

Exploring Pragmatics Teaching in Chinese High School English Classrooms

Xinni Zeng*

Faculty of Humanities, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, China

*Corresponding author: 22098994d@connect.polyu.hk

Abstract. This paper delves into the efficient ways of teaching pragmatics in Chinese high school English classes, focusing on applying Role play, analyzing pragmatic failures, and comprehending Speech Act Theory to enhance learners' successful acquisition of pragmatic, positive competence in communication. Pragmatic failure in cross-cultural contexts leads to misunderstandings and communication interruption between individuals. Through methods such as Role play, students can acquire authentic experience in real communication scenarios and develop an awareness of language and cultural differences. In addition, the paper introduces Austin's Speech Act Theory, which emphasizes "locutionary", "illocutionary," and "perlocutionary." It additionally provides suggestions on how these concepts can be integrated into classroom activities to enhance language teaching. The study results indicate that pragmatic teaching is indispensable for developing learners' capacity to communicate appropriately in various social settings.

Keywords: Pragmatic; Roleplay; Pragmatic failure; Speech Act Theory.

1. Introduction

Pragmatics research is becoming increasingly significant in the field of second language acquisition, particularly in the context of improving learners' daily communication. Leech emphasized the significance of social expectations and politeness strategies in language usage [1]. In this case, understanding pragmatics is crucial for language learners to avoid pragmatic misunderstandings caused by cultural differences. Ninio emphasizes that pragmatic development encompasses the acquisition of language structures and the ability to use language effectively in social interactions, which pertains to the appropriate use of language in various circumstances [2]. The main objective of this paper is to apply pragmatics to English teaching, primarily through role play and the application of Austin's speech act theory. Roleplaying is a widely used instructional method that enables students to learn language and sociocultural knowledge in a realistic setting. In addition, finding and correcting grammatical errors is imperative to facilitate cross-cultural communication. This paper will provide practical resources for teachers to enhance students' pragmatic competence in English by analyzing Austin's speech act theory.

2. Language Teaching Method

2.1. Role Play

Role play is an instructional method that is widely acknowledged as effective. Blatner states that roleplaying is a method derived from social drama that can help students understand aspects of literature, social studies, etc [3]. Roleplaying is a standard teaching method, especially in language classes, to help students master the use of language in actual communication. In addition, it can help them generate greater interest and engagement in learning how to put knowledge into action by solving problems, exploring alternatives, and seeking new and creative solutions. Cracuin considers roleplaying to be an interaction between games and simulations, and students gain learning outcomes through activities in science education [4].

According to Rayhan, the fundamental aspect of roleplaying is communication [5]. He describes roleplaying as "an activity in which students can communicate ideas, opinions, or emotions with others through language or pronunciation." Teachers use this method in class to interact with students

and effectively solve complex problems. To be more specific, teachers can design different situations, such as shopping in a store, ordering food in a restaurant, or handling complaints, requiring students to play different roles and communicate using appropriate language. Students are provided with practical opportunities that enable them to practice language use in simulated real-life communicative situations. In individuals, pairs, or teams of several people, in the roleplay, each person gets a specific role in a special scene that the students might have experienced or not yet encountered the same situation. The students immerse themselves in the roleplay activities, transforming their original self-character into a different personality and experiencing deep, real scenes that can achieve interaction with others.

Nagasaka and Brock developed a simple activity that demonstrated one way to increase students' pragmatic awareness of English. In detail, the teacher introduces the courtesy continuum using the table following:

Example 1:

Indirect: I forgot to bring my pencil. / My pencil is broken.

Direct: Lend me a pencil.

Polite: Can you lend me a pencil? / Would you mind lending me a pencil?

Familiar: It would be great if I could lend you a pencil [6].

According to Example 1, students learn the key points and keywords of polite expressions, such as: Can you...? /Would you mind...? Therefore, students will have roleplaying experience in another scenario. For instance, when ordering food in a restaurant, one student, A, imitates the waiter, and another student, B, imitates the customer:

Example 2:

A: Hello, how can I help you?

