



On the Western Overseas Students' Intercultural Communication Competence in Their Chinese Application Letter Writing

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Abstract

For a second foreign language learner, writing an application letter in target language is not only a test for the level of target language, but also a process of intercultural communication. This paper attempts to explore the manifestation and performance of some western overseas students' intercultural communication competence in their Chinese application letter compositions which are collected from a dynamic composition corpus. Through the analysis of collected corpus, it aims to identify how overseas students situated in different culture can communicate in a target language through a written form and what kind of thinking pattern they hold exists in their application letter writing, which may influence their cross-cultural communication. The result of this research suggests that intercultural communication competence of western overseas students still need to be improved.

Key words: Overseas students; Intercultural communication competence; Application letter

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INTRODUCTION

Application letter is the letter in which job-hunters communicate with employers in a written form in order to get a job interview. Although it is a written form, there

is a definite but covert subject for people to communicate with and it can also, to some extent, reflect one's culture and thinking pattern. Through the comparison of different people's application letters in a different culture circle, there exist obvious differences. For a second foreign language learner, writing an application letter in target language is not only a test for the level of target language, but also a process of intercultural communication. Intercultural communication is actually a communication between people who come from different culture. "A definition of intercultural communication was derived from the responses, and knowledge and motivation were identified as important components of intercultural communication." (Arasaratnams & Doerfel, 2005) According to some relevant references, intercultural communication competence can be considered as the ability to negotiate cultural meanings and to properly conduct effective communication behaviors identifying mutual multiple identities in a specific environment.

The corpora in this research come from HSK dynamic composition corpus in Beijing Language and Culture University. HSK dynamic composition corpus is a collection of composition answer sheet of non-native foreigners who take part in the advanced Chinese level examination. It has collected parts of foreign examinee's composition answer sheet from 1992 to 2005, totally amounting to 424 million characters. And the corpus offers a wide platform for researches of Chinese inter-language, Chinese courses for foreigners, and second language acquisition, which facilitate the development of relevant research in this field.

On the basis of the corpus, this paper aims to analyze seven compositions of overseas students who come from America, the United Kingdom and Canada and tries to figure out their intercultural communication competence presented in their application letter writings. Through the analysis, on the one hand, this paper tries to engender an empathy that improvement of intercultural communication

competence plays an important role in daily cross-cultural communication; on the other hand, it hopes to attract the attention of some educators and teachers who teach Chinese as a foreign language for foreigners to focus on the cultivation of intercultural communication competence of foreigners.

1. STUDIES ON APPLICATION LETTERS

A job application letter entertains abundant and profound research value for it represents and reflects language use, cultural background and even a way of communication. Thus, job application letters have already engendered widespread attention of scholars at home and abroad. In the early twentieth century, a foreign scholar, named Bhatia, has studied application letters. In his research, he said “generally one tends to find a predominant reference to the needs of the potential employer, always implying that the candidate can fulfill those needs.” (Bhatia, 1993) Bhatia’s research on application letters is to testify his viewpoint that in all contextual factors linked to a speech event, communicative purpose is the most dominated criterion for the identification of genres. Besides, Henry and Roseberry (2001) have made a narrow-angled analysis of application letters. They mainly analyzed application letters from the aspects of moves and strategies and proposed that in order to teach the Letter of Application, ESP (English for Specific Purposes) practitioners need to be aware of not just this range of features, but where they are used and for what purpose. It can be concluded that the writing of application is not merely a process of writing but also a process of communication, because one must consider the cultural background information, especially where the application letters are used, and the communicative purposes. In China, scholars take interest in the analysis of application letters from the perspective of biased errors. Bai (2009) made a research about the biased errors of overseas students’ Chinese letter writing, and she analyzed the errors of several aspects such as punctuation marks, grammar and pragmatic application. Another researcher named Chen (2015) studied the pragmatic biased errors in application letters of overseas students. Through comparison, she found that in a Chinese application writing, in general, there would be eight speech acts such as addressing, greeting, introducing, promising, complimenting, acknowledging, making a request and showing the best wishes, while in overseas students’ writing, some speech acts did not appear in the whole text. Her research, to some extent, gave the author great enlightenment and inspiration to make this research, because the research on application letters of overseas students can reflect their intercultural communication competence. On the basis of all the previous studies, the author explores the intercultural communication competence of western overseas students from a different perspective.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Objects

