A Multi-dimensional Study on the English Class Reticence in Local Colleges

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Abstract: With multiple theories, English class reticence in local colleges is analyzed on the basis of investigations. Students have difficulties connecting their prior knowledge with the new one because of their deficiency in English and the unsuiTable learning materials. The collectivism and uncertainty avoidance in Chinese culture are cultural factors resulting in students' class silence. Besides, local college students bear too much anxiety and instrumental motivation, to which English class reticence is often attributed. Some suggestions are put forward with the hope of helping reduce the negative English class silence and benefit local college English teaching and learning.

1. Introduction

The College Enrollment Expansion Policy has been implemented for nearly two decades, which has not only provided increased opportunities for more students to receive higher education but also helped to select and train more qualified youngsters for the country. With the rising number of people cultivated in colleges, the general quality of Chinese people has been improved. However, as the saying goes, every coin has two sides. Yearly increased undergraduates cause unexpected problems for colleges, especially for the local ones, among which the poor performance of students in English classes is a headache for local college teachers in recent years. Most teachers complain students seldom respond to questions or activities in classes. Students are unwilling to speak their mind and reticence is a common phenomenon in classes. As is known to all, language acquisition cannot happen if there is not enough output. Therefore, how to diminish the negative class-reticence becomes a new concern for many local college English teachers.

2. Definitions of Reticence and Class Reticence

2.1 What is Reticence?

According to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, the word "reticence" means the unwillingness of a person to talk about his or her feelings or thoughts.[1] Researchers point out reticence or silence functions in communication, but conveys different meanings in different settings and contexts. The U.S. linguists Muriel Saville-Troike and Deborah Tannen believed the function of silence was "delimiting the beginning and end of utterances."[2] From social and cultural perspectives, Bosacki defined "silence" differently: "(1) a sign of rejection; (2) fear of social evaluation; (3) a feeling of invisibility; (4) expressing social disinterest; (5) intense intellectual engagement." [3] It seems reticence or silence is not always negative.

2.2 What is Class Reticence?

Class reticence has been described and studied earlier abroad than at home. In 1959, the U.S. anthropologist and cross-cultural communication expert, Edward T. Hall claimed: "silence provides nonverbal clues to the cultural beliefs and activities of a given group." [4] Inspired by Hall, many scholars began to study the group silence, especially class reticence. Those scholars proved class reticence mainly referred to the silence or little reaction of students to teachers, which was the direct and major reason for most student-teacher conflicts. In 2001, researcher Petress confirmed several reasons of students' reticence: "personalities; personal anxiety and cultural part."[5]

Since 1990s, Chinese scholars have noticed and studied the students' reticence in foreign language classes. Some scholars found teachers' teaching style is the crucial factor that can cause students' silence in class, while others believe it's students' characters and their learning habits that mainly result in class reticence. Some experts claim compared with western cultures, Asian culture tends to be conservative and people there would be more reluctant to express themselves directly. All the present researches have demonstrated class silence with certain perspectives, but they may not provide a comprehensive understanding to the problem. What's more, most studies treat students' class silence as a whole and haven't distinguished students of key universities from those of local colleges. As is known to all, local college students have different characteristics from prestigious university students, and the reasons of their class silence would not be the same. Furthermore, undergraduates born in 1990s and 2000s have distinct growing experiences from their senior students and thus they possess new features in learning. Based on questionnaires and interviews, this study tries to seek the reasons of English class reticence among local colleges from multiple dimensions.

3. Causes for English Class Reticence in Local Colleges

3.1 On the Constructivism Theory

As a branch of cognitive psychology, constructivism stresses the key role of learners in learning. It claims that knowledge cannot be taught directly from teachers to students. Instead, with the help of teachers and others, learners acquire new knowledge through constructing relationship between their prior experiences and information with the new one. That is to say, learners are not passive and obedient. They are the subjects of class activities. Correspondingly, teachers should be a helper and organizer in class, providing all necessary resources and co-operational assistance. As for the learning materials and resources, they should be guided by the theory of proximal development zone put forward by Lev Vygotsky.

