College English Reading Study: a linguistic landscape

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Abstract: A growing interest in second-language learning has resulted in remarkable empirical studies that attempts to explore the approach of improving reading abilities. English reading learning occupies an essential position in the curriculum in college, which requires the students to acquire a higher inferential competence of the reading comprehension. Compared with the traditional reading studies, it can be said that great progress has been made in studies of English reading learning if we take it as an independent subject in language use and language production. However, much evidence indicates that we should probe the exact and implied meaning in depth of the reading materials. Thus, in our study, we offer a practical application of Indirect Speech Act Theory into English reading learning, demonstrating that the theory can help students to decide the tactful meaning intended in the reading.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of indirect speech acts was first pointed out by Searle[11]. Searle proposed that sometimes the speaker’s utterance meaning and the intended sentence meaning come apar in different ways[11]. Austin then made the statement that the act performed can be understood as locutionary acts. While the illocutionary act refers to the additional meaning of the utterances produced on the basis of the literal meaning. As for the perlocutionary act, it illustrates the act performed by or as a result of saying. Sometimes a person uttered a certain illocutionary effect in the hearers by producing a number of linguistic patterns and organizing in a specific approach with an additional meaning[1]. It is noteworthy that the easy-analyzing cases of meaning are those in which the speaker utters the sentences and means exactly and literally what he says.

In spite of the literal meaning of the linguistic items and illocutionary force presenting textual meaning, the reading materials are characteristically presented intention of the text writers which needs to be recognized in virtue of the students’ knowledge of the reading skills or rules that govern the meaning of those texts. Therefore, we are aware that the distinguished features of locutionary and illocutionary acts lie in the interpretation of the acts, namely, the interpretation of the former one with meaning and the interpretation of the latter with force. Brown and Yule state that the ultimate meaning of the language contains far more than literal meaning; besides it consists of the implied meaning of the speaker[2]. Thus, when the text writers may mislead readers’ opinions and understandings, the expressions used in an indirect way in which the readers ought to integrate overall elements or factors in the texts to consider the final meaning of the intended ideas. Specifically, the speech acts, then, can be schematized as Figure 1:

![Figure 1: Introduction of Speech Acts](image)

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2. Indirect Speech Act Theory as Rhizomatic: English Reading Teaching and Learning

A challenge emerged in reading study is the lack of a systematic theory to guide the English second-language teaching and learning. Noteworthy, both teachers and theorists contribute to constructing a scientific basis for language study. They proceeded in various perspectives to conduct the scientific research of English teaching. Prior studies mainly adopt interaction analysis between learners and researchers in linguistic and multimodal perspective to relate language learners’ motivations to subject objectives, research on students’ reaction of the students into academic expressions from a concept of terminology, international academic flexibility in second language teaching or language adaptable usage in interaction. Specifically, English reading has resulted in notable emphasis, but the method adopted in reading procedures are still traditional as previous methods mainly addressed around the grammar or fixed sentence patterns in the reading study.

We argue that in English reading study, teachers should guide students to appropriately understand the meaning of the texts and figure out the intended meaning after analyzing the reading materials. Teachers can apply indirect speech theory to the process of English reading. Additionally, establishing and reconducting the context can encourage students to accurately recognize the exact meaning of the lines. In order to observe the inherent meaning of the texts, students initially make reasonable analysis of the text, and then enhance students’ reading ability. Thereby, in the paper, we apply the theory of indirect speech acts to English reading teaching, leading students to explore the literal and the tactful meaning of the contents they read and make reasonable judgments to determine the writing purposes that the author wants to express. As shown in the figure below, the process of students understanding reading texts is concerned fully with the contextual analysis and reconstruction of the reading texts.

Figure 2: Major factors in the procedure of Reading Study

3. Practical Application in English Reading Study

Indirect speech acts can be divided into conventional and non-conventional indirect speech acts. The non-conventional ones in turn include both linguistic and non-linguistic contexts. Linguistic context is mainly received through lines in reading, rather than relying on students’ own common sense. The general genres of an article involve various categories such as culture, history, biographies, education and social issues, etc. Therefore, the prime elements presented in Figure 2 contribute to great effect on college English reading teaching. As is known, one of the objectives of college English reading teaching is to improve students’ comprehension and inferential abilities. Thus, how to recognize the intention of the writer is the key point to English reading for the author’s intention is usually implied in the text. Students need to identify the context, then combine background information to ultimately derive the author’s purposes. Reading is crucial in second-language acquisition. That is, if students do not make efforts to strengthen comprehensible input under the assistant of the contextual digital learning, they would fail in non-native writing. Undoubtedly, the practical study especially in indirect speech act theory will provide high potentials for reading study.
3.1. Recognizing Contexts of the Reading Texts in the Three Reading Stages

Baded on a recent report, a large number of English learners, 276 million current users in total, would be looking for a better way to master the second-language\(^7\). Among them, nearly 9 million college graduates are enthusiastic about employment relevant to English field\(^9\). In the process of reading teaching in college, teachers guide the students to get the implication on the basis of acknowledge the context constraints. As is demonstrated in Figure 2, it is a model of reading instruction from the perspective of the Indirect Speech Act Theory. In the figure, pre-reading procedure would be conducive to make well-preparation for the next stage of while-reading. For an efficient improvement of English reading, it is significant to explain the general idea of the theory to the students. Besides the three elements are equivalent to the theoretical knowledge. In the body procedure, various reading materials should be selected for reading online or offline practices. Meanwhile, the reconstruction of contexts, if necessary, helps readers to catch the ultimate meaning correctly and quickly. As for the last stage, reflection and integration play an essential role in understanding the focus theory, so students can review the contents to make a conclusion of how the theory is combined and applied into the reading procedures. For instance, in the Blackmail in Advanced English I, “My husband and I find strong smoke offensive. Would you kindly put the cigar out?” The latter sentence itself does not have an imperative force as part of the literal meaning, that is, literally it is a question or request. But it is conventionally used to realize directive illocutionary force, for there is a systematic relation between the lines and directive illocutionary acts. The word “kindly” taken in the utterance, it explicitly and literally marks out the non-literal illocutionary force of the sentence.

