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## A Study on English Politeness Terms and Teaching Application in Cultural Communication

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### Abstract

*Politeness is a common social phenomenon in various cultures. Polite language is an important means in people's daily language communication. Different cultures have different polite language. Politeness is an essential aspect of language communicative competence, and cultivating students' intercultural communicative competence is one of the main objectives of foreign language teaching. In this context, in order to avoid conflicts and misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication, it is very important to know how to use polite expressions correctly. Therefore, this paper analyzes the different politeness principles between China and the West and the pragmatic differences between English and Chinese politeness expressions in greetings, appellations, thanks and compliments. In order to provide some enlightenment for the cultivation of students' communicative competence in English teaching.*

**Keywords:** Intercultural communication, Polite language, Politeness principle, English education

### I . Introduction

Cross-cultural communication refers to the communication between people with different cultural backgrounds. In the study of cross-cultural communication, the focus is on country studies, focusing on the study of the mainstream culture in a country, rather than any vague comparison of communication between two people [1]. Politeness can be regarded as a kind of pragmatic expression, and the study of politeness is of far-reaching significance for understanding Chinese history and mastering Chinese culture. Oriental culture has a long history, and Chinese polite expressions are its most representative part, which can show the profoundness of Chinese culture from different aspects and depths.

Politeness, as a social phenomenon, exists in all social groups, but the differences in cultural backgrounds among different nationalities may lead to different standards for measuring things, which is also reflected in politeness. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce politeness concepts related to speech acts in English teaching, and pay attention to the cultivation of students' politeness ability in cross-cultural communication, so that they can master and use communication strategies accurately and skillfully, thus avoiding communication conflicts as much as possible.

### II . Politeness Principles in the Context of English and Chinese Culture

#### A. Politeness Criterion Based on English Culture

English language and culture have been shackled by feudal system for a short time, and Christian culture and western philosophical ideology have constructed the main body of the cultural edifice of English-speaking countries. There is no traditional distinction between high and low in English language and culture, and there is a strong sense of equality. No matter rich or poor, everyone will respect themselves and not allow others to violate their rights. At the same time, everyone can fully respect others.

Leech, a famous English linguist, put forward the politeness principle according to the characteristics of English culture [2]. It includes six guidelines, namely:

- (1) Appropriateness criteria: minimize the cost paid by others and maximize the benefits to others;
- (2) Generosity criteria: minimize the benefits to yourself and maximize the cost you pay;
- (3) Praise criteria: minimize criticism to others and maximize praise to others;
- (4) Principle of humility: Try to minimize your praise and exaggerate your criticism;
- (5) Consistency criterion: try to minimize the different opinions with others and exaggerate the same opinions with others as much as possible;
- (6) Compassion rule: minimize dislike of others and maximize sympathy for others.

### ***B. Politeness Principle Based on Chinese Culture***

Chinese language and culture have accumulated 5,000 years of Chinese civilization, forming a profound cultural heritage of securing the world with Confucianism. On the one hand, Chinese language and cultural values affirm people's inherent personality value; on the other hand, they emphasize the harmonious and unified relationship between people and nature and between people. On the basis of leech's theoretical framework, this paper studies the politeness phenomenon in Chinese, and summarizes the politeness criteria related to Chinese culture [3-4], which consists of five items:

- (1) Criterion of belittling oneself and respecting others: "belittle" and "be modest" when referring to oneself or things related to oneself; It means that the listener should "lift" and "respect" the things associated with the listener.
- (2) Address criterion: It means that people are polite, and when addressing each other, they still reflect the social relations in interpersonal communication according to the different traditions of "up and down, noble and young".
- (3) The rule of elegance: choose elegant language, prohibit indecent language, use euphemism more and use less blunt words. The use of euphemism is to avoid directly mentioning and using unpleasant or embarrassing things.
- (4) Principle of seeking common ground: It means that both parties seek harmony in many aspects and try their best to satisfy each other's desires. There are some similarities between the principle of seeking common ground and leech's consistent principle.
- (5) Code of morality, words and deeds: in terms of behavioral motivation, try to reduce the cost paid by others, maximize the benefits of others, exaggerate the benefits given to oneself by others in words, and try to minimize the cost of oneself.

