

A Study of Avoidance Phenomenon in College Oral English Course for Non-English Majors

Song Yike* and Wang Lin

Abstract—In the process of second language acquisition, the learners often deal with language difficulties negatively when they have trouble with target language, that is, by avoiding obstacles to promote the smooth progress of communication. Thus, avoidance phenomenon appears and runs through the entire process of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). However, although the avoidance is essentially a kind of communication strategies, excessively inclined to take it will also lead to stagnation of learner's foreign language proficiency, which is also an important reason for the formation of fossilization. Based on the relevant theoretical results of scholars at home and abroad, this paper is designed to analyze avoidance behaviors of non-English-major freshmen in oral English class, and discuss the coping strategies for this phenomenon. In addition, some suggestions will be also put forward for shaping a dynamic classroom atmosphere that can effectively improve students' oral English level.

Index Terms—Avoidance Phenomenon, English classroom, oral English communication, Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

I. INTRODUCTION

The avoidance phenomenon in the process of second language acquisition was first proposed by German educator Schachter when she studied how English learners of different native languages deal with restrictive clauses. Schachter found that Chinese and Japanese learners of L2 English made fewer errors in the use of relative clauses than Persian or Arabic learners because they produced far fewer clauses overall. It can be seen that, as pointed out by Daskova [1], fewer errors do not mean that the problem is simpler.

Contrastive Analysis (CA) holds that differences between the mother tongue and the target language will bring difficulties to foreign language learning, and these difficulties will lead learners to make various forms of mistakes. Hence, it claims that through finding out those differences, students' mistakes can be predicted and analyzed. However, CA and EA which focus exclusively on what learners do, have no way of investigating avoidance and are, therefore, seriously limited.

As a kind of communication strategies, avoidance in oral communication is naturally common phenomenon. Practical research shows that the second language learners will give up the content which is difficult for them to express, and instead use synonyms or similar language rules they have already mastered to replace the unknown content, so as to overcome the barriers of language use and achieve smooth and

successful communication. But excessive avoidance of language difficulties will have a negative impact on students' foreign language learning, and hide the mistakes which students may make.

Therefore, the avoidance phenomenon overturns the hypothesis and function of contrastive analysis to some extent, and reflects the complexity of language acquisition and learning. It becomes obviously a significant issue for SLA research. Meanwhile, to correctly understand and treat avoidance is of great significance to the improvement and promotion of college English teaching. In view of this, on the basis of the literature summary of avoidance conducted by domestic and foreign scholars, this paper intends to investigate the avoidance phenomena of Chinese non-English majors in their process of oral English communication by way of questionnaire survey, actual classroom teaching and interview. This paper plans to take the freshmen of non-English major in Northwestern Polytechnical University as the research object, collect students' avoidance behaviors during their oral communication in classroom setting as comprehensively as possible, and classify these phenomena further into three aspects: vocabulary, syntax and pragmatics.

In short, this paper will be divided into five parts. The first chapter will mainly introduce the topic background, research purpose and structure and so on. The chapter two is literature review which sorts out the relevant research results from scholars at home and abroad. In the chapter three, namely the specific research design, including the research questions, research objects, research instruments and procedures, will be explained clearly. Subsequently, the paper will in chapter four specifically analyze the performance of undergraduates' avoidance in speaking, and explore the causes, so as to put forward constructive suggestions for correctly coping with the avoidance and give some implications for college English teaching and learning. The last part will draw the conclusion of the research through the analysis of the results and dissect the limitations of this paper, propound the prospect of future research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Overseas Research Status of Avoidance Phenomenon

The classic study of avoidance, is Schachter [2]. On the basis of the results of experiment, she concluded that it is precisely because the position of relative clauses in Chinese and Japanese is quite different from that in English, the native speakers of Chinese and Japanese should avoid using this structure to avoid making mistakes. According to Schachter, due to the differences between their mother tongue and the target language, foreign language learners often passively

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deal with some difficulties in the learning process, and actively abandon the use of certain linguistic structures or vocabulary in order to obtain the correctness of the language. From here, avoidance phenomenon has attracted the attention and discussion of linguistic scholars.