B: Can you get me a glass of water?

According to Example 2, it would be politer than student B directly saying to student A: I want a glass of water. Politeness expression is a vital part of pragmatism in real life. In addition, as Olshtain and Cohen et al. point out, using roleplay, drama, and small dialogues, which allow students to choose what they say, allows them to practice and develop various practical abilities [7]. Specifically, the teacher first teaches the students various critical scenes, such as praising, giving feedback, apologizing, waiting, etc. For example, in China, most children are taught early on that there is a distinction between superiority and inferiority and that they need to respect their elders. Then, the following scene can be provided to students:

Example 3:

A(Child): Grandpa, would you mind teaching me to draw this picture?

B(Grandpa): No problem. Come and look carefully.

In contrast, according to example 3, in the United States, it is customary to call the elders by their first names, but it is impolite to call the elders by their first names in China. In addition, according to the comparison between the communication of A and B, A's tone is polite and cautious. B, on the other hand, is more informal. Therefore, students experience cultural differences and diversity when performing such role plays.

To conclude, roleplaying is a teaching method that enhances students' language skills and engagement by simulating real-life situations. It enables students to communicate, solve problems, and investigate creative solutions. By immersing themselves in various roles, students can develop pragmatic awareness and acquire civil expressions in diverse contexts, such as ordering food or communicating with elders. Roleplaying also allows students to observe cultural distinctions, such as the difference between respect for elders in China and informal communication in the United States, which aids students' comprehension of language in a variety of social contexts.

2.2. Recognizing Pragmatic Failure

Recognizing pragmatic errors is critical to improving language and pragmatics competence in pragmatics learning. Pragmatic errors refer to the failure of learners to use language appropriately in

cross-cultural or cross-linguistic communication according to social and cultural contexts. These errors are not only related to grammar or vocabulary but also to a failure to understand the target language's social rules, politeness strategies, or cultural context. According to Thomas, pragmatic failure refers to the failure of speakers to communicate effectively by social conventions in the target language, resulting in miscommunication or misunderstanding. Thomas categorized pragmatic failure into two types: pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure, which have different performances and impacts on intercultural communication and seriously affect the learners' language use [8].

2.2.1 Pragmalinguistic Failure

Pragmalinguistic failure refers to learners' mistakes in choosing specific language forms, usually involving direct translation of language expressions or inappropriate language forms. It is typically because learners cannot identify appropriate pragmatic expressions in the target language and instead inadvertently transplant expressions from their native language directly into the target language. These failures are generally related to vocabulary, grammar, or expression misuse. For instance:

Example 4:

A: Your cooking looks so good!

B: (For the British, the answer would be): Thank you very much for appreciating my cooking. Would you mind coming to my home in your free time to try my cooking?

(For the Chinese, the answer would be): Thanks, come to my home for dinner anytime you are free.

According to Example 4, there are no grammatical or lexical errors in the Chinese response. Nevertheless, the invitation is excessively forceful and disrespectful after the corresponding response is applied to the English response. In English, gratitude is expressed politely by incorporating modifiers, such as "Thank you *very much* for your appreciation of my food." This response in Chinese appears to cause the respondent to feel uneasy in a subtle manner, and it can also create the impression that the conversation is less intimate and familiar, as if strangers are meeting for the first time. Consequently, in Chinese, a straightforward expression of gratitude, such as "Thank you," is typically sufficient to indicate. Furthermore, in English, invitations are frequently preceded by euphemisms, such as "Would you mind...?" This provides the respondent with the opportunity to contemplate and decide. Nevertheless, in Chinese culture, inviting an individual directly provides the recipient with comfort and intimacy.

The reason for this pragmalinguistic failure is that the speaker fails to realize the polite and indirect requirements for invitations and more expressive attitudes of gratitude in the English culture, mistakenly considering that direct expressions in the native language are also applicable to the target language, which leads to inappropriate language use.

2.2.2 Sociopragmatic Failure

Sociopragmatic failure involves the misunderstanding of cultural and social rules. It refers to the learner's failure to understand appropriate language behavior in the social context of the target language. These failures are associated with cultural factors that influence language usage. Sociopragmatic failures usually occur in cross-cultural communication as different cultures have varying perspectives of manners, gender roles, etc. For example, Refusing a gift or invitation is usually done out of humility in Japan. Japanese people may politely decline multiple invitations to show respect.

On the other hand, in the United States or other Western cultures, refusing to accept an invitation or a gift may be interpreted as disinterest or dissatisfaction. For example, suppose a Japanese English learner refuses a gift from an American friend. In that case, the person may be confused or offended and mistakenly assume that the gift or invitation is not welcome. It is due to a misunderstanding of cultural standards and expectations of politeness and humility on both sides, resulting in sociopragmatic failure.

In addition, maintaining appropriate eye contact while talking to others is considered respectful and honest in Western cultures. However, in some Asian cultures, it may be considered impolite or challenging authority, especially when talking to elders or superiors. If a Chinese interviewee avoids eye contact in the United States, the American interviewer may perceive the interviewee as diffident or dishonest, which causes a common sociopragmatic failure.

Pragmatic errors affect language fluency, cause severe cultural misunderstandings, and harm interpersonal relations. Learners who cannot precisely recognize the target culture's societal expectations might encounter disappointment or conflict during daily interactions. To enhance English learners' pragmatic competence and identify and rectify pragmatic errors, teachers and learners need to pay more attention to the social norms of the target language and culture. In addition, students can be assisted in comprehending to prevent pragmatic errors by simulating real-life scenarios and cultural comparisons. To address such issues, a deeper understanding of the role of language in social interaction is essential, which is also the practical significance of Speech Act Theory.

3. Austin's Speech Act Theory

Speech Act Theory (SAT) is a linguistic theory proposed by the British philosopher J.L. Austin and further developed by the American philosopher John Searle (1969). The fundamental concept of Speech Act Theory is that language can engage in an extensive range of actions, in addition to functioning as a tool for conveying facts and actions. In simple terms, language is not merely an inactive medium for transmitting information; it can also be applied to carry out actions. This theory presents an innovative viewpoint on the behavioral traits of language, emphasizing the significance of speech acts in real life and social interactions. According to Austin, speech acts can be divided into three categories: The locutionary Act, the Illocutionary Act, and the Perlocutionary Act [9].

3.1. Locutionary Act

Locutionary act refers to the fundamental behavior of the speaker's use of language, including the use of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Locutionary act is the process by which the speaker chooses the vocabulary and grammar to form the sentence. For instance, a student says, "We have a test tomorrow." The locutionary act of this sentence refers to the phrase and the formation of this sentence as a composition of words and grammar.

3.2. Illocutionary Act

Illocutionary act refers to the speaker's realization of a specific behavior through language, which reflects the speaker's intention. For example, a student who says, "There is a test tomorrow." It may be reminding the other students to review the lesson or to remind them to bring stationery, or simply to convey the message.

Searle classifies illocutionary acts into five essential categories: assertive, directives, commissive, expressive, and declarations [10]:

a) Assertive: The act of articulating a fact or an opinion through speech. The example mentioned above belongs to the assertive category, which conveys information and describes facts.

b) Directives: The speaker endeavors to compel the listener to act by speaking. For instance: "please close the door" is a directive requesting others to act.

c) Commissives: The sender guarantees that they will act. For instance, the speaker says, "I intend to spend time in physical activity tomorrow." It conveys the speaker's commitment to act.

d) Expressives: Speakers express emotions or attitudes through language. For example, the speaker says, "I am sorry." or "Thank you."

e) Declarations: To directly alter a state or fact through language. For instance, the defendant is acquitted by the magistrate. The legal status of the accused is immediately transformed from "defendant" to "acquitted" by this verbal act.