### **III. Reasons for the Differences between Chinese and Western Polite Expressions**

Literature [5] shows the cultivation of intercultural communicative competence in foreign language teaching from the micro, meso and macro levels, and the interrelated and inter-contained modes are as follows: socio-cultural competence, communicative competence and language competence (Figure 1).



*Fig.1 Foreign Language Teaching Purpose and Social and Cultural Ability Map*

Among them, social and cultural ability includes language ability, which covers listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating in teaching. Communicative competence includes pragmatic competence such as discourse, strategy and sociolinguistics, as well as the ability of sublation and penetration. The ability of sublation and penetration refers to the ability to understand different cultures, rationally evaluate the information received, and integrate new and old knowledge.



*Fig.2 Model Diagram of Social and Cultural Ability*

All these abilities together constitute intercultural communicative competence (Figure 2), which combines the improvement of intercultural communicative competence with the cultivation of people's quality. Cross-cultural communicative competence should be realized through effective communication and specific communicative purposes [6].

### **A. Differences in Ways of Thinking**

Both Chinese and English cultures pay attention to the contradiction of things, but generally speaking, Chinese people pay attention to “harmony” and “unity”, and pay attention to the harmony and coexistence of the whole world. Ethically, it takes care of the overall situation and the whole, and if necessary, it does not hesitate to sacrifice personal or local interests to safeguard the overall interests. However, in English culture, the idea of seeking to be independent and realize self-worth is quite common. It is believed that the collective and others are a force to suppress self, and individuals should resist the erosion and exclusion of this force and strive for their own interests.

### **B. Differences in Values**

In the final analysis, the differences in language expression in cross-cultural communication are the differences in subjects, which are caused by the differences in values and ways of thinking between Chinese and English-speaking countries. Since ancient times, the Chinese nation has been a nation that loves peace and is kind to others, and advocates the idea of harmony and unity [7]. Therefore, Chinese culture does not advocate highlighting individuality or personal value, and thinks that silence and smile are preferable to noisy quarrels.

However, Western culture emphasizes individuality independence, advocates publicizing individuality and pursuing the realization of personal values, and has a strong sense of safeguarding rights. It holds that individual rights are

sacred and inviolable, and the greatest pursuit in life is self-realization. It is impolite to avoid answering other people's questions or to answer irrelevant questions, so after speeches and reports, there will often be audience free to ask questions, which also shows the spirit of pursuing freedom and advocating self in English-speaking countries.

#### **IV. Politeness and Cross-Cultural Communication**

##### ***A. Etiquette and Taboos***

Due to cultural differences and social norms that restrict speech acts, taboos involved in interpersonal communication are also different. In English culture, the extension of privacy is relatively large, so some polite speech acts in Chinese culture will be considered as infringing others' privacy in English culture.

In Chinese culture, it is polite to treat others warmly and show concern for others. When two Chinese meet for the first time, they may ask each other about their age, occupation, marital status, income, etc., so as to shorten the distance between the two parties, and these contents will be regarded as rude interference in their privacy by English-speaking people. When Chinese people hear that the other person is unmarried and has no children, they will feel that what they just said is too abrupt, and they will say "I'm sorry." I'm sure this will make the other person even more embarrassed, because the other person thinks that you feel very sad after hearing that he is unmarried and has no children.

##### ***B. A Comparison between English and Chinese Compliments and Self-Modesty***

Advocating equality and freedom is the core pursuit of British and American culture, which is deeply rooted in the hearts of people in British and American countries. When people are complimented and praised, they generally adopt consistent principles, which are basically positive attitudes, so that the complier or the complier will not feel embarrassed. So when they are praised, they will happily say, "thank you!" Accept compliments without hesitation. Because in their view, since they have made achievements, they deserve to be praised.

However, Chinese people's language expression is more subtle. When they are praised by others, they often belittle themselves and show a modest attitude, which makes people feel advanced and backward. Such as "not yet", "ashamed", "generous", "where where" and so on. In addition, in western culture, it is very common for men to praise women. Therefore, in China, men should be careful if they want to praise women.