3.2. Rebuilding Contexts Based on Various Circumstances in the Texts

The illocutionary act, as a speaker-based theory\(^5\), should be taken into consideration with reader-based reactions. In practical reading activities, teachers can appropriately explain the setting, social environment, regional culture, and historical materials generated by these conversations, in order to help students build a “comprehensive or specific context” to improve students’ English reading comprehension ability\(^13\). By the usage of reasoning and suggestion questions in reading training as the starting point, along with indirect speech act theory as the theoretical basis, teachers guide students to combine multiple background factors previously explained, reconstruct language contexts, and correctly analyze and understand the implied meaning in reading contents. We discuss the practice in detail: recognize the context first, which may be gain from the scanning of the text. After that, students reconstruct contextual assumptions in the analyzing of the textual scenes. Significantly, the literal meanings are those locutionary acts which are standardly used to make direct speech acts, so most students may not be conscious of the illocutionary force in the process of reading practices. The reason for using rebuilding contexts is multifold, and for the non-native English learners’ use of the indirect speech acts, the main motivation may appropriately perceive the meaning of the texts. Authors construct contexts hidden in some hints of the expressions, from which we guide students to search the optimal relevant between the recognized-contexts and contextual assumptions. The prediction would be finally judged by the overall comprehensive reading.

3.3. Improve the Inferential Ability on the basis of Contexts

The solution suggested to improve the inferential ability is like this: in indirect speech acts, students interact with the text author more than he actually writes by relying on both sides’ mutually shared background information, linguistic and non-linguistic elements, together with the general power of rationality and inference on the part of the students. Undoubtedly, for exactly understanding the opinion of the texts, they need to resort to contexts, the indirect speech act theory, and at the same time taking account of all the above factors. That is, students need focus on the information they receive based on the certain contexts provided in the original text and reconstructed contexts to make inference. In the reading activities, deriving setting information is vital for the whole practice. Students are also required to look for implicit contextual associations in their recognized context based on their own cognition. In short, from explicit acts or expressions of the text, students make reasonable inferences and conduce to capability improvement for reading.

3.4. Focus on the cultural integration, Improve the Reading Competence

There are many cultural factors that influence the understanding of language. Language use thus has to do with a specific culture, with social context, mental context and physical context in it. All the texts we read that concern language expressions are constant topics relevant to the societal or cultural factors. The text writers take advantage of language to give intended information. Indeed, reading is a process of cognition. It is a combination of the original contexts, rebuilding contexts, readers’ cognitive ability, etc. In those factors, the students must see to it that the intercultural use of language in the texts also need to be noticed. Through the reading materials, whether the expressions are literal or metaphorical, students should comprehend the intended meanings of the texts depending on the phenomena taken from the specific society and culture. The intercultural usage of language is frequently manifested in the reading texts. Additionally, in some materials. A number of the variety of English such as Chinese English has emerged and attracted much more attention, which is a vital evidence of the cultural integration\(^3\). Thereby the indirect speech act theory should begin an attempt to exploit the phenomenon. Moreover, teachers, as the guider and organizer of the course study, take the responsibility to answer some of these questions hidden in the reading
practices. I argue, reading can be seen as a property of input to cognitive processes, for instance, linguistic knowledge learning, exploring opinions and thoughts between readers and writers, recognizing differences of various cultures, etc. Combining with contextual assumptions (in 3.2) to yield contextual implications, students make the conclusions derivable from the linguistic competence and recognized context as well as cultural integration together, but not merely from either background information or context alone. Other things being equal importance, the higher potentials students have, the more efficient reading may achieve. However, the processing of the reading practice, and the derivation of the effects, involve some mental and social world efforts. In the example illustrated (in 3.1), suppose students are not aware of the cultural factors in the text, it is difficult for them to comprehend the exact meaning of the sentence. For the standard English uttered by the main character represents a specific class, namely, higher class at that time. According to the cultural elements of Blackmail, teachers had better introduce briefly the background information of the narration. As noted above, making inferences starts with the cognition of both a linguistic-based sentence meaning and a non-linguistic factor. When we realize the essentiality of combination of them, the reading procedures would be contextually enriched in the way to yield a full-fledged meaning of the text writers.

4. Conclusion

Chinese and English are two languages different in system and structure. The understanding constraints vary a great deal in learners’ linguistic knowledge, reading strategies and a range of elements which the present paper has explained. The approaches to reading can be adopted to help solve some problems by striving for the application of indirect speech acts into practical teaching and learning. I argue that the significant effect in reading, as we put it, aims at comprehending the textual meaning in full, taking all account of factors in the process of reading practices. The indirect speech act theory has potentialized the procedures of English reading teaching. Noteworthy, it can also be adopted to every aspect of English teaching in college. We should emphasize the language implicatures and the intended set of the contextual assumptions as well as the identification of exact meaning of the target language.

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