

Sociolinguistics and English Teaching in China

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Abstract—As a wide-ranging inter-discipline which rose in the 1960s, sociolinguistics takes language as a part of society and culture and explores how to relate the rules of language with social factors as its basic task. At the same time, its theories and practices are not only an important supplement and development for linguistics, but also very important for theories and practices of foreign language teaching. The foreign language teaching must pay attention to the cultivation of students' communicative ability. However, foreign language teaching in China has ignored the communicative ability with only paying attention to the language form for a long time. The paper is intended to analyze the reasons why sociolinguistics encounters so many obstacles in English teaching in China and the existing problems of China's foreign language teaching to help the readers have a better understanding of the application of sociolinguistics in China's English teaching.

Index Terms—sociolinguistics, English teaching, application, communicative ability

I. INTRODUCTION

Sociolinguistics is the study of language in relation to society. Generally speaking, the essence of sociolinguistics is how social factors influence the structure and use of language. It is the field that studies relations between the use of language and the social structure in which the language users live.

Generally speaking, the major topics that are covered in sociolinguistics are as follows:

- (1) the language strata of one country or district, such as diglossia, bilingualism, multilingualism or multi-dialects;
- (2) language variation consisting of regional dialect and social dialect, endonormative and vernacular, formal style and informal style;
- (3) the relationship between the conversation and the choice of code, and the interaction between the code choice and personal relationships;
- (4) the society and different groups' estimate of and attitude towards all languages or language variation and the resulting social effects;
- (5) the ways and rules of language change which results from social, cultural or political factors and language contact.

Sociolinguistics broke away from the pure linguistic tradition that linguistics studies language itself (such as voice, grammar, vocabulary, etc.), and it began to study the rules of language and its use from the relationship between language and many social factors. This kind of linguistic research opens up a more extensive new field, and it will have a far-reaching impact on foreign language teaching. Broadly speaking, sociolinguistics is beneficial to language teaching in the following two aspects:

Firstly, sociolinguistics extends theoretical linguistics in the direction of language learning and teaching so that the teacher is enabled to make better decisions on the goal and content of the teaching.

Secondly, sociolinguistics states the insights and implications that linguistic theories have on the language teaching methodology. Once the goal and content of the teaching are settled, the teacher has to consider questions of how to teach.

Many language learning theories are proposed based on certain linguistic theories. In fact, linguistic knowledge lies at the root of understanding what language learners can learn, how they actually learn and what they learn ultimately. Social linguistics provides us with a brand new perspective to approach foreign language teaching and learning.

II. A SURVEY OF SOCIOLINGUISTICS

Since linguistics is defined as the scientific study of language, it is obvious that such a study would help a lot in language teaching and learning. Linguistics defines the nature of language learning in connection with various linguistic theories. Therefore, it helps the teachers to choose teaching methods and techniques.

Sociolinguistics rose in the 1960s as a wide-ranging interdisciplinary. As a branch of macro-linguistics, sociolinguistics studies languages in relation to social factors, such as social class, educational level, age, gender, race and so on. It takes language as a part of society and culture and explores how to relate the rules of language with social factors as its basic task. In simple words, sociolinguistics studies the use of language in society and its related issues. As J. A. Fisherman (1971) says, "sociolinguistics studies on who uses what kind of languages to what kind of people in what

time.”

Language is a social phenomenon. It is a means of communication that people rely on in this society. Language and man and society are inseparable. There will be no human beings and society without language; on the contrary, there will be no language without human beings and society. Language is produced along with the production of society and develops with the development of society. The relationship between language and human society is so close, so language research must be connected with human society and social culture, namely, we analyze language from the perspective of society.