The research objects in this paper were seven composition answer sheets, all of which had the same title “an application letter” in the HSK dynamic composition corpus. And in the corpus, the requirement of application letter is to apply a post about an advertisement designer or a tour guide. The seven compositions came from seven foreigners who took part in the advanced Chinese level examinations. Among them, two were from the United Kingdom; three came from Canada and another two were Americans. In the HSK dynamic composition corpus, there was quite limited number of compositions about the topic “an application letter”, especially for western overseas students whose native language was English. Thus, considering all the conditions of this research, the author had chosen seven representative and typical composition answer sheets for this research.

2.2 Research Questions

In this research, the author wanted to find out how those western overseas students wrote an application letter in Chinese; what their common features or errors were in writing; how those overseas students behaved themselves in this written form of intercultural communication and how we could evaluate their intercultural communication competence.

2.3 Research Methods and Procedure

This research was based on corpora collection. All the collected corpora originated from the HSK dynamic composition corpus which was a collection of composition answer sheet of non-native foreigners who took part in the advanced Chinese level examination, so the source of research materials was first-hand materials with high accuracy and reliability. In this research, the author mainly adopted both quantitative and qualitative methods. As for quantitative research, the author concentrated on data collection and classification. As for qualitative research, the author paid attention to the analysis of the collected texts, finding the nature of those data.

There are several steps in the following. First of all, the author needed to integrate the total data and figured out whether those corpora were in demand, because there were many compositions written by Japanese and other Asian people. In order to ensure the accuracy of the corpora, the author needed to check them several times. Secondly, before gathering all the existent data, the author would classify them into different category with a fixed criterion. In the research, the collected corpora were in a form of text, so there must be several parts in the whole text. According to the formal format of Chinese application letter, the whole text should be divided into seven parts of analysis such as an address form, greeting,

introduction, promising, requesting, acknowledgement and wishing. Thirdly, the author matched each part with relevant data. For example, in the first part of address form, among the seven samples, the author examined how many collected compositions had the address form, because it was possible that some foreigners might not have this part in their composition, which to some extent, could reflect their differences. Such data used in the analysis could achieve high effects. Fourthly, the author analyzed the differences among those western overseas students and evaluated their intercultural communication competence. Finally, on the basis of the results and analysis, the author tried to offer some suggestions for the cultivation of intercultural communication competence of western overseas students.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This part is the results of this research. As it is said in the above part, in terms of formal Chinese application letter, seven important parts must be included in order to achieve the good communicative effects with the covert or fictional employer. Through the research in this paper, the author checked the contents in seven overseas students aiming to find whether the seven essential parts are included in their application letters. In the following, a table was offered for a clear observation.

Table 1
Numbers of Each Part in Seven Overseas' Students' Application Letters

Seven parts	Numbers
Address form	7
Greeting	2
Self-introduction	7
Promising	3
Acknowledgement	1
Requesting	7
Wishing	1

From the above statistics, it found that not all the seven parts appear in all the seven students' writing. To some extent, it also indicated some deficiency of the intercultural communication competence of seven western overseas students. In addition, in order to ensure the reliability of the results, the author searched for the scores of those compositions of western overseas students. Only the one who comes from the United Kingdom gets the highest score: 90; the other two who come from America get the score of 70 while a Canadian gets 55 points in his composition part. The rest examinees do not have scores in the recording of HSK dynamic composition corpus. Although only the scores can not determine the intercultural communication competence of an individual, to a large extent, they can test foreigners' communicative competence. Hence, from the scores of their compositions, it can be also inferred the degree of their intercultural communication competence.

In the following part, the author will analyze each part in the application letter in details and illustrate how the seven western overseas represent their intercultural communication competence in their application writing.

