An Analysis of Pragmatic Failure in Junior Middle School Students' Oral Communication

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Abstract: Successful oral communication requires not only fully meaning transmitting but also appropriate language expressions with pragmatic competence.Cultivating students' pragmatic awareness and developing their pragmatic competence are the vital goals of students' English learning. The pragmatic failure in students' oral communication, especially involving intercultural communication, is inevitable in their junior middle school age. This course paper tries to discuss and analyze the causes of the frequent pragmatic failures in their oral communication for three aspects of cultural differences, negative transfer of L1 and lacking of pragmatic knowledge. And then some practical suggestions for teachers' instruction to reduce students' pragmatic failures and improve students' pragmatic competence are put forward. First, teachers need create more real communicating context and increasing authentic input. Meanwhile, teacher should integrate culture instruction closely with language program instruction. Lastly, pragmatic knowledge should be infiltrated in class.

Keywords: Pragmatic failure; Oral communication; Middle school students; Pragmatic competence

1. Introduction

Oral communication is an important part of English learning for Junior middle school students. Proper oral communication requires not only adequate knowledge of the language, but also pragmatic knowledge and pragmatic competence. However, we find that the students often have the situation of pragmatic failure, and especially when it comes to intercultural communication. So based on the causes of pragmatic failure I've analyzed, I list some implications for English teachers' instruction to reduce students' pragmatic failure. It hopes that this course would have feeble contribution of providing instruction implication in junior middle school students' pragmatic failure.

2. Problem Identification

2.1 Pragmatic Failure

A pragmatic failure is not an error in the use of language in general, but a mistake in the use of language that is out of place, or a mistake in the manner of speaking, or a mistake in expression that is not in accordance with customary practice, which leads to the failure of communication to achieve the desired effect.[1]Jenny Thomas(1983), a leading British pragmatist, divides English pragmatic failure broadly into pragmalinguistic failure and social pragmatic failures.[2] Pragmalinguistic failure refers to linguistic errors caused by inappropriate grasp of the linguistic context.[3]Social pragmatic failure refers to linguistic errors that occur in communication due to a lack of understanding or ignorance of the social and cultural background differences between the two parties.[4] Both of them exist in middle school students' oral communication.

2.2 Causes of Pragmatic Failure in Middle School Students' Oral Communication

It's inevitable for students to have the situation of pragmatic failure and we discuss and analyze the causes of the frequent pragmatic failures in students' oral communication for three aspects of cultural differences, negative transfer of L1 and lacking of pragmatic knowledge.

2.2.1 Culture Differences and Deficiency of Cultural Background Knowledge

Cultural differences are the main reason for the pragmatic failures in cross-cultural communication. As we all know, culture and language are inseparable and culture knowledge is indispensable part in language learning, so the degree of awareness of culture

differences would directly affect the use of the target language. Wang Dexing(1990) states that in the process of cross-cultural communication, both the cultural conventions and language conventions are involved and these two types of conventions are the root cause of pragmatic failure.[5]

Cultural background knowledge is an important foundation in oral communication. However, due to the lack of exposure to the target language and cultural contexts, pragmatic failure will exist in students' oral communication. For example, in Chinese, the symbolic meaning of dragon is a holy and strong creature, but in English, it is the symbol of evil. So if students don't know the different cultural connotations, they might misuse or misunderstand the target language so a pragmatic failure would result in.

2.2.2 Negative Transfer of L1

In the process of language learning, there is an inevitable negative transfer from the first language to the second language. The negative transfer of L1 is the inappropriate transfer of knowledge of one task to another similar task in the target language. This makes it very easy to make pragmatic failure.

For example, in English, when people want to express their gratitude for the help given by others, they'll say "Thank you." However, some students will immediately reply, "Never mind." Listener will be very surprised. Because "Never mind." is often used when the other express apologizes that he or she does not mind, which involves comfort. And in expressing greetings, many students think that it is no problem to say "Teacher Brown or Have you eaten yet?" to their teacher which they always greet in this way in Chinese. Obviously, this negative transfer of L1 will led to pragmatic failure in oral communication.

2.2.3 The Lack of Pragmatic Knowledge

The acquisition of pragmatic knowledge plays a positive role in improving students' pragmatic competence (Kasper&Rose,2002)[6]. However, in conventional teaching in most of junior middle school，English teachers attaches great importance to the teaching of language system，their daily teaching seldom involves pragmatic knowledge. Besides, students pay much attention to the learning of English grammar because of the college entrance examination, and their pragmatic awareness is weak.

