So obviously, Chomsky paid more attention to "competence", but not the language itself.

And Hymes believed the "competence" Chomsky mentioned was only the linguistic competence which cannot include all the practical usage of language in a unique linguistic "society". And in his opinion, he took linguistic competence as a part of communicative competence. So communicative competence can not only give the person the ability to learn a language but also provide him the capability to use the language properly in the society. He also gave four parameters on communicative competence—degree of possibility, feasibility, appropriateness and performance.

After the appearance of communicative competence, more and more scholars did research on it, and at last gave a clear and detailed concept to it. In 1970s', scholars believed that communicative competence includes linguistic competence, social linguistic competence, and pragmatic competence. The core of their theory is the acclimation to the society which decides the use of the language (Hymes, 1971, 23). But when we survey it from the perspective of cross-cultural communication, we can find the theory is insufficient: first, though it concerned about the rules of society objectively, it didn't mention the purpose of the communicators; second, the content of communicative competence must go deeper

and boarder or it can not show the dynamic development of cross-cultural communication. So according to the opinions of Spitzberg (1994), cross-cultural communicative competence must indicate: "the competence which follows the acclimation rules to the society and meanwhile achieve the purpose of the cross-cultural communication."(Spitzberg, 1994, 129)

1.2 The System of Cross-cultural Communicative Competence

Broadly speaking, cross-cultural communicative competence can be generalized into three levels: (Pan, 1996, 7)

System of Communication Competence Basics: This system mainly indicates the communicative competence which an individual must occupy and must be related to the social rules, such as language and gestures, social linguistic competence and acclimation rules, relevant communicative knowledge, motivates of the communication, method to recognize and social cultural knowledge.

Episodic Competence Communicative System: It means the individual has the competence to give a brand new reflection in a specific scene or a specific communicative snippet. This system includes these two variables: first, to show higher communicative status; second, to fulfill the expectation of others in order to get a higher evaluation.

Relational Competence System: The core of this system is the quality of the communication. And the relational quality is the specific symbol of the effectiveness of the communication: first, the communicators must be both "free" and "intimate"; second, similarities of the cultures must be the very hypothesis, and meanwhile the differences of the cultures must be sacrificed a little; third, communicating the sensibility; fourth, use acclimation instead of egotism.

In this communicative competence system, it is easy to see the four parameters in the system, and this system is the basis for people to discuss the impact of cultural transfer on cross-cultural communication, especially cross-cultural communicative competence.

2. Cultural Transfer

Under the trend of globalization, culture is becoming a "melting pot", so the purpose for English learners to study a language is to communicate with others freely and correctly. A successful communication not only requires you a good mastery of foreign language, but also the knowledge of the differences of different cultures and the practice of the knowledge. Therefore, the corresponding culture of language is what the learners should learn if they want to study a language. Next, we will discuss culture transfer which plays an important role in both the foreign language study and the language itself.

2.1 Concept and Development of Cultural Transfer Theory

Culture transfer is the cultural interference caused by cultural difference. Generally speaking, it means that in culture communication, people use their own culture rules and value to guide their words and deeds, even thoughts, and they also use these as standards to judge the words and deeds of others.

To analyze the forms and essence of cultural transfer, researchers should first define and classify culture. Culture contains the things people learn in their whole life, including languages, deeds, faith and the martial and spiritual base for living. The big concept of culture can be divided into three levels (Hu, 1997. 35): the first level is the material culture altered and processed by people's subjective thoughts; the second level is the systematic culture including the political and economic systems, legal and artistic works and the deeds and habits of people; the third level is the psychological level which contains the life value, thought pattern, moral standard, religious feeling and so on. Though this classification is not specific and clear enough, it can show the essence of cultural transfer.

According to the classification, culture transfer can be described as two kinds: surface-structure transfer and deep-structure transfer. The first and second culture levels belong to the surface-structure transfer, so if people care a little, they can find the differences of cultures in these aspects. The deep-structure transfer indicates the transfer of the culture in the third cultural level, and since it's the psychological elements, it is difficult to feel.

You may ask why cultural transfer is the biggest barrier in cross-cultural communication. This is mainly because the national culture is so impressed in the deep heart of people in that nation. Ever since they were born, they had received the national cultural influence, and no matter what they did, they were guided by the national culture. And people all take their own culture as the center, so they believe that only doing things as people around do is correct, or the action will be wrong and unacceptable. This opinion can help national union on one hand, but on the other hand, it will cause misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication.