Address form is the basic element in the application letter, often appearing in the very beginning. In Chinese culture, the employer is in a high position, so job-hunters have to show their respect to the employers. By this token, most of address forms in Chinese application letters tend to be honorifics. According to the analysis of seven application letters of overseas students, they all have address forms but they have different ways of addressing. Among the seven overseas students, only one person uses "respectable Mr Lixiang"; three overseas students address "Mr Lixiang" while other three call the employer or the name of the company directly. According to Brown and Levinson, in their book *Politeness: Some Universal in Language Usage*, they have ever said: "Positive politeness can be realized by being complimentary and gracious to the addressee. For instance, claiming common ground conveys that speaker and hearer are cooperators." (Brown & Levinson, 1987) Thus, in most of westerners' mind, calling one's surname can get closer to him or her, so they tend to address others by their names without honorifics. This kind of cultural pattern is reflected in their letter writing, so most of them are unconscious of the impropriety. According to the relevant research, in Chinese application letters, the address form such as honorific prefix +title is used most frequently while in English application letter, this address form such as surname is the most popular one. To some extent, if a foreigner calls a Chinese employer name directly, the employer will regard him impolite and the employee will not get the job. Hence the improper address will also cause a failure of communication.

In the formal letter writing, greeting is a necessary part. Greeting shows the respect to the other. In the collected seven application letters, only two students greet the covert employer by saying hello to him. Other students still use their own ways of writing. In China, greeting someone indicates that you notice the existence of him and shows your respect to him. Different countries also have different ways of greeting. In those western countries, some greeting part may be straightly omitted, especially in close friends, however, in Chinese writing, even one writes a letter to his or her intimate friends and the first line always is a greeting. Thus, because of the profound influence of culture, people use different ways to communicate with each other. For overseas students, they have to acquire this kind of cultural pattern in China for a better communication and they need to improve their intercultural communication competence. Learning a language is not merely learning the language itself, which also includes the culture learning. As Deng Y and Liu (2013) said that learning a foreign language well means more than merely—mastering the pronunciation,

grammar, words and idioms. It means learning also to see the world as native speakers of that language see it, learning the ways in which their language reflects the ideas, customs, and behavior of their society, learning to understand their language of the mind. Thus learning a language is inseparable from learning its culture. For overseas students, they should learn Chinese culture in order to improve their intercultural communication competence.

Self-introduction plays an important role in the application letter. Job-hunters introduce themselves to the employer for letting the employer have a good command of their identity, personality, working experience, qualifications and so on. More importantly, they desire to persuade the employer to accept their applications and offer them the job in order to achieve the purpose of application.

The first corpus of application letter is written by a student from England. In his introducing part, first of all, he talks about his nationality and his residence. Then he explains his profession in the university which is modern foreign language and other hobbies such as art design. As it was stated before, the requirement of this application letter is to apply a post about an advertisement designer or tour guide. As for an advertisement designer, one is bound to be endowed with good language base and the designing talent. This student claims that he has a good command of several kinds of language such as Russian, Chinese, French and English. Besides, he likes designing and gets a prize for his own designing work. He also has plenty of work experience. From his description, in a sense, he manages to achieve his communicative purpose, for all his introduction is what the employer demands. The second one is also from England, and his intercultural communicative competence is higher than the former. In his introduction, he pays more attention to his work experience and personal ability. All his work experience and ability are closely related to the advertisement, which attracts the employer most. In China, one's ability and work experience take a large part in his or her job application. In conclusion, this student grasps the core techniques in job application, so he owns good intercultural communication competence. The third student is from Canada. She states her work experience but does not say anything about her own ability in her own introduction. The fourth student is also from Canada, he claims that he has three work experiences in the commercial circle. The fifth Canadian student says that he has a high level of Chinese but nothing is talked about his ability and experience. The sixth student comes from America, and she recalls her experience in Shanghai, promoting clothes. Her introduction is not closely related to her application. To some extent, she does not perform her intercultural communication competence well. The last American student also shares his work experience and his illustration is more convincing. On the basis of above

analysis, some overseas students have good intercultural communication competence while others fail in their communication.

Promising can reflect employee's sincerity in job application, which can be seen as an important quality. In Chinese culture, Chinese people attach great importance to the spirit of contribution and advocate put the whole interest on an individual's interest. The promise can also convey one's responsibility, so it can be regarded as a criterion of a good employee. In the collected seven application letters, three students have the promising part. One says that he will go on studying English which is useful in the later job; the other one promises that she will work hard if she is admitted and the third one states that he will make contributions to the company. Actually, making a promise is very important for an employee.