Besides, Kleinmann [3] in the research on avoidance behaviors of 39 foreign English-acquisition students who are admitted to the English School of the University of Pittsburgh in the winter of 1976, proposed that “comparative analysis” can be a good way to predict avoidance phenomena. Moreover, Selinker [4] supplements that it is only possible to claim that avoidance has taken place when the learner has demonstrated knowledge of the form in question, and when there is evidence available that native speakers of the L2 would use the form in the context under consideration [5].

The above research results have greatly enriched the recognition of avoidance phenomenon in academic circles and testify to the prevalence of avoidance in SLA.

In terms of theory, The Monitor Theory explains the avoidance phenomenon from the perspective of language acquisition and language learning [6]. Because the avoidance of certain words or structures does not lead to errors, it can only make these words and structures “under-performance”. As a means to achieve communication purposes, avoidance phenomenon has also entered the research field of scholars. The Theory of Communicative strategy was first proposed by the American linguist Selinker, when he discussed the process of SLA. It refers to the method adopted by learners in order to overcome the communication barriers, when they are unable to express information due to limited corpus.

According to Tarone [7], the role of communicative strategies is to fill the gap between the second language learners’ knowledge of the target language and the knowledge of their mother tongue. In respect of discourse functions, it can be divided into five types: reporting, borrowing, avoiding, asking for help, and sign language. Communication strategies are also divided into two categories. If the learner avoids obstacles, it is avoidance strategy.

It can be seen that foreign studies on avoidance phenomenon are mostly confined to the individual behavior, and focus on the similarities and differences between learner’s native language and target language. They mainly discuss the reasons for the avoidance through the way of contrastive analysis, but without considering other subjective factors of second language learners like psychology, emotion, learning motivation, on the impact of avoidance.

B. Domestic Research Status of Avoidance Phenomenon

Ruan Zhoulin[8] introduces the related theoretical research on avoidance phenomena, and shifts the domestic research perspective from the traditional explicit error analysis to the implicit avoidance phenomenon, and puts forward the prerequisite conditions for the emergence of avoidance. Li [9] attributes the avoidance phenomenon to a lack of foreign language knowledge, and considers that the existence of this phenomenon is inevitable. Others regard that avoidance as a communication strategy which students use more in social interaction and learning.

Many scholars analyze the avoidance phenomenon in SLA from a theoretical perspective. Chen Tingyun [10] introduces

the proposal and classification of avoidance, and makes some strategic research on the understanding of avoidance phenomenon. In addition, Sun *et al.* [11] conduct an in-depth study and analysis of avoidance behaviors from the perspective of psychological factors. Wang [12] through empirical research explored the positive and negative effects of avoidance on foreign language learning.

So far, domestic studies on avoidance phenomenon in the process of second language acquisition not only cover the difference between the mother tongue and the target language, but also include the psychological, cognitive, cultural and other perspectives of learners. However, the related theoretical research is more than the empirical research, and the qualitative research is still in the majority. And many researches only stay on the surface discussion, without in-depth exploration.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

A. Research Questions

- 1) What the non-English majors freshmen usually avoid in oral communication?
- 2) Why do students appear avoidance during the process of oral communication?
- 3) How to deal with avoidance in oral communication correctly ?

B. Research Objects

The subjects of this study are 34 students from two classes in the Oral English Course of Northwestern Polytechnical University, all of whom are non-English majors’ freshmen. A total of 34 questionnaires were sent out and 34 were returned, of which 30 were valid.

C. Research Instruments and Procedures

This paper adopts three research methods: classroom empirical research, questionnaire survey, and interview. This study first collects the avoidance behaviors of students in actual oral communication by attending lectures and taking notes, and then combines the results of the questionnaire, in order to further analyze its manifestations and characteristics, and discuss the causes of its occurrence. The questionnaire consists of 14 questions, which mainly focus on students’ avoidance in terms of vocabulary, syntax and pragmatics. The options under each question divide the occurrence of students’ avoidance into five levels (always, often, sometimes, rarely, hardly ever). Students need to make their choices according to their actual performance. Subsequently, on the basis of in-depth understanding of students’ views on avoidance, this paper will put forward its own opinion, and provide some useful suggestions for effectively improving students’ English communication level.