Structural linguistics and other linguistic schools, studying language forms at a standstill and ignoring the social function of languages and the social cultural factors, are divorced from the society for half a century. In contrast, sociolinguistics emphasizes the socialization of languages. It broke the pure form of static description which ruled language field for a long time. Sociolinguistics pays attention to the dynamic study of the application of cross-disciplines and begins to focus on the social functions of language (Ellis, 1994). It studies the relationship between language and social culture systematically. And it researches on languages, language variations, language rules and communicative functions of languages dynamically by using social viewpoints and methods. As Ellis (1994) points out, “whereas much of the earlier second language acquisition work focused on the linguistic and, in particular, the grammatical properties of learner language and was psycholinguistic in orientation, later work has also attended to the pragmatic aspects of learner language and, increasingly, has adopted a sociolinguistic perspective.”

III. THE RELATIONS BETWEEN SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND ENGLISH TEACHING

Sociolinguistics and English teaching have a long-time and close relation. For example, Yang Yonglin (2004) points out that first, from the angle of theoretical reference, Hymes' Communicative Language Teaching, Labov's sociolinguistic theory of variant, etc. all provide references for English teaching; second, from the angle of research on extension, the observing scopes of sociolinguistics have extended from the concrete use of language in the social context to the influence of cultural and social factors on the environment of foreign language acquisition. Obviously, this overlaps with the research scope of English teaching; last, from the angle of academic publishing, the publication of many monographs and proceedings such as Preston's *Sociolinguistics and Second Language Acquisition* and Wolfson's *The Multi-Dimension Sociolinguistics and English Teaching* fully indicate that the cooperation between sociolinguistics and English teaching is increasingly close. Thus, sociolinguistics and English teaching become increasingly closer in recent years, which not only provides a new theoretical perspective for the research of English teaching, but also provides concrete guidance for English teaching practice.

IV. THE IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIOLINGUISTICS ON ENGLISH TEACHING

Linguistics is the scientific study of language and so linguistics theories, which can be used as the guiding principles of language teaching, are of great use in English teaching. Among the various branches of linguistics, applied linguistics, sociolinguistics and pragmatics, etc. influence language teaching more than other branches. (Xie Xiubang, 2003) The importance of social and cultural factors in language teaching cannot be too emphasized in sociolinguistics. Sociolinguistics emphasizes the language utilization, highlights the communicative skills and studies language in its relation to society and culture, for every language is the reflection of a certain culture and has profound cultural connotation. If we compare a language to a tree, then culture is a forest. Supposing that we only pay attention to the language itself without understanding the culture which language depends upon for survival, it is equivalent to losing a wood for a tree. Therefore, it will be very difficult for us to completely understand and use the language accurately and appropriately (Xie Xiubang, 2003). If we want to master a language really, we must have an adequate knowledge of the rich social and cultural backgrounds in which the language exists; rich social and cultural knowledge also benefits the comprehension and use of language, and the two complement each other. So the introduction of social and cultural knowledge in English teaching is necessary. As an emerging discipline, though sociolinguistics does not exist for a long time, it has had great influence on the content and methods of English teaching. (Gao Zhengheng, 2006)

A. Paying Attention to the Students' Subjective Emotional Factors

Teachers should emphasize the emotional communication of the students. The harmonious teacher-student relationship can provide a friendly atmosphere and harmonious interpersonal relationship for the teaching, contribute to improving teaching quality and foster the students' integrated thinking ability and proactive spirit, and lay the foundation for the effective implement of various teaching means. (Deng Yanping, 2002) In addition, when teachers organize the students to carry on the classroom learning, they should pay attention to the understandability of language input and the tolerance of language output. The understandability of language input refers to that the language which the teacher inputs can be easily understood by the students. If the students can not understand what the teacher says, they will feel antipathic and have defiant mood. The tolerance of language output refers to that the teacher should hold a tolerant attitude towards the mistakes the students make in their language output and by doing so, they avoid the negative influence which produces because of worrying about making mistakes.

B. Combining Language Teaching with Cultural Teaching

As a social phenomenon, language is a tool for communication and it is also all important part of culture as well as a mirror which reflects a nation's culture and reveals its cultural content. Therefore, in language teaching, teachers should not only teach the students language knowledge such as the vocabulary and grammar, but also introduce the cultural background and teach the communication principles which combine with various social and cultural factors, thus the students know what to say in what situations. Gradually, they can use the language appropriately. Introducing culture is very important in language teaching because it is directly related to the appropriateness of students' language utilization. We know that if we want to master a language successfully, we must exactly understand its social and cultural backgrounds, so we can say that learning a language is the process of understanding its culture.