Acknowledgement often appears in the Chinese application letters. Through the research, the author finds that only one overseas student shows his thank to the employer, but his expression is not quite suitable for Chinese habit. For example, he says: "Thanks for your time." Other six students do not show their thanks, which does not conform to Chinese habit. Acknowledgement is also a kind of politeness for Chinese. In Chinese culture, people attach great importance to politeness, so for those overseas students, this habit should be highlighted in their intercultural communication.

Wishing is a conventional form in the application letter. Most of people make good wishes to the employer at the end of their letters. Chinese tend to use good will both at the very beginning and the end of a job application. In this research, the author also finds that among seven application letters, only one overseas student makes a good wish to the employer by saying: "Wish you happy." From this analysis, some overseas students are not endowed with this kind of intercultural communication competence.

Making a request is at the center of an application letter. Although the employer has already known the purpose of applicants, the interpretation of their intention can also reflect their ability, especially communicative ability. There are different types of request, mainly direct and indirect request. Direct request is the request expressed by the addresser to the addressee directly, and it is straight enough to express the addresser's inner thoughts and desire. While indirect request conveys more meaning than what the addresser actually says. Sometimes indirect request shows more implicit and can be regarded as a kind of politeness. In this research, each collected application letter contains the request. However, they have different ways of expressing their own request. For example, two Englishmen make indirect request at the very beginning of their application letter. They all say that they hope to be an advertisement designer in the employer's company. While the two Americans make request more directly, both of their

request are straightforward. Three Canadians offer very explicit and direct request. For example, one Canadian says: "I apply for the post in your company." This request sounds fairly direct. It is suitable for a western application letter but not a Chinese one. Among them, one even claims that according to his personal experience, he is qualified for the post he applies. This kind of request never appears in a Chinese application, which is not fit for Chinese culture. Chinese culture advocates modesty and avoid directness in one's speaking while in western ideology, most of westerners are apt to pursue freedom and individuality. According to Brown and Levinson, they proposed: "Negative politeness is found in ways of minimizing the imposition, for example, being indirect, not presuming, not coercing hearer, communicating speaker's want without impinging on hearer, redressing other wants of hearer's." (Brown & Levinson, 1987) In westerner's mind, being indirect is a kind of impoliteness. Because of the differences of this cultural pattern, their intercultural communication is bound to meet difficulties. According to Yang (2005), in his book *Intercultural Communication and Foreign Language Teaching*, he thinks that in the way of language expression, Chinese tend to illustrate some potential conditions and reasons and then put forward their own opinions but westerners firstly come up with their personal viewpoints and then explain the reasons and make some analysis. So from the above analysis, some overseas students do not perform good intercultural communication competence, which will cause the failure of the communication. After analyzing the seven important components in the western overseas students' application letters in terms of a formal Chinese application letter, it can be found that intercultural communication competence of western overseas students still need to be improved.

According to the research, the differences between different cultures are the most influential factors in intercultural communication. In order to improve one's intercultural communication competence, he or she must learn more about the culture of target language. Through the result of this research, it is obvious that those western overseas students' intercultural communication competence still need to be improved. For a better communication between Chinese and western culture and the cultivation of overseas students' intercultural communication competence, the author will give several suggestions. For educators and teachers who take up teaching Chinese as a foreign language, they need to pay attention to the education of Chinese culture in their language teaching and meanwhile focus on the cultivation of students' intercultural communication competence in their daily study. For overseas students, they also should learn Chinese culture actively and notice distinctions of the two cultures. In their everyday communication, they should concentrate on the transformation of their thinking pattern for achieving good effects of cross-cultural communication.

CONCLUSION

Through the results of this research, it can be found that some of the western overseas students still need to improve their intercultural communication competence. From their application letters, their communication competence can be examined, to some extent. For them, writing an application letter in Chinese is not only a test for the level of Chinese language, but also a process of intercultural communication with Chinese culture. Thus, this research has certain significance for engendering an empathy that the improvement of intercultural communication competence pays an important role in daily cross-cultural communication and for attracting the attention of some educators and teachers who teach Chinese as a foreign language for foreigners to focus on the cultivation of intercultural communication competence of foreigners. With the restraint of time and ability, this research has some limitations. The number of collected corpora is not enough, and the analysis should be more precise and can be discussed from different aspects. In order to figure out the intercultural communication competence of western overseas students, more relevant studies are still needed.

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