IV. THE RESULTS AND ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH

A. The Manifestations of Avoidance in Oral English Communication

1) Vocabulary

The learner’s vocabulary can be divided into two types: productive vocabulary and receptive vocabulary. The former

refers to the words that learners can use to express themselves, while the latter are the words that are difficult for learners to use and generally only used for understanding (such as reading), not for one's self-expression. Among them, the productive vocabulary is a part of the receptive vocabulary. For most Chinese learners, their receptive vocabulary is much larger than the productive vocabulary. In English oral communication, it's usually full of poor vocabulary and monotonous language patterns. An important reason for this problem is that students avoid using some difficult words. Questions 1 to 5 in the questionnaire exactly investigate the degree of students' avoidance, when they face with different types of vocabulary. According to the survey data, 80% of students avoid using words they are not familiar with; 86.67% of the students always or often use easy to pronounce words in oral communication; 96% of the students always or often tend to use words with a single meaning and simple phrases. In addition to, 86.33% students tend to use words similar to the cultural background of their mother tongue.

It can be seen that the avoidance phenomenon is particularly obvious in students' choice of words during oral communication. The results of questionnaire surveys and classroom empirical research both corroborate this situation. It can be seen from the survey results and interviews that most students tend to choose words and phrases with simple pronunciation, concise collocation, single semantics, and similar culture background to Chinese. When faced with unfamiliar or unsure vocabulary, the degree of students' avoidance behavior is also relatively high.

Especially, when one word is difficult to pronounce, and not commonly used in spoken expressions, but there are corresponding relatively simple synonyms to replace it, the students will often give up using this word. For example, in class oral exercises, the use range and frequency of superordinate words are much greater than subordinate words. Students often use the superordinate words and avoid using their hyponym. For instance, students will use "vegetable" instead of cauliflower, spinach, etc.; use "fruit" instead of pomegranate, fig and other specific fruit names. It is also worth mentioning that students often use general vocabulary to avoid unfamiliar technical terms. Students also use other methods like circumlocution or paraphrase to explain the connotations of words they have not yet mastered, in order to avoid the difficult points.

All of the above avoidance behaviors will lead to the lack of students' productive vocabulary. That is, the number of words used to express themselves is limited, so that the learner's English output level is also impaired. Although it is common to avoid language difficulties in oral communication, most students still hold a positive attitude towards mistakes.

Question 6 in questionnaire investigates the impact of error correction in the classroom on students' vocabulary use. 60% of students said that generally they would not avoid using some words just because they are corrected in class, while 26.67% of the students said that they would occasionally show avoidance behavior due to this reason. Only 13.33% said the correction would have a greater impact on their use of these words again.

It can be seen that error correction has a certain impact on students when they use this kind of words again. But it will

produce different effects for different individuals. Most of the subjects are able to face the corrections frankly and provide positive feedback, instead of avoiding errors and completing the oral practice indistinctly. However, there are still a few students who are more sensitive to error correction, which is related to many subjective factors such as the strength of personal learning motivation and self-confidence.

According to the survey data on question 7 in the questionnaire, nearly 50% of the students said that they would correct themselves at a high frequency when they are aware of the incorrect use or pronunciation of words in the process of oral communication. From The Monitor Theory by Krashen, we can find some reasonable explanations for this behavior. This Hypothesis states that language knowledge gained through "learning" can play a role as "monitor". "Monitoring" is a kind of conscious supervision of language output by learners. In addition to avoiding language difficulties, students' self-correction is an external manifestation of the role of "monitor" [13]. This is different judgment made by students based on the degree of language difficulties and how much language knowledge they have mastered.