For example, some students use the following expression when describing words involving the Chinese word "fei" in English. "The land is so fat". Because the Chinese word "fei" can correspond to the English word "fat" in some cases. Students often mistakenly believe that as long as "fat" is involved, it can be used in conjunction with fat, which results in a pragmatic failure.While we should express it as "The land is fertile".So students' lack of pragmatic knowledge is an important reason for junior middle school students' pragmatic failure.

3. Measures for Teacher's Instruction to Reduce Students' Pragmatic Failure

Based on analyzing the causes,some implications for English teachers' instruction to reduce students' pragmatic failure will be put forward.

3.1 Creating More Real Communicating Context and Increasing Authentic Input

Due to the lack of natural language learning environments, students' thinking mode is shaped and governed by L1 and have little awareness of culture differences. Hence, it is essential to create more real language learning environments and enhance authentic input in class,so that students can have less pragmatic failure in oral communication.

Teachers can help students create realistic contexts for communication, provide opportunities to practice language expression, and motivate students to participate. We encourage students to make full use of the second classroom to carry out English activities, to communicate with foreign teachers outside the classroom, and to consciously improve their pragmatic competence.[7] The authentic input can be the language materials which designed for native speakers rather than language teaching, for example, the advertisements, menus, labels, newspapers, broadcasts, etc. And also, the culture, tradition, custom, history of target language are all embedded in authentic materials.[8] The language in these authentic materials is more native, natural and practical in English conversations.

### 3.2 Integrating Culture Instruction Closely with Language Program Instruction

Culture covers an extremely wide range of topics, and cultural input in English language teaching should focus on the cultural information in the language that has a direct impact on students' pragmatic accuracy.[9]

Taking vocabulary teaching as an example, the traditional isolated vocabulary teaching method makes it difficult for students respond appropriately in communication. Such as the word "old", in English culture, which contains associative meanings of wrinkles, inability to take care of oneself, etc. In Chinese culture, besides that, it can represents rich experience. Junior middle school students are usually not aware of such minor cultural differences and will directly translate, resulting in pragmatic failures. Therefore, teachers'

vocabulary instruction can not only involve the hyponymy, synonyms, antonym but also integrate culture so as to help students eliminate the negative transfer of L1, understand the culture differences and use appropriate language for communication.

3.3 Infiltrating Pragmatic Knowledge in Class

Kasper and Rose (2002) divide the instruction of pragmatic knowledge into two types: explicit teaching and implicit teaching. For most of the junior middle students who don't have strong pragmatic awareness, the explicit teaching of pragmatic knowledge is more useful and effective. Dai Weidong and Yang Juxian(2005) provide an explicit teaching model as follows:[10]

Metapragmatics Information → Real Context → Opportunity of Communication → Corrective Feedback
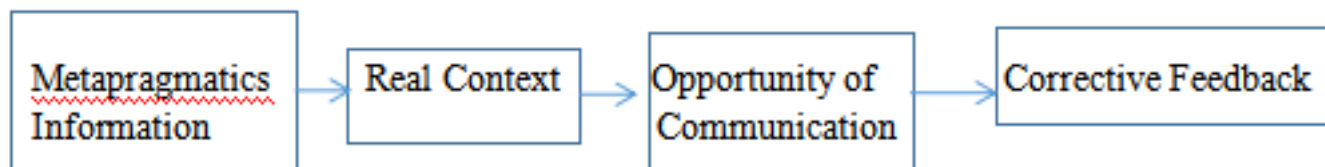
Therefore,teachers first need to provide the metapragmatics information, so as to direct students' attention to these pragmatic features and increase their pragmatic awareness. After that, teachers can provide or set up a lot of real language examples and environments, such as films or skits in the target language, to develop students' awareness of the context. The third step is the planning and production stage of the target language. The teacher can choose relevant topics and types of activities, such as role-playing, group activities, story-telling, etc. Based on the language knowledge taught in the above, finally, teachers must provide frequent feedback to learners about their learning. Teachers can choose the form of feedback according to the learners' language ability, their familiarity with the feedback method, the content of the feedback and its possible effects.So that students can engage enough pragmatic knowledge to avert pragmatic failure to some extent.

4. Conclusion

At the middle school level, students' pragmatic failure are inevitable, especially in oral communication. They are influenced by the negative transfer of L1 in communication and have relatively little knowledge of cultural background knowledge, and also they cannot apply pragmatic knowledge to solve the problem of pragmatic failure.So teachers should try to create authentic contexts and increase authentic input in their teaching. They can infiltrate cross-culture and pragmatic knowledge in class for students to conduce to overcoming the negative transfer of L1 in oral communication, so as to improve students' pragmatic competence and reduce pragmatic failures in oral communication.

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