There are a lot of research on cultural transfer and the relationship between culture and foreign language learning. In 1940s', the American linguists C.C.Feris (1945) and Robert Lado (1957) advocated paying more attention to culture in the teaching of foreign language and they asked the learners to understand the cultural differences and do cultural comparison. Moreover, Social linguists also gave some information about cultural transfer. For example, British linguist, Jenny Thomas, did a successful research on the interference of cultural difference on the cross-cultural communication.

She divided the failure in the cross-cultural communication into two kinds (Thomas, 1983, 3): pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure. Correspondingly, pragmalinguistic failure is the surface-structure transfer, and sociopragmatic failure is the deep-structure transfer. From this we know that cultural transfer must play an important role in cross-cultural communication, and actually, Thomas' theory is the theoretical frame of cultural transfer and we can discuss the impact of cultural transfer on cross-cultural communication from the perspectives of surface-structure transfer and deep-structure transfer.

2.2 The Form of Cultural Transfer

Scholars of both linguistics and sociology did a lot of research on cultural transfer. Generally speaking they divided cultural transfer into two forms—surface-structure transfer and deep-structure transfer.

2.2.1 Surface-structure Transfer

The research on surface-structure transfer includes two parts: first, research on the culture of language forms; then, research on communicative matter and linguistic words and deeds.

Research on the culture of language forms mainly discusses the culture of vocabulary which can be classified into five parts.

a. There are no corresponding words in another language. For example, "Chun Jie" in Chinese, though it can be translated into "the Spring Festival", also needs explanation or people from western world cannot understand it.

b. The words have very strong historical or social implication, such as the meaning of "cowboy" to American.

c. Idioms. Because these expressions came from the ancient legends, religion or historical stories, they are the most difficult to understand.

d. Adages and proverbs. They are popular in the common people or said by some famous men.

e. Formulae and euphemisms. These expressions are different in different societies.

The five aspects do exist in real life. In fact learners use the vocabulary unconsciously, and this action can be regarded as an instinct. And at the same time, their knowledge of the English vocabulary is limited and the practice of the vocabulary is also not enough. As a result, the transfer of the first language vocabulary to the foreign language vocabulary is unavoidable for most learners.

In Lado's theory, at least three instances can bring cultural transfer (Ridge, 1957, 276): same meaning, different form; different meaning, same form; same meaning, same form, but different distribution. No matter in which case, the only way to avoid misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication is to do comparison between different cultures, and try to know the connotation of the word according to the corresponding culture.

As for research on communicative matter and linguistic words and deeds, we know that any communication is combined with the natural, social and cultural environment, so research on the cultural background can help learners understand the differences between communication rules and language rules in other nations.

For example, a Chinese employee (training manager) in a foreign company introduced the American speaker in the Chinese way when the training would start like this: "Now, let's welcome Mr. Smith to give us an excellent and enlightening speech." That is an introduction to a VIP in Chinese people's opinions, but this American was not happy, and it seemed that he was a little angry, because the American's understanding of this sentence was just to the opposite: he felt that the host was not confident of him and tried to encourage him to show all his abilities. Obviously, that misunderstanding is caused by the cultural differences of the linguistic deeds.

Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) gave the Speech Acts Theory, which can explain the phenomenon of cultural transfer. They distinguished three kinds of languages (Searle, 1969, 56): locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. The key point is the illocutionary act, because the same sentence from different culture can bring different illocutionary act, as the analysis of the former example – the same sentence from the Chinese brings the misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication only because he is facing a person from a different culture.

2.2.2 Deep-structure Transfer

The deep-structure transfer is on the psychological level, so the impact of the life values and thought patterns are not clear in a specific dialogue except for the speakers are all very familiar with these two cultures. It is why there is misunderstanding in the communication but the speakers are still confused. And moreover, this is caused by the long-term habits and thoughts, it is difficult to overcome.

Chinese would like to express things in a circumbendibus way and let others guess the implication, while American prefers speaking things directly. For example,

Mr. Smith: It looks like we are going to have kept the production line running on Saturday.

Mr. Wu: I see.

Mr. Smith: Can you come in on Saturday?

Mr. Wu: Yes. I think so.

Mr. Smith: That'll be a great help.

Mr. Wu: Saturday is a special day, did you know?

Mr. Smith: How do you mean?

Mr. Wu: It's my son's birthday.

Mr. Smith: How nice. I hope you all enjoy it very much.

Mr. Wu: Thank you. I appreciate your understanding.

In this dialogue, Mr. Wu's English is perfect, but his communication is a failure. He didn't want to work on Saturday, but he also didn't want to refuse directly, so he told his American boss in a circumbendibus way, but his boss cannot understand him because of the differences in the way of communication and thought pattern.