The existence of avoidance phenomenon makes students develop a dependence on familiar and simple words in oral communication. Meanwhile, they try to avoid using those complicated and unfamiliar words. Therefore, due to lack of use, quite a lot of receptive vocabulary will always be receptive words and cannot be transformed into productive vocabulary of students. This situation in turn causes the limitation of students' vocabulary, and their oral level cannot be improved fundamentally. In this way, a vicious circle appeared.

2) *Syntax*

In classroom oral communication, students also have avoidance behaviors when using grammar rules [14]. Specifically, as pointed out by Levenston [15], learners will show a preference for certain syntactic structures when using a second language. He called this kind of excessive use of certain structures and rejection of other sentence patterns, as "over-indulgence" and "under-representation".

The first obvious manifestation is that, because most of the students learn the formal language during the process of school's English education, they are more accustomed and willing to use formal sentence patterns while avoiding the informal type in current class oral communication. Students might develop a perception that the more formal the sentence structure is, the more correct it is. But it leads far too easily to pragmatic failures where the language style contradicts the context. According to the feedback in questionnaire, it can be seen that all 30 subjects have this problem more or less. Among them, 20% of the students said that they tend to use formal sentence patterns almost all the time. 43.33% and 20% of the students said that they often or sometimes have this problem in oral communication. Only 16.67% thought that they rarely avoid informal sentence patterns and do not prefer to use certain sentence patterns.

In addition, due to fear of making mistakes in communication, students will repeatedly use the rules of English (target language) which are similar to Chinese (native language), but always avoid the differences between the two, when there are differences between the two. Among

the 30 subjects in this study, only 2 said that they were not affected by the grammatical differences between their native language and the target language in oral communication.

For example, students tend to choose the simplest English sentence structure which is similar to the structure of subject-predicate-object in Chinese in oral expression, and only seek to express the meaning without paying attention to the variation and diversity of sentences.

- a) I'll ask someone to clean my room.
- b) I'll have my room cleaned.

Students tend to use sentence a), because it is consistent with the grammatical habits of Chinese, while few students use the expression like sentence b).

Or, students often use personal pronouns as the subject of the sentence after the Chinese habits. Such as:

- a) He went to Beijing for business.
- b) Business took him to Beijing.

Students use sentence a) more frequently than sentence b), because the structure of sentence a) is more similar to Chinese.

The negative transfer of native language may also cause students to speak Chinglish. For instance, some students will express this sentence "study hard and make progress every day" in the wrong way like "good good study, day day up".

Moreover, in combination with the results of the questionnaire survey and the classroom teaching situation, it can be found that in the selection of sentence patterns, most students often use simple sentences to replace complex sentences in oral communication, such as splitting attributive clauses into simple sentences. The avoidance of certain syntactic structures and sentence patterns leads to the accumulation of simple sentences in students' oral expressions. The sentence patterns used in communication also lack variability and diversity. All of the above are detrimental to the improvement of the overall level of students' oral English.

3) *Pragmatics*

In terms of pragmatics, due to the lack of the understanding of Western culture and enough knowledge of English, many Chinese students may misunderstand the usage of communicative language, which leads to the appearance of avoidance.

Secondly, students tend to avoid topics that they do not know and are not interested in. This is also inseparable from the lack of relevant cultural knowledge. In the questionnaire survey of 30 students, 11 students will always avoid the topic they are not interested in or unfamiliar with in the communication process; 16 students did this occasionally, and only three said they rarely avoided communication because of different topics. In other words, the survey results show that the degree of students' participation in familiar or unfamiliar topics is also quite different.

For example, in the actual class teaching activities of this semester, students are very interested in certain topics such as "shopping festival", which are closely combined with daily life. But the participation is limited on some topics that require higher expertise, such as politics and technology.

B. Causes of Avoidance in Oral English Communication

Combined with the results of questionnaire and interview, this paper mainly focuses on the internal and external reasons

behind students' avoidance behaviors.

