

An Analysis of Pragmatic Failures and Teaching Strategies in Middle School English Writing

Yanglan Xu

China West Normal University, Nanchong, Sichuan, 637002, China

Abstract: The compulsory education curriculum standards clearly state that pragmatic knowledge is an important part of language knowledge and is a crucial foundation for developing language skills. However, pragmatic failure is a major problem in middle school students' English writing, directly affecting the development of their cross-cultural communication skills. Based on relevant pragmatic theories, this article sorts out the main types of pragmatic failures in middle school students' English writing and analyzes their causes, including negative transfer of the native language, insufficient pragmatic orientation in teaching, and the lack of cross-cultural input and practice. Finally, based on the existing problems, this article also puts forward some specific and feasible suggestions from the perspectives of pragmatic knowledge, situational writing, cross-cultural comparison, and evaluation dimensions.

Keywords: English Writing; Pragmatic Failure; Teaching Strategies.

1. Introduction

English writing is an important form of language output and a core indicator for evaluating students' comprehensive language application ability. In middle school English teaching, teachers often focus on grammar, vocabulary and paragraph structure guidance, but tend to neglect the norms at the pragmatic level. Pragmatic failures are different from grammatical errors. They refer to the phenomenon where language users, in communication, fail to understand or violate the pragmatic rules of the target language, resulting in the expression of their words not meeting the requirements of the context and thus affecting the communication effect [1]. With the improvement of the new curriculum standards' requirements for students' cross-cultural communication ability, analyzing pragmatic errors in middle school English writing and exploring solutions has become an urgent issue for middle school English teaching.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition and Classification of Pragmatic Failures

Pragmatics requires that communication should choose appropriate expressions according to the communicative purpose and communicative object, so as to achieve the expected communicative purpose[5]. However, in the actual writing of middle school students, due to the influence of various factors such as different cultural backgrounds, thinking patterns, contexts, and language abilities, students may use expressions that do not conform to reality, which can lead to misunderstandings and affect the effectiveness of communication. Thomas proposed the concept of pragmatic failure, which refers to the inability to correctly understand the speaker's purpose and result in pragmatic failure. Thomas believed that in verbal communication, grammatical or lexical errors made by the speaker are considered as "not speaking well" at best. If pragmatic failure occurs in violation of pragmatic principles, it is considered as "poor performance" [1]. According to Leech, when pragmatic rules of one group are applied to another group, it is inevitable that pragmatic

failure will occur. That is to say, language users from different cultural backgrounds make mistakes due to different habits and other factors during communication, resulting in misunderstandings and interruptions in communication[2]. In 1983, Leech classified pragmatics into pragmatic linguistics and social pragmatics. Subsequently, Thomas further divided pragmatic failures into two levels: the linguistic pragmatic failures and the social pragmatic failures.

2.2. Research on Pragmatic Failures in English Writing

There are some practical mistakes in the English writing of middle school students. These mistakes can be further classified into linguistic pragmatic failures and social pragmatic failures, with linguistic pragmatic failures being the main ones. Moreover, language pragmatic mistakes at the lexical level and social pragmatic mistakes are more serious than language pragmatic mistakes at the syntactic level[6]. Xu Cuiling found that there were more linguistic pragmatic failures in students' writing texts than social pragmatic failures[7]. Linguistic pragmatic failures can mainly be classified into four types: inappropriate wording and collocation; Chinese sentence structure; omission or misuse of discourse markers; and illogical sentences. Social pragmatic errors can be divided into two categories: failures caused by ignoring cross-cultural idiomatic expressions, and failures resulting from not understanding cultural background differences. Liu Qing found that the pragmatic failures made by students in writing mainly consist of linguistic pragmatic mistakes and social pragmatic mistakes[8]. Among them, linguistic pragmatic mistakes mainly involve vocabulary, syntax, logic, and text structure, while social pragmatic mistakes mainly manifest as inappropriate language expression. Overall, due to the influence of factors such as negative transfer of the mother tongue and English basic proficiency, linguistic pragmatic mistakes are more frequent than social pragmatic mistakes.