Both English and Chinese cultures follow the principle of politeness. The difference is that Chinese people's "modesty" is mainly reflected in "respecting others", while Westerners' "respecting others" does not "belittle themselves". This difference is mainly determined by different cultural values. Western culture belongs to scientific culture, which emphasizes material and despises human theory. Its value orientation is utilitarian, emphasizing human rights, advocating individual supremacy and paying attention to special identification. Therefore, they always try their best to make themselves stand out from the collective in order to fully express themselves [8]. In China, speaking or writing with elders and superiors is different from communicating with peers and subordinates in attitudes and ways, and some honorifics are often used, otherwise it will be regarded as disrespectful. Under the influence of western equal social relations and personal orientation, people in Britain and the United States advocate equal address in social communication. People are more and more willing to call by their first names regardless of their status and position. Even in formal occasions, the title before the name is not too cumbersome, which fully shows the equal social and cultural orientation.

##### ***C. Words of Thanks and Apologies***

Politeness principle emphasizes that speaking should look at the object and the occasion and be just right. Therefore, speaking too casually will offend others, while being too polite will make people feel ironic or hypocritical. Both "thank you" in English and "thank you" in Chinese are used frequently, but "thank you" is used more frequently. Due to different cultural backgrounds, close relatives, friends and acquaintances in China, especially fathers and

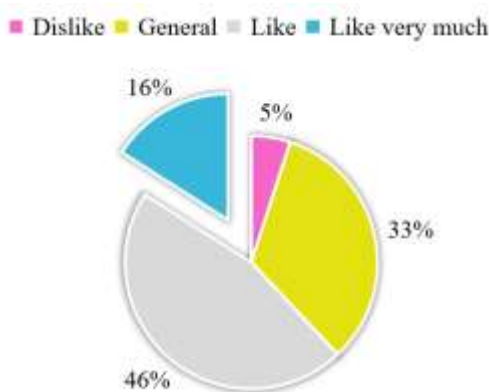
sons and couples, rarely hear “thank you”, and even the word “thank you” is often considered to be unfamiliar; The postman handed the letter, and the waiter brought tea, vegetables, etc., which the Chinese took for granted and seldom thanked them.

In English, “thank you” is said hundreds of times a day, even more. Besides, “thank you” and “thank you” are different in scope and occasion. When praised, invited and served, British and American people will express their gratitude when they accept it gladly, while Chinese speakers usually use denial or concession. In addition, there are differences in appreciation between English and Chinese. When they are thanked, Chinese people will answer such words as you are welcome, it's my duty, nothing. As far as western culture is concerned, the social structure is oriented in parallel, which determines that the social function of apology is a remedy to maintain an equal order. Since personal autonomy is paramount, even if you offend the other party, you need a sincere apology from your superiors to your subordinates.

### V. English Polite Expressions and Their Teaching Application in Cross-Cultural Communication

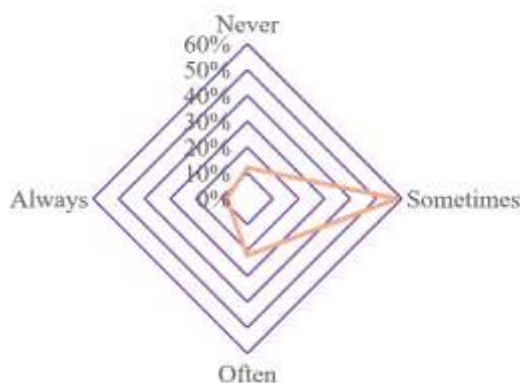
In order to train students to use English polite expressions appropriately, so that communication can be carried out in a peaceful and friendly atmosphere, thus achieving the purpose of communication, it is far from enough to teach only language forms.

The questionnaire examines how much students like to contact and communicate with foreigners. The survey results are shown in Figure 3. 5% of students choose “don't like it at all and don't want to communicate actively”; 33% of students choose “general, and can communicate when necessary”; 46% of students choose “a little like, but not very active communication”; Only 16% of the students choose to “like it very much and take the initiative to communicate”.



*Fig.3 Investigation Chart of the Positive Degree of Communication between Students and Foreigners*

The questionnaire examines whether students always remind themselves to maintain a high awareness of “cross-cultural situational communication” when communicating with foreigners, as shown in Figure 4. About 12% of students choose “never”, about 58% choose “sometimes like this”, about 22% choose “often like this”, and about 8% choose “always like this”.