First of all, although the avoidance phenomenon in the process of second language acquisition manifests in different forms, it's all inseparable from the lack of the target language knowledge. According to the questionnaire results, 26 of the 30 students believed that the main cause of avoidance behavior in their oral communication is an inadequate supply of vocabulary, while 11 students thought that the reasons include the insufficient language input. The other related reasons in sequence also involve the insufficient attraction of the topic, unfamiliar with syntactic structure, mother tongue transfer, and the fear of making mistakes and so on. When learners are uncertain about one difficulty in the target language, they are faced with two choices: keep silent or use an approximate structure to replace the original structure [16]. Both of the above options will lead to avoidance.

The difference between the mother tongue and the target language is also one of the reasons for the avoidance phenomenon. Learners are likely to avoid structures they find difficult as a result of differences between their native language and the second language. This is also reflected in Schacher's [17] research on the processing of restrictive relative clauses by English learners of different native languages.

In this study, it was shown that Chinese and Japanese speakers produced fewer relative clauses in English as L2 than did Farsi and Arabic speakers, but were more accurate. Schacher relates this result to differences between L1 and L2: Chinese and Japanese relative clauses are constructed to the left of the head noun, while Farsi and Arabic have relative clauses to the right of the head noun as same as in English. In such cases, the impact of the native language is not what learners do wrong(errors), but what they avoid (omissions).

In addition, The Monitor Hypothesis of Krashen also makes a understandable and clear explanation for the causes of the avoidance phenomenon. Above all, this Hypothesis elucidates the relationship between acquisition and learning: acquisition plays the central role while learning only functions as a monitor. It means, the acquired system is responsible for the generation of utterances in L2, while the learned system is in charge of monitoring the speech. However, conscious Monitoring need not always result in the full repair of an L1 influenced error. When the repair job appears to be too complex for the Monitor to deal with, the performer may simply abort the entire sentence and try to express the idea in a simpler way. This may be one cause of the avoidance phenomena.

Besides, during the process of oral communication, the external factors such as time limit and mental state also put more pressure on students [18]. In order to reduce errors, ensure the accuracy of the language form and achieve the purpose of communication much better, students will choose to avoid using uncertain vocabulary, phrases and sentence patterns in a short time.

C. Correct Cognition and Treatment of Avoidance

According to the survey of students' attitudes towards avoidance in the questionnaire, 33.33% of these students think that avoidance as a method is conducive to accomplish oral communication. 56.67% of them regard it as one problematic behavior which detrimental to the process of English acquisition and learning. In general, most students

hold a negative attitude towards the avoidance phenomenon, and think it will hinder the improvement of English proficiency to some extent.

Avoidance phenomenon is the performance of learners' excessive use of avoidance strategy in communication, which is manifested in the form of "using known knowledge to avoid unfamiliar language knowledge". It is an inevitable objective phenomenon in the process of second language acquisition, with both positive and negative aspects. Therefore, only with a correct understanding and rational treatment of avoidance can students' pragmatic competence and English oral level be truly improved.

1) Correct understanding of avoidance phenomenon

As a communication strategy, avoidance has a certain positive effect. When learners encounter obstacles during communication, moderate avoidance can help them complete the entire communicative process [19]. However, the smooth progress of communication may make learners lack the motivation to further improve their language competence. This is the downside of avoidance.

When learners avoid using some language structures, and tend to use one or several simplified language forms for a long time, they may be unable to fully express the nuances between different language forms. Such blind avoidance will hinder learners' absorption and mastery of new knowledge.

2) Rational treatment of the avoidance phenomenon

a) Increase understandable input and high-quality output: It is precisely because of the lack of language knowledge, such as vocabulary and syntax, that English learners tend to avoid too much in the process of oral communication. According to the Input Hypothesis by Krashen, the only way for one learner to acquire a foreign language is: by exposure to comprehensible input. When the input contains forms and structures just beyond learner's current level of competence in the target language, then both comprehension and acquisition will occur, and the learner's progress in his knowledge of L2 will be realized. In this regard, teachers can provide some practical phrases or sentence patterns relevant to the discussion topic before starting oral practice, in order to help students express themselves better. In short, it is necessary to combine language input and output appropriately to deal with the negative avoidance behaviors.