In light of the orientation emphasized by the new curriculum standards and the new curriculum reform, which aims to cultivate students' core competencies and enhance their cross-cultural communication skills, the research on

English writing pragmatic failures among middle school students becomes even more urgently necessary. The current studies on the classification and causes of pragmatic failures not only align with the core requirement of "language application" in the curriculum standards, but also directly address the shortcomings of "emphasizing form while neglecting pragmatics" in current teaching. Delving deeper into such failures is not only an inevitable path to implement the educational goals of the new curriculum reform, but also provides a key basis for constructing an English writing teaching model that is in line with the orientation of core competencies. It has far-reaching significance for promoting the transformation of teaching from "knowledge imparting" to "ability cultivation".

3. Analysis of Pragmatic Failures in Writing

It is generally believed that pragmatic failure refers to situations where a speaker uses sentences with correct symbolic relations in verbal communication, yet the speech is inappropriate, the way of speaking is improper, or the expression goes against common usage. Specifically, the speaker unconsciously violates interpersonal norms and social conventions, fails to consider the time, space, the addressee, the identities and statuses of both communicative parties, and the occasion, and goes against the unique cultural values of the target language, resulting in the interruption or failure of the communicative act, obstacles in language communication, and the inability to achieve the expected or satisfactory communicative effects. Such failures are called pragmatic failures [9].

3.1. The Main Types of Pragmatic Failures

Based on the actual learning situation of middle school students in English writing, the current research divides the pragmatic failures in writing into two main types: pragmatic language failures and social pragmatic failures. The specific characteristics of these pragmatic failures are as follows.

3.1.1. Pragmatic Language Failures

Pragmatic language failures refer to the situation where learners transfer the language rules or pragmatic habits of their native language to the target language, resulting in non-compliance with the usage norms of English in terms of vocabulary, sentence structure, etc. The common forms include four aspects: the pragmatic misuse of vocabulary, inappropriate usage of sentence structures, mistakes in the transfer of pragmatic rules and mistakes in tone and tense usage [10].

The pragmatic misuse of vocabulary refers to the phenomenon where some English words have a "false correspondence" with Chinese words. Students merely use them based on their literal meanings, ignoring their pragmatic connotations. For instance, translating "贵国" literally as "your expensive country" is incorrect; in English, "your country" is sufficient. In a thank-you note, using "thanks a lot" is inappropriate; in a formal context, one should say "I would like to express my sincere gratitude to you".

The inappropriate usage of sentence structures refers to the fact that students often make mistakes in sentence construction due to the influence of their native language, resulting in the selection of English sentence structures that do not match the formality of the context. For example, in argumentative essays, the excessive use of imperative

sentences (such as "Let's discuss this problem") makes the writing lack objectivity and rigor. In writing, the use of overly casual elliptical sentences does not conform to the pragmatic norms of letters.

Mistakes in the transfer of pragmatic rules refers to the situation where students often apply Chinese habits but fail to conform to the fixed pragmatic patterns of English expressions such as greetings, apologies, and requests. For instance, when declining an invitation in English, one should first express gratitude before giving the reason. However, students might simply say "I can't go", which appears abrupt and impolite. In Chinese, the greeting "Have you eaten?" is a polite expression, but students might directly translate it as "Have you eaten?", which is likely to cause misunderstandings in the English context.

The last type is mistakes in tone and tense usage. Due to the influence of Chinese, students often mistakenly use sentences that should be in the passive voice in the active voice, which leads to pragmatic failures. For example: "Our school will hold a ceremony for us in our big playground." In Chinese: "The school has held a grand ceremony for us on the playground." This follows the thinking and habits of Chinese language. However, in English, such situations are usually expressed in the passive voice and the actor of the action is omitted: "A ceremony will be held for us in our big playground".

3.1.2. Social Pragmatic Failures

Social pragmatic failure refers to the situation where learners fail to express themselves appropriately in a socially acceptable manner in the target language due to their lack of understanding of the cultural background and social customs of English-speaking countries. It mainly manifests in two dimensions: mistakes caused by differences in cultural values and mistakes caused by differences in social context norms.

The mistakes caused by cultural value differences arise because there are differences between Chinese and Western cultures in terms of collectivism and individualism, as well as modesty and confidence. In writing, this is reflected in inappropriate usage. For instance, when writing "self-introductions," Chinese students tend to overuse humble expressions such as "I'm just an ordinary person" and "I didn't do well," which contradicts the pragmatic convention of highlighting personal strengths in self-introductions in English-speaking countries. In argumentative essays, students emphasize that "the collective interest prevails over everything" without considering the English-speaking countries' emphasis on individual rights, rendering their arguments unconvincing.