3.3. Perlocutionary Act

Perlocutionary act refers to the reaction or effect produced by the listener after hearing the speech, which can be psychological or behavioral. For example, a student says, "There is an exam tomorrow." B may immediately go to review or check whether the stationery is ready, which is a behavioral action, or B may begin to feel anxious after A tells him there will be an exam tomorrow, which is the psychological impact of the perlocutionary act.

4. Application of Austins' Speech Act Theory in the Class

The three categories of speech act theory- locutionary act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act- provide a practical framework for language teaching, helping learners learn how to speak and speak appropriately in specific situations. This helps to improve learners' effectiveness in practical communication.

Using the Locutionary Act to Teach Pragmatics to Students, the teaching goal is learning to use vocabulary and grammar to express complete sentences correctly. Teachers need to pay attention to the basic knowledge and expression of language, such as the grammatical structure of sentences, choice of vocabulary, and pronunciation. For example, teachers can hold class activities and design sentence construction exercises by using a word and asking students to use the correct tense, vocabulary, and syntax. The point is that students can get more exercises to use the language structure accurately and master the essential speech act ability.

Applying the Illocutionary Act to teach students, the teaching objective is that students should not only master the form of language but also understand and use the intention of the language. The teaching of the Illocutionary act focuses on expressing specific intentions such as request, suggestion, and apology according to different contexts. Teachers first teach students by giving five examples of each category of the Illocutionary Act. Each type is usually associated with certain words or expressions. For Assertives, some typical words are believed, think, claim, assert, state, report, and so on. For Directives, some keywords are request, command, suggest, ask, urge, and invite. For Commissives, "promise" is the most common word in this specific act. For Expressives, locomotives such as "sorry," "thank," and "wish" can express the emotions of the speaker. For Declarations, words such as "pronounce," "judge," "resign," and "appoint" are common. After learning each category's specific words, the teacher can hold a role-playing activity for students to practice by understanding the words or phrases in other people's utterances to understand the speaker's intention. This exercise helps students comprehend how to achieve intent in formal situations through appropriate Illocutionary acts and focuses on the social function of language.

For teaching the Perlocutionary Act, teachers must pay attention to students and be aware that language will have a specific effect on the listener. The emphasis of Perlocutionary Act teaching is to understand and predict the listener's reaction and to choose the appropriate expression mode. Teachers can ask students to discuss how different words affect the listener. For example, teachers can design situational discussions to compare the effects of using different tone requests:

Example 5:

Use polite language: Can you pass me a bottle of water?

Use something mandatory: You need to pass me a bottle of water.

According to Example 5, the two examples produce different psychological and behavioral responses to the recipient. The former may help the speaker feel the speaker's good attitude and a comfortable communication environment. The latter may make the recipient feel unpleasant and compelled, so the receiver may not help the speaker. Through this activity, students can realize the influence of language and learn how to use appropriate strategies in different situations to achieve the desired social effect.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, pragmatics plays a crucial role in Chinese high school English teaching, in which students acquire the necessary language skills to navigate social and cultural nuances in communication. Role play is regarded as an effective teaching method, allowing learners to simulate real-life scenes and improve their language application ability in context. By engaging in roleplaying, students acquire language proficiency and develop an awareness of cultural distinctions, which is crucial to preventing pragmatic failures. In addition, Austin's Speech Act Theory (SAT) provides a comprehensive framework for practical language teaching, emphasizing the significance of understanding speech acts from three aspects: The locutionary act, the Illocutionary act, and the Perlocutionary act. To implement the theory, educators can design classroom activities that encourage students to practice in different contexts and facilitate their reflection on the impact of different contexts or terms in cultural communication. Ultimately, by integrating pragmatics into language teaching, educators can assist learners in developing more effective communication skills, which are essential for cross-cultural communication.

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