C. *The Occurrence of Situational Language Teaching*

Language can only realize the function of social communication in certain situations. The same grammatical sentence in different situations will have different influences. If we say something inappropriate, our communication will possibly become a failure. Therefore, in language teaching, teachers should not only make the students know the different meanings of language in different situations, but also set up various situations that the students are likely to encounter in real life to teach them suitable language.

V. DIFFICULTIES OF APPLYING SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPROACH TO ENGLISH TEACHING IN CHINA

Sociolinguistics regards relationships between language, culture and social intercourse function of language as its research target from the beginning. As a new branch of linguistics emerged from the 1960's, linguistic views and research results of sociolinguistics provide a lot of new content for linguistics. At the same time, its theories and practices are not only an important supplement for and development of linguistics, but also very important for theories and practices of foreign language teaching. It became linguistic theoretical basis of communicative language teaching. And it has been and is continuing to have its profound impact. Its implications on foreign language teaching are as follows:

The foreign language teaching must pay attention to the cultivation of students' communicative ability directly.

By definition, language education includes the training of language skills (such as: listening, speaking, reading, writing, etc.). Therefore, language learning should be the cultivation of integrated skills. The aim of English teaching is to enable students to use languages in communication. In the book *On Communicative Competence*, American society linguist Hymes (1972) points out, "languages must have use doctrines; otherwise the rules of grammar are meaningless." His "use doctrine" refers to the appropriateness of the use of language in communication. Canale & Swain (1980) defines the communicative competence as "the combination of communicative function of knowledge that basic rules of grammar and language play in specific social occasions and discourse and communicative function under certain principles". In their views, the communicative functions are sensitive to various changing factors (such as context, register, social status, gender, age, etc.). There is no doubt that the ultimate goal of foreign language teaching is to cultivate students' communicative competence.

However, foreign language teaching in China ignored the communicative ability, only paying attention to the language form for a long time. To some extent, this phenomenon is the consequence of traditional structural linguistics. It has ruled linguistics for a long time and has serious negative effect on foreign language teaching in China. Communicative language teaching which was based on sociolinguistic theory was introduced into China in the 1980s, and it has great influence on foreign language teaching in china. But over the past few decades, the communicative approach has not become the mainstream of English Teaching in China.

In author's opinion, the main reasons are as follows:

1) There is short of natural environment for foreign language teaching in China. Communication would be impossible with no natural environment. Compared with traditional teaching methods, communicative approach needs a larger and more suitable language environment which enables learners' language skills to be consolidated and strengthened. However, we lack such language an environment, so students have few opportunities to use English in extra-curricular time or even in the classroom. The most important reason may be the problem of language policy. In China, English is the first foreign language, so every college student has to learn English at University at least for two years (University English syllabus, 1991). Students should participate in all kinds of examination; however, these examinations regard the language points as their importance but ignore the communicative ability. In this case, teachers and students' motivation are all put into how to pass the exam (CET4, CET6). The result is bound to lead the English education to come back to books, neglecting to cultivate students' ability of using language. It is not difficult to find that both teachers and students are not very clear about the fundamental goal of English teaching.

2) Teachers are not up to the requirements of the communicative teaching approach. Compared with the traditional teaching approach, communicative teaching approach sets higher demand for foreign language teachers. First, teachers are required to use English proficiently and properly. In addition, they should have strong ability to organize the classroom. The most important and difficult role for teachers is to be a good organizer. However, most teachers in China are most concerned about is not how to improve students' communicative competence, but how to complete the school's teaching plan and improve the passing rate of CET4 and CET6. So presently, they don't have ability to achieve the communicative goal completely.

3) At present, the environment of classroom teaching in China is not suitable for the communicative teaching approach. As what has been mentioned above, communicative teaching approach requires teachers to design a variety of teaching activities. However, what is the present situation of classroom English Teaching in China? There are lots of students in English class, so it is not easy for teachers to organize communicative activities in classroom. Even activities can be organized, the efficiency of classroom teaching will be greatly reduced.

4) There is still a lot to do in regard to sociolinguistic studies. We have obtained notable achievements in sociolinguistic theories by far, but we still need to study more from abroad. We can often hear some partial or one-sided statements concerning linguistic theories. As for English teaching, some people think communicative teaching should just practise listening and speaking, needless to pay attention to reading and writing. If a teacher teaches intensive reading course, they should just teach students how to read well, disregarding speaking. It is a common phenomenon that a teacher keeps cramming in analyzing a text with students having no chance to ask questions or do any interactive activities. It is also not uncommon that a listening teacher just plays the record again and again without explaining. We see these kinds of practice so much so that we are used to take it for granted that it is what an English class should be. It is high time to do something to reform English teaching in China. We need to learn more advanced linguistic theories and methods to guide us. We also need to study our domestic linguistic theories together with advanced sociolinguistic theories abroad to reform English teaching in China fundamentally.

VI. CONCLUSION

In a word, sociolinguistics has great influence on English teaching. Language is a kind of social phenomenon and it always appears and develops against a certain social background. Hence, the teachers should not only pay attention to the teaching of language rules while ignoring the social context. In order to achieve the real goal of English teaching, we should integrate language with the social context.

Studying English teaching of China from the angle of sociolinguistics, both the English teachers and the English syllabus designers should not only pay attention to the language itself which is taught, but also should be concerned about the social factors which are related to it. In addition, we should associate the language with these social factors to set the teaching aims, such as how to improve the students' English communicative competence, design teaching program, determine teaching method and finish teaching task etc. Sociolinguistics defines a connected series of utterance, a text or conversation as discourse, which exists in a context. Context can choose the structure of a discourse, theme, semantics, etc. Based on communicative competence, English teaching thus requires College English teaching should plan teaching activities according to the particular discourse or text from the whole discourse to the detailed language points.

Take the text "Big Bucks the Easy Way" from *College English Book 4* (Dong Lifen, 1995) for example, teachers may first lead students to discuss the overall background concerning self-efficiency. Speaking of American kids doing part-time jobs to help pay for their school tuition and other expenses, teachers may compare this culture with Chinese traditional child-rearing ways to inspire students to think about the questions like: "Which way are you inclined to?" Other cultural background points may also be taken into consideration such as: the ads by some American supermarkets, by department stores, by grocery stores or by drugstores, the advertising mode, a brief introduction to Sears and Montgomery Ward, etc. With the relevant background information, students will easily make sense of these cultural shocks: different self-support life, different ad performance and results, and different sales promotion strategies. These student-centered interactive activities will definitely help analyze the text's theme, register, characters involved in language activities and their social cultural background, their possible ages, occupations, education, the relationships between each other like father and son, husband and wife in this text.

The overall context determines its language style, formal or informal, spoken or written. It is necessary for teachers to interpret the usage of a certain word or expression according to its context. For example, in this text, when Father scolds Son, an informal or spoken language is employed: "Do it!" "Idiot!" "I'll kill you if you threaten one of the kids again!" The polite or formal language like "Excuse me...", "Thank you...", "Will you please...?" should be used on certain occasions. Teachers need to let students know how to use as well as when to use these kinds of expressions. Through discourse teaching, students can not only learn how to use appropriate language in social communication, but also get to know how to deal with different writing tasks. In this sense, sociolinguistics penetrates into each aspect of English teaching and social communication.

Sociolinguistics does provide us with a brand new perspective of seeing language. It has been applied in many fields today and English teaching is one of the rising fields. However, English teaching is limited by many practical factors, such as the shortage of natural environment for foreign language teaching in China, the inadequacy of teachers' communicative teaching approach and the discrepancy of the classroom teaching environment etc. As is seen, the researchers still need a long way to go to tackle with the better combination of sociolinguistics and English teaching in China.

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