The mistakes caused by differences in social context norms occur because students often fail to take context factors into account. However, in English writing, one needs to adjust pragmatic strategies according to the communication partner and the purpose of communication. For instance, when writing an email to a teacher, one may use overly colloquial openings such as "Hi! How are you?" instead of the formal expression "Dear Mr./Ms. XX". Additionally, an applicant may adopt a casual tone in a letter of application, lacking the due respect and rigor.

3.2. Analysis of the Causes of Pragmatic Failures in Middle School English Writing

The occurrence of pragmatic errors in middle school English writing is the result of the combined effect of multiple factors. By analyzing the various pragmatic failures that

students make in their writing, the causes can be summarized into the following three aspects.

3.2.1. The Influence of Native Language Transfer

Chinese and English belong to different language systems and have significant differences in cultural background[11]. Students in English writing tend to organize language using the thinking mode of Chinese, directly applying the pragmatic rules of Chinese to English without realizing the differences in vocabulary connotations, sentence structures, and social norms between the two languages. This is the primary cause of pragmatic errors[12]. For instance, Chinese emphasizes coherence through meaning, while English emphasizes coherence through form. Students fail to use conjunctions when writing, resulting in loose sentence structures that do not conform to the pragmatic logic of English.

3.2.2. Insufficient Pragmatic Orientation in Textbooks and Teaching

At present, most middle school English textbooks focus mainly on imparting language knowledge, while the presentation of pragmatic knowledge is scattered and lacks systematicness. There is seldom any specific explanation of pragmatic rules and expression strategies in different contexts[13]. In teaching practice, the teaching focus of teachers often lies in vocabulary memorization, grammar correction, and the application of writing templates. There is a lack of clear goals and systematic methods for cultivating pragmatic abilities[14]. Even when explaining writing samples, they mostly focus on the structural aspects and grammatical correctness, and rarely guide students to analyze the pragmatic appropriateness of the samples, resulting in students lacking the cultivation of pragmatic awareness.

3.2.3. The Lack of Cross-Cultural Input and Practice

The improvement of pragmatic competence cannot be achieved without sufficient cross-cultural input and real communicative practice[15]. Currently, in middle school English teaching, the English materials that students come into contact with are mostly oriented towards examinations, lacking content that reflects the real life scenarios and social customs of English-speaking countries. At the same time, classroom teaching is mainly based on teachers' lectures, lacking writing tasks that simulate real communication, making it difficult for students to experience the application of pragmatic rules in practice. Moreover, students lack opportunities to communicate with native English speakers, unable to obtain pragmatic feedback in time and thus difficult to correct their own pragmatic mistakes.

4. Problem Solution

Based on the above analysis of the types of pragmatic errors in middle school English writing and their causes, several targeted teaching suggestions are hereby proposed.

First, enhance the integration of pragmatic knowledge and construct a systematic teaching curriculum. Teachers should base their teaching on the textbooks and explore the pragmatic knowledge contained in the texts. They should integrate the explanations of pragmatic rules into vocabulary, grammar and writing teaching. In vocabulary teaching, not only should the literal meanings of words be explained, but also the pragmatic differences between Chinese and English words should be compared[16]. For example, distinguish the usage scenarios of "thank you", "thanks a lot" and "I'm grateful" in formal and informal contexts[2]. In sentence teaching, guide students to choose appropriate sentence

structures based on the purpose of writing. For instance, in argumentative essays, more declarative sentences and passive voices should be used to enhance objectivity, and in letters, adjust the formality of the sentence structure according to the communication partner. At the same time, teachers can compile special pragmatic knowledge handbooks to summarize the pragmatic norms of different genres, providing clear pragmatic guidance for students.

