

## *Original Paper*

# A Study of Strategies for English Pragmatic Teaching in Senior High School under Core Competency

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### **Abstract**

*Pragmatic competence is an indispensable element of communicative competence, which is also one goal of core competencies. The introduction of the concept of core competency in General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards puts more emphasis on cultivating students' pragmatic competence and on teachers' input of pragmatic knowledge in English teaching. This paper begins with clarifying the theories of pragmatic competence and pragmatic failure by referring to other linguists' explanations. Then, it briefly discusses the importance of pragmatic teaching in senior high school English classrooms. Finally, this paper proposes some feasible teaching strategies to promote high school students' pragmatic competence.*

### **Keywords**

*English Curriculum Standard, pragmatic competence, core competency*

## **1. Introduction**

### *1.1 Research Background*

As we all know, language is a tool of communication. The development of English pragmatic competence is one of the important goals of learning English, and it is also an important way to test the level of English acquisition. In April 2018, the Ministry of Education issued the China English Proficiency Scale, which specifies the English proficiency levels of Chinese English learners and users. The ability description framework includes language understanding ability, language expression ability, pragmatic ability, language knowledge, translation ability, and language use strategies. Besides, General Senior High School Curriculum Standards (2017) also proposed that pragmatic knowledge should be included in the English curriculum content and that teachers should pay attention to the cultivation of students' pragmatic competence in the teaching process. These two official documents

from the Ministry of Education both state that pragmatic competence is as important as language knowledge and plays an important role in English learning. However, in actual English teaching and learning, the classroom dominated by vocabulary and grammar teaching is still relatively common. Especially, in high school, under the pressure of the college entrance examination, teachers and students focus more on vocabulary accumulation and grammar knowledge, pay more attention to language knowledge, and ignore their abilities to use language.

In the past twenty years, the investigation and research on students' pragmatic competence have been continuously emerging. Most studies show that there are still many deficiencies in the cultivation of students' pragmatic competence in English teaching in China, which leads to the fact that Chinese students' pragmatic competence is at a low and middle level. Many studies also put forward some solutions and measures from the perspective of teachers and teaching methods. However, the current research on pragmatic competence mostly focuses on college students and even English majors with high language proficiency, and less attention is paid to high-school English learners.

This paper will explore the strategies and approaches to cultivate high school students' pragmatic competence under the guidance of core competencies.

### *1.2 Research Significance*

To cultivate English pragmatic competence is the need for English teaching, the necessity of teaching reform, and also one of the ways to improve the effectiveness of English teaching. This study analyses the present situation of high school English pragmatic teaching and students' pragmatic competence, trying to improve high school students' English pragmatic competence. This paper is of great theoretical and practical value for improving high school students' core competency and English pragmatic competence. It contributes to expanding the research scope of English teaching and promoting the development of teaching methods under the new curriculum reform. To some degree, it can enrich the studies on pragmatic competence.

## **2. Theoretical Foundation**

### *2.1 Pragmatic Competence*

Language learning is a process of promoting pragmatic competence. Different scholars hold different opinions on the definition of pragmatic competence. He Ziran (1997, pp. 199-201) introduced some of them in *Pragmatics and English Learning*.

Hymes (1972) first expanded the concept of competence proposed by Norm Chomsky in the 1960s and then put forward the term communicative competence, which consists of four components: possibility, feasibility, appropriateness, and performance. It is generally believed that the first component is equal to linguistic competence, while the rest three components are submitted to pragmatic competence.

Leech (1983) first distinguished pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics, thus pragmatic competence is divided into two parts of pragmalinguistic competence and sociopragmatic competence. The former is a pragmatic competence of using correct grammar and appropriate language form to realize certain

communication, while the latter requires the speaker to conform to the social rules of language use to reach proper communication. Besides, in 1990 Bachman provided a much more detailed illustration of linguistic competence. In his illustration, as for the two parts of pragmatic competence, illocutionary competence refers to the competence of understanding a communicative act and knowing how to carry it out; and socio-cultural competence refers to the competence of using language appropriately in a specific context. Blackman (Blackman, 2003, p. 173, cited in Barron) identified pragmatic competence as one element of communicative competence, placing pragmatic competence as part of illocutionary competence, which is a combination of speech acts and speech functions along with the appropriate use of language in context.

To sum up, pragmatic competence refers to the ability to comprehend, construct, and convey meanings that are both accurate and appropriate for the social and cultural circumstances in a particular context to achieve successful communication.

### *2.2 Pragmatic Failure*

The most important indicator of pragmatic competence is pragmatic failures, which is an important factor leading to communication obstruction and even failure. British linguist Thomas (1983) first proposed pragmatic failure. It refers to the hearer's failure—to recognize the intended force of an utterance. According to Thomas's theory, pragmatic failures can be classified into two types: language pragmatic failures and social pragmatic failures. A misunderstanding of the semantic intent due to differences in the use of two different languages is known as a language pragmatic failure. Socio-pragmatic failure refers to the linguistic failures caused by the communicator's inadequate understanding of the other's culture, social background, customs and habits.

Experts believe that pragmatic failures refer to errors in that people fail to achieve their communicative goals or achieve poor results for various reasons in verbal communication. In China, English language teaching put more emphasis on the student's fluency and accuracy of language usage, and less attention is paid to the cultivation of students' pragmatic competence, thus resulting in pragmatic failures occurring frequently. The cultivation of pragmatic competence and the improvement of pragmatic awareness in cross-cultural communication have not attracted enough attention in our English teaching. Therefore, in English teaching, language pragmatic failures and social pragmatic failures should be paid enough attention to. Principles of pragmatic competence must be included in teaching content to reduce students' pragmatic failures.

## **3. The Importance of Pragmatic Teaching in Senior High School**

A test of Chinese students' pragmatic competence in English shows that students' pragmatic ability will not improve with the improvement of language ability (Liu, 2006, p. 264). At a lower level, language teaching is the basis of pragmatic teaching. However, with the continuous increase of language knowledge, pragmatic competence may stagnate if it is not cultivated deliberately. Senior high school students' pragmatic competence may become rigid and stagnant after reaching a certain stage due to

lack of adequate pragmatic teaching and training. Even though they have accumulated a large amount of language knowledge, they may still be confused or overwhelmed when confronted with real communication contexts. High school students may have some pragmatic deficiencies, such as weak pragmatic awareness, insