

Application of Cooperative Principle in College English Listening Comprehension

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Abstract

In terms of college English listening comprehension, the students in mainland of China should figure out the explicit communicative intention of the speakers and the implicit communicative intention of the speakers as well. Guided by the cooperative principle in pragmatics, this essay has a preliminary discussion on the use of the principle in the listening comprehension of non-English majors, which aims to help the students to figure out the communicative intention (especially the implicit communicative intention) of the speakers successfully. Consciously using pragmatics in college English listening comprehension could promote the sound development of college English teaching and learning in mainland China.

Keywords: Listening comprehension, College English teaching and learning, Cooperative principle

1. Introduction

The objective of listening teaching and learning is to make the students figure out the explicit communicative intention based on the form and meaning of the language, and figure out the implicit communicative intention based on explicit communicative intention according to different context of situation and context of culture. The process of listening comprehension is a thought process, which can be theoretically analyzed with the knowledge of pragmatics. In terms of college English teaching and learning in mainland of China, non-English majors don't learn the theory of pragmatics systematically; generally, they just do much language practicing. This essay has a preliminary discussion on the use of the cooperative principle in the listening comprehension of non-English majors and aims to help the students to conduct the listening comprehension analysis more intentionally.

2. Cooperative Principle

In terms of how to make the inference in the communication and how listeners infer the intention of the speakers in a specific context, Herbert Paul Grice (1975), a British-educated philosopher of language, introduced the cooperative principle which deals with the understanding of the utterance meaning. Cooperative principle refers to make your conversational contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged; speakers and listeners usually cooperate with each other very well in order to communicate smoothly. In other words, speakers try to contribute meaningful, productive utterances to further the conversation and the listeners (who are the conversational partners) are doing the same. In the vast majority of conversations, it's safe to assume that both participants are trying to be cooperative.

The cooperative principle being very rough and general, to specify the principle, Grice came up with the following four maxims of conversation which embody the cooperative communication. The first is maxim of quantity, which refers to the utterance, should be as informative as required and it should not be more informative than is required. The second is maxim of quality, which refers to try to make the utterance be true, do not say what you believe to be false, do not say that for which you lack enough evidence. The third is maxim of relation, which refers to the utterance, should be relevant. The fourth is maxim of manner, which refers to the utterance, should be perspicuous, brief, and orderly, avoid obscure expression, avoid ambiguous expression.

Assume that the speakers observe the cooperative principle; therefore, there is one and only one explanation of the utterance of the speakers which is consistent with the cooperative principle. The listeners can infer the

communicative intention of the speakers based on the cooperative principle, the context and the literal meaning of the sentence.

3. Application of Cooperative Principle

3.1 In general, non-English majors in mainland of China don't learn the theory of pragmatics. In order to help them to infer the communicative intention more easily and smoothly, college English teachers should intentionally teach them the relevant theory, such as the cooperative principle. After learning the cooperative principle, non-English majors could infer the communicative intention based on the maxims mentioned above, which will be exemplified in the following teaching materials. All the examples below are cited from the book named Listening and Speaking of New Horizon College English(hereinafter referred to as Listening and Speaking) , which is published by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press and is widely used by the non-English majors in mainland of China.

(1) M: If I lose this dictionary, how should I replace it?

W: Go to a bookstore and obtain another copy.

Question: What should the man do if he loses this dictionary?

- A. Borrow another copy from his friend. B. Purchase another copy.
C. Ask the owner of a bookstore. D. Write to a bookstore.

This short conversation is cited from Unit 1, Book 2 of Listening and Speaking. In this conversation, the man asks the woman if he loses the dictionary, how he should replace it. The woman advises him to go to a bookstore and buy another copy. Because the participants in this conversation observe the cooperative principle, it is easy for the students to choose the correct answer B according to the maxim and the literal meaning of the sentence.

(2) M: A little teenage rebellion is normal. Your son will get over it.

W: I know. I'm just worried about him doing something that will ruin his life.

Q: Why is the woman worried about her son?

- A. Because her son's rebellion might not end.
B. Because her son's actions might ruin his own life.
C. Because her son's teenage life is not normal.
D. Because her son's life is ruining his father.

This short conversation is cited from Unit 2, Book 1 of Listening and Speaking. In this conversation, the man says that a teenage rebellion is normal and the woman's son will get over it. The woman says that she knows it is normal and she is just worried about him doing something that will ruin his life. The participants in this conversation observe the cooperative principle; therefore it is not difficult for the students to choose the correct answer B according to the maxim and the literal meaning of the sentence.

(3) W: I'd really like to make a good impression in class.

M: Well, so long as you pay attention, you shouldn't have a problem.

Q: How can the woman make a good impression in class?

- A. By not having problems. B. By not staying so long.
C. By really liking the class. D. By paying attention.

This short conversation is cited from Unit 2, Book 1 of Listening and Speaking. In this conversation, the woman says that she would really like to make a good impression in class. In response to that, the man tells her that so long as she pays attention, she shouldn't have a problem.

In this conversation, the participants observe the cooperative principle which can be shown in the clear response of the man to the woman; therefore, the students can infer the correct answer is D according to the literal meaning of the sentence when they practice the listening comprehension.

3.2 According to the theory of Grice, the explanation obtained through inference is called conversational implicature, which involves generalized implicature and particularized implicature. Generalized implicature refers to the implicature obtained from the speaker's utterance when the speaker observes the cooperative principle and its maxims. In the college English listening teaching and learning classroom of the writers, the students can often infer the generalized implicature smoothly. For example, the students can easily get the correct answers when they listen

to the three short conversations mentioned in 3.1.

Particularized implicature refers to the speaker violates certain maxim of the cooperative principle and forces the listener to infer the meaning according to the specific context. Under this circumstance, the speaker violates certain maxim; however, he is cooperative and observes the general cooperative principle. So, the utterance of the speaker undoubtedly contains a particular meaning which is different from the literal meaning but meets the need of communication. The listener can infer the meaning of the speaker which is behind the violation of the maxim.

In the college English listening comprehension classroom teaching, the most difficult part for most students is to figure out the particularized implicature. Therefore, college English teachers in mainland of China should guide the students to infer the implicature which is different from the literal meaning based on the cooperative principle and the specific context.

(4) W: Prof. Wang's lecture yesterday evening was so dull!

M: I'll say. I had one eye on the clock the whole time.

Question: What can we infer from the man's reply?

A. He hurt his eye this morning.

B. His clock was a very unusual one.

C. He found the subject of the lecture uninteresting.

D. The lecture lasted more than one hour.

This short conversation is cited from Unit 1, Book 2 of Listening and Speaking. In this conversation, the woman said Prof. Wang's lecture yesterday evening was so dull. The man didn't respond to the woman directly, he just said that he had one eye on the clock the whole time. Assume that the man was cooperative, then, it can only be inferred that the man thought the lecture of the professor was dull, too. Then, the correct answer C can be chosen out by the students.

(5) M: What do you think of the film on Channel 5 last night? It was about how a couple went through the hardships in their life.

W: I wish I'd stayed awake long enough to see the whole thing.

Q: What does the woman mean?

A: The film was too long to see.

B. The film was not interesting.

C. She slept through the film.

D. She turned to another channel.

This short conversation is cited from Unit 3, Book 2 of Listening and Speaking. In this conversation, the man asks the woman what she thinks of the film on Channel 5 last night. The woman didn't respond to the man directly, she just said that she wished she'd stayed awake long enough to see the whole thing. The students in mainland China generally have a good understating of the subjunctive mood in English grammar. They know the rule of subjunctive mood is that when the speaker uses "wish" in his expression, then what he says in the expression hasn't actually happened. Therefore, when the students hear the word "wish" is used in the short conversation; they can infer that what really happens is the woman is asleep rather than awake. So, they can choose the correct answer C.

(6) W: You are the first person to extend help when I needed it.

M: Don't worry about it. That's what friends are for.

Q: What does the man tell the woman not to worry?

A: Because she only needs help, not worry..

B. Because she cannot get help from her friends.

C. Because the first person will help her..

D. Because friends will help her.

This short conversation is cited from Unit 3, Book 1 of Listening and Speaking. In this conversation, the woman tells the man that he is the first person to extend help when she needed it. The man says "Don't worry about it. That's what friends are for". What the man says doesn't clearly point out what the friend should do. However, students can infer that if a person is the woman's friend, the person will help her based on the words "extend help" said by the woman.

The cooperative principle of Grice interprets the inference nature of communication and provides an operational

model for the inference of conversational implicature. After learning the cooperative principle, non-English majors in mainland China can infer the communicative intention in the listening comprehension with the guidance of theory of pragmatics.

4. Conclusion

The chairman of “Advisory Committee of Foreign Language Teaching in Colleges and Universities” of the Ministry of Education of China Shouren Wang (2009) claimed that the theoretical research and empirical research should be combined in the college foreign language research projects, which can promote the theory and practice of college foreign language teaching to a higher level. Based on the college English listening comprehension teaching practices in the classroom of the writers, the essay has a preliminary discussion on the guiding function of the cooperative principle in the college English listening comprehension of non-English majors in mainland of China. It shows that consciously using the theory of pragmatics is actually useful in the college English listening comprehension. It is advisable for the college English teachers to teach their students the relevant knowledge of pragmatics, such as the cooperative principle, principle of relevance, etc. There is still a long way to go if the college English teachers in mainland China want to really improve the English level of the non-English majors. Only the college English teachers in mainland China consistently sum up the experience in the teaching practice and use the linguistic theory to guide their teaching can they really promote the sound development of college English teaching and learning.

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