*Fig.4 Students' Cross-Cultural Awareness*

Figures 3 and 4 show that students can't treat cultural differences correctly, lack correct understanding of cultural differences, lack awareness of cross-cultural communication, can't approach and understand foreign cultures actively and consciously, and lack initiative and consciousness in cultural learning.

#### **A. Personal Pronouns Can Convey Politeness**

Personal pronouns can convey politeness, show the speaker's attitude, social status, and the relationship with the listener. Consistency and power play a decisive role in the choice of pronouns. Consistency can make both parties talk equally, friendly and harmonious; Consistency includes political background, family, religion, occupation, gender and birthplace. Power refers to the difference in status between the two parties, and the powerful party can control the conversation. Power includes physical strength, age, gender, wealth and so on. Consistency and power not only affect the choice of personal pronouns, but also affect the process of polite communication. For example, using the plural form of the first person can produce politeness effect.

For example, when a child wants to drink coffee, he says, "Let's have some coffee." When a friend promises to try to help the other party, he will say, "Let's see what can be done."

In these two sentences, the plural "Let's" replaces the singular form "Let me", which achieves the effect of politeness. Because the plural "Let's" provides a consistent hypothesis, which makes the listener feel very kind. Assuming that the boy wants to drink coffee not only by himself, but also by another person present, "Let's have some coffee." It sounds as if both parties present have the same interest, that is, they all want to drink coffee. Therefore, the boy's proposal is more acceptable to the other party without losing face.

#### **B. Pay Attention to the Teaching of Cultural Differences and Cultivate Students' Cross-Cultural Awareness**

Learning a language is not only a process of accumulating vocabulary and grammar knowledge, but also a process of cultivating students' pragmatic ability. In the teaching process, teachers must teach language knowledge and use language according to the specific context, cultivate students' appropriate language use ability, and attach importance to the communicative function teaching of language forms.

Polite language is an important means in people's daily language communication. Different cultures have different polite language. Teachers should pay attention to cultural infiltration in foreign language teaching. In classroom teaching, students are encouraged to pay attention to the cultural customs of the target language, so that students can deeply understand the similarities and differences of various cultures. Make students understand the relationship between mother tongue and target language, and gradually cultivate students' cross-cultural awareness in this process, so that students can master both language ability and cultural ability. Only in this way can we choose appropriate language structure and expression habits in cross-cultural communication and avoid mistakes in cross-cultural communication.

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### ***C. Stimulate Students' Interest in Cultural Differences***

Interest is the best teacher. English learning also requires great interest. It is also necessary for teachers to cultivate students' interest in learning cultural differences while imparting cross-cultural knowledge. Teachers can find fun for students by comparison with the teaching materials they have learned. For example, when we meet acquaintances on the road, we often say, "Have you eaten?" "Where to?" To greet each other, and people in Britain and America often say "How are you?" Wait. Students are encouraged to have fun in using English, and teachers strive to provide opportunities and platforms for students to communicate in English both inside and outside the classroom, so that students can have fun and a sense of accomplishment in using English, and at the same time, they can subtly acquire expressions that conform to English communication habits.

Teachers can also consciously guide students to read a large number of simple and interesting reading materials, appreciate and appreciate the authentic exotic scenery depicted in the books, and the customs and cultural values accumulated by other nationalities for thousands of years, so as to stimulate students' interest in learning cultural differences while acquiring languages and appreciating foreign cultures.

### **VI. Conclusion**

Chinese and western politeness principles are different, and there are also differences in the pragmatics of English and Chinese politeness terms in greetings, appellations, thanks and compliments. Therefore, in cross-cultural communication, it is very common to have misunderstandings and obstacles in communication because there is no distinction between eastern and western languages. English teachers should not only impart language knowledge and skills, but also pay attention to integrating relevant English cultural background knowledge into teaching, enhance students' cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity to English-speaking countries' cultures, and guide students to flexibly choose appropriate communication strategies in different situations to achieve the purpose of effective communication, thus cultivating students' pragmatic competence in cross-cultural communication.

### **VII. Acknowledgment**

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