This example can show that deep-structure transfer exists commonly in communication, and that's why some people cannot communicate properly though they have a good mastery of English.

From the sample, we know that even some sophisticated English users cannot communicate properly and successfully, let alone the beginners. Why? The answer can be found in Dilin Liu's three hypotheses (Liu, 1995, 143):

First, even though people learn English and contact with the corresponding culture for a long time, the cultural transfer will still continue.

Then, even though the English learners know the surface-structure differences of the mother language culture and target language culture, it doesn't mean that they also know the deep-structure cultural transfer.

Finally, even knowing the cultural difference doesn't mean that English learners can avoid or abandon the mother language cultural transfer subconsciously.

These three hypotheses are proved to be true through observation and questionnaire. In other words, cultural transfer has a deep impact on the English learners and moreover, it is difficult to abandon it. So it reminds English learners especially the senior English learners of the importance of cultural difference.

3. The Impact of Cultural Transfer

3.1 The Impact of Cultural Transfer

From the analysis of surface-structure transfer and deep-structure transfer, we can feel the impact of cultural transfer on cross-cultural communication, but what the specific impact is like? Next we will generalize the impact as follows:

Cultural transfer forms the base to cross-cultural communication because it beings the difference of cultures. As we know, traditional cross-cultural communication mainly concerns about the cultural differences which is the core of cultural transfer. Scholars tried to find ways to reduce cross-cultural misunderstanding. If there were no cultural differences, there wouldn't be cross-cultural communication.

Cultural transfer is the motive of cultural diversity, which can enhance the development of culture, so it supplies new material for the research of cross-cultural communication continually. We all know that cultural differences are caused by cultural transfer, and actually cultural differences are the main content of cultural diversity. The basic content of cross-cultural communication is the diversity of cultural, so if we ignore cultural transfer, we won't find the essence of communicative acts.

Cultural transfer supplies the possibility to talk about the commonness of culture, which gives a new perspective in the research of cross-cultural communication. Then the research on the communicative acts can be more and more significant.

Both surface-structure transfer and deep-structure transfer are the main causes of cultural misunderstanding, so they show the essences more clearly, which is good for us to find out the ways to solve the problems radically. As we know, cultural transfer theory shows the reasons of communicative misunderstanding psychologically, so if we put this theory into our research on cross-cultural communication, we can solve the problem effectively.

These impacts contain nearly all the aspects of cross-cultural communication, and through the theory of surface-structure transfer and deep-structure transfer, we can see them more clearly and in the future study, we should try to avoid the impact of cultural transfer.

3.2 The Methodology

As talked before, the core of cross-cultural communication is the improvement of cross-cultural communicative

competence (Hu, 1994, 893). As we know, cultural transfer is the main cause of cross-cultural misunderstanding. So specifically, we will give learners a methodology to avoid the failure in cross-culture communication and try to improve the communicative competence.

Trying to get familiar with the foreign culture is the first step. This step is mainly about cultivating the system of communication competence and trying to avoid the surface-structure transfer. It gives the basic competence to go into cross-cultural communication, and mainly concerns about some easy knowledge. At this level, the very job is to read about books on foreign culture including the higher culture, popular culture and deep culture.

Trying to understand the value of foreign culture is the second step. This step is on the episodic competence communicative system because you must know the differences of values, then you can give a corresponding answer. Meanwhile, it also tries to avoid the surface-structure transfer because it is the process for you to understand the values but not accept the values. It is easy for us to get the knowledge of foreign culture, but understanding it can take you more time.

Trying to compare cultural differences and use the knowledge to avoid misunderstandings spontaneously and suitably is the final level. At this level, you can master the relational competence system and avoid deep-structure transfer. In this process, the learners not only know the culture, understand the culture, but also give their opinions so that they can do cross-cultural communication freely and correctly. After this step, the learners have a good mastery of both language and culture, so their communicative competence can supply them a better performance in the cross-cultural communication.

4. Conclusion

Through the analysis of cross-cultural communication, communicative competence and the impact of cultural transfer on cross-cultural communication, we can forecast that cross-cultural communication will help us a lot when dealing with the cultural differences and cultural conflicts. The final purpose of this subject is to cut the misunderstandings and confusions caused by cultural differences.

Any academic theory must develop on the base of speculation, but the only purpose is to guide the practical activity of human beings. This paper mainly introduces cross-cultural communication and cultural transfer theory, and gives some suggestions for the practical life. If learners can understand the impact of cross-cultural communication, it will not be difficult to put the methodology into practice.

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