Second, create realistic communication scenarios and implement task-based writing instruction. The cultivation of pragmatic competence requires the support of real contexts. Teachers should design writing tasks based on communicative purposes, allowing students to practice pragmatic rules during the process of completing the tasks. For example, assign tasks such as "Write an invitation letter to an English teacher" and "Introduce traditional Chinese festivals to an English pen pal", clearly specifying the communicative target and purpose of the writing, and requiring students to balance language accuracy and pragmatic appropriateness in their writing[17]. At the same time, organize group collaborative writing activities, allowing students to discuss and revise around a specific topic, and discover pragmatic mistakes through mutual evaluation and correction. Additionally, use multimedia technology to present real communicative scenarios in English-speaking countries, such as family dinners and campus exchanges, enabling students to observe and imitate the pragmatic expressions, thereby enhancing their pragmatic sensitivity.

Thirdly, enhance cross-cultural comparison teaching and cultivate the ability of cultural empathy. Cross-cultural awareness is the core of pragmatic competence. Teachers should conduct comparative teaching of Chinese and English cultures, guiding students to understand the influence of the differences in cultural values between China and the West on pragmatic expression[11]. For instance, they can compare the pragmatic habits of self-introduction in China and the West, analyze the cultural roots of emphasizing personal achievements in English-speaking countries and emphasizing modesty and lowliness in China; they can also compare the formats and tones of Chinese and English letters, explain the usage norms of titles and polite expressions in English letters[18]. At the same time, they can recommend students to read literary works, news reports and social media texts from English-speaking countries, allowing students to experience cultural differences in real language materials, cultivating cultural empathy skills, and avoiding pragmatic mistakes caused by cultural barriers.

Finally, from the perspective of writing, optimize the writing evaluation system and attach importance to the feedback on pragmatic dimensions. Traditional English writing evaluation mostly focuses on grammar, vocabulary and paragraph structure, while neglecting the evaluation of pragmatic dimensions. Teachers should establish a multi-dimensional evaluation system that combines "language" and "pragmatics", incorporate pragmatic appropriateness into the writing scoring criteria, and clearly define the types of pragmatic failures and the deduction rules. When grading students' essays, teachers should not only correct grammatical errors but also mark pragmatic mistakes and provide revision suggestions, such as suggesting that "Hi, teacher" should be changed to "Dear Mr. Li" in a formal email, and "I can't go" when declining an invitation should be supplemented with "Thank you for inviting me, but I have to attend a meeting". At the same time, a combination of self-evaluation, peer-

evaluation and teacher evaluation should be adopted, allowing students to enhance their pragmatic awareness and actively avoid pragmatic mistakes during the evaluation process[19].

5. Conclusion

Pragmatic failures are a common problem in middle school English writing. They are closely related to factors such as negative transfer of the native language, insufficient teaching orientation, and lack of cross-cultural practice. Cultivating students' pragmatic abilities is the key to improving the quality of middle school English writing and is also an inevitable requirement for implementing the new curriculum standard's goal of cultivating cross-cultural communication skills. Teachers should help students establish pragmatic awareness and master pragmatic rules by strengthening the infiltration of pragmatic knowledge, creating real communication scenarios, enhancing cross-cultural comparison teaching, and optimizing the evaluation system. This will improve the accuracy and appropriateness of English writing.

It should be noted that this research has certain limitations. Firstly, the research focuses on the common types and causes of pragmatic failures in English writing among middle - school students. It does not conduct a stratified analysis in combination with the differential characteristics of students at different educational stages and with different English proficiency levels. The proposed teaching strategies tend to be universal, lacking targeted guidance for students with learning difficulties and top - performing students. Secondly, the research does not carry out empirical teaching experiments. The proposed teaching strategies are only derived from theoretical summaries and existing research results, and their practical application effects and promotion value need to be further verified through classroom teaching practice. Thirdly, the research does not incorporate the influence dimension of intelligent technology on the cultivation of pragmatic competence and fails to explore the specific action paths of emerging means such as AI writing assistance tools in the intervention of pragmatic errors.

In the future, English teaching in middle schools should further deepen the research and practice of cultivating students' pragmatic competence. On the one hand, hierarchical research can be carried out for students at different educational stages and with different proficiency levels, and differentiated teaching plans can be formulated accordingly. On the other hand, empirical experiments can be conducted to verify the effectiveness of teaching strategies, and active exploration can be made on the integration path of intelligent technology and pragmatic teaching, so as to lay a solid foundation for students' cross - cultural communication ability.

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