According to the constructivism, it is found that in local college English teaching, the materials are not suiTable for students to connect their original knowledge to the new one. In other words, the learning materials are against the proximal development zone theory. During investigation, some students complain the college English is difficult for them since most of them haven't learned English well in high schools. Due to the College Enrollment Expansion Policy, those that could have not entered colleges have the chance to receive higher education, but most of them can hardly adapt to college learning because of their inadequate knowledge accumulation. In English classes, many students can't follow the teachers' instruction and they have to keep silence in most time. In addition, the English teaching materials in some local colleges are still the New Horizon English (2nd edition) or other books, the passages of which are out of date and could hardly arouse contemporary students' interests. Some students admit they don't like the English book and they are reluctant to learn from it. Second, the traditional teaching styles are another obstacle keeping students from speaking themselves. Constructivists believe students are the center in learning, while some English teachers are used to their hero role in classes, and have difficulties making a change. So they hope students follow their conventional teaching modes, namely, they teach or talk mostly in classes, which greatly prevent students from interacting with them in classes.

3.2 On the Intercultural Communication Theory

"Culture is a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of a society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning."[6] Nothing in the world is like culture that is ubiquitous, multidimensional, complex, and all pervasive. Compared with students from western cultures, Chinese students are more likely to be silent in classes.

First, the collectivism in Chinese culture makes Chinese students believe "I" is always inferior to "we". And the individual is emotionally dependent on organizations and institutions. Thus, it is not common for students to speak their minds without considering their groups' attitudes. Chinese

students tend to be silent when most of their classmates don't answer the teacher's questions or refuse to be active. What must be pointed out is this phenomenon has become less serious recently since the current students are the generation influenced more by western cultures. Second, the uncertainty avoidance in Chinese culture makes Chinese students try to avoid uncertainty and ambiguity in classes. Professor Geert Hofstede claimed uncertainty and avoidance indicated "the extent to which a culture feels threatened by or anxious about uncertain and ambiguous situations."[7]Roughly, Chinese culture is a high-uncertainty-avoidance one. As the Chinese saying goes, "The bird which takes the lead gets shot first", many Chinese students are reluctant to express their thoughts if they feel the thoughts may vary from others'. And they often expect their teachers to be the experts who have all the answers.

3.3 On the Affective Filter Hypothesis

In psychology, affect refers to one's emotion or desire influencing behaviors. Affective factors in foreign language learning are the emotion or feelings that learners bear during their learning. The common affective factors include interest, anxiety, motivation and self-esteem. Linguist H.H.Stern believed learners' affect in language learning was decisive for the success of their language acquisition.[8] As far as the English class reticence in local colleges is concerned, this study found students' anxiety and instrumental motivation are the two factors that mostly influence learners' output.

First, too much anxiety prevents students from committing themselves to English learning. Over half of the students investigated in this study say they haven't been good at English ever since they began to learn it in junior middle schools. They feel it is so hard to improve it. And a few students are so anxious in English class that they become nervous and worried when attending it. Second, questionnaires show 77% undergraduates learn English for practical purposes. These students assume good English ability would ensure them better jobs and more opportunities for further study. So they try to get higher marks in English exams or contests even though many of them don't like English at all. It seems usefulness is the only reason these students learn English and that's why they are unwilling to take part in class activities, like discussions or games, which they regard as useless in helping them gain satisfactory marks in exams.

The U.S. linguist Stephen D. Krashen indicates that in second language learning, learners' affective factors can be a "filter" and "comprehensible input may not be utilized by second language acquirers if there is a 'mental block' that preventing them fully profiting from it."[9] According to Krashen, serious anxiety and too much instrumental motivation are the "mental block" that would impede students English acquisition. Though to some extent, instrumental motivation may push students learn English, it wouldn't function as better and long-lasting as integrative motivation could.

4. Conclusion

Definitely, the factors mentioned above are not all the causes of English class reticence, to which there are many other complex reasons, such as teaching styles, students' personalities, self-esteem, educational ecological factors, and so on. For local college English teachers, it is their responsibility to assess students' language level, work out practicable teaching schemes, and establish friendly and beneficial teacher-student relationship. Students, on the other hand, should try to overcome the cultural obstacles and join in class interactions, which have been proved as effective ways to promote language acquisition. In addition, students' negative affective factors deserve close attention. Teachers and colleges should change the exam-oriented assessment tradition and with more encouragement and interest-arousing plans help students foster integrative motivation and relieve their anxiety.

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