b) Strengthen the interpretation of the target language culture: Teachers should realize the importance of improving learners' understanding of the target language culture [20]. The curriculum design needs to combine English language knowledge with the western culture, and compare it with the Chinese. It will guide students to improve their awareness of cultural features, prevent the negative interference of Chinese, and use appropriate expressions in the corresponding context.

c) Help students overcome psychological barriers: Teachers should create a relaxed language learning environment in classroom, organize flexible and effective oral practice activities, and stimulate students' enthusiasm for participation. Teachers need to encourage students to actively participate in interaction, express their opinions in English, try new vocabulary and different language structures, and guide students to use communication strategies correctly [21]. The occurrence of avoidance is permitted to a certain extent. In addition, teachers need to pay attention to

the way of error correction and give appropriate feedback to students' language output. Instead of giving stern warnings directly, teachers should guide students to recognize problems on their own, so as not to undermine students' self-confidence.

Combined with the classroom empirical research of this semester, it is found that some practice activities such as role-playing and discussion are more popular among students, because the contents of such exercises are closely related to their realistic life experience, which make students have more desire to express their opinions. However, the type of exercises like debate is difficult to mobilize the enthusiasm of all students, because it requires students' high linguistic competence and pragmatic competence in the second language and flexible adaptability.

V. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Based on many results of second language acquisition researches obtained by domestic and foreign scholars, it is found that contrastive analysis and error analysis can not foresee and include all the mistakes made by students in the process of language acquisition and learning, because sometimes learners will avoid the unknown knowledge of the target language to reduce the occurrence of mistakes.

It can be said that avoidance of difficulties is a common feature of human beings in the process of language acquisition, which no one can completely eliminate. As an objective phenomenon and a strategy to facilitate the success of communications, avoidance plays a indeed positive role in practical application, but it has more negative influence on learners.

This paper focuses on the avoidance phenomenon of non-English majors in oral English expression. And as an important element of language teaching and practice, the classroom has become the venue for this research. In this regard, on the basis of reviewing the research achievements of the avoidance phenomenon, this paper takes 30 non-English-major freshmen as the research objects.

By means of questionnaire survey, after-class interviews and observation of students' actual performance in oral English class, their views and understandings of avoidance in oral communication are collected. After summarizing the avoidance phenomenon, this paper also makes a preliminary discussion on the causes of it, and puts forward some suggestions to improve the effectiveness of English learners' oral learning.

First of all, due to insufficient linguistic knowledge reserves of the target language (English) and the negative transfer of mother tongue (Chinese), when it is difficult or impossible for students to express something, they will directly avoid certain contents and forms in terms of vocabulary and grammar rules. In addition, due to cognitive psychological factors like learning motivation, cultural difference and pragmatic competence, students may avoid participating in some topics which they are not familiar with or interested in. It should be noted, the blind avoidance in oral communication will hinder learner's absorption and mastery of new knowledge, which results in the inability to improve their language ability.

In view of the negative impact of avoidance phenomenon,

teachers should increase understandable language input in classroom teaching, integrate English culture into the learning of language knowledge, and guide students to apply the English thinking mode in practical communication. At the same time, it is also very significant to create a relaxed learning atmosphere and organize diversified practice activities to train students' language output ability. Through the above measures, students will have a more objective and comprehensive understanding of avoidance phenomenon, and they will be able to correctly use it as a communicative strategy, so as to solve the language difficulties in oral communication more reasonably and then improve their language proficiency. The improvement of the learner's oral level can also promote the combination of language knowledge and practice, and promote the comprehensive development of listening, reading, writing, translation and other language skills.

Because this paper is restricted by the author's limited capability, this paper still has certain limitations in the sample size and the content design of the questionnaire. It has not yet made an in-depth analysis of the avoidance phenomenon from the perspective of individual cognition. At last, how to further improve the experimental design and how to analyze the influence of different task types on the avoidance phenomenon through scientific methods are all the directions that need to be explored in the future research.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Song Yike conducted the research, wrote the paper, collected and analyzed the corpus; Wang Lin checked and corrected the mistakes during the corpus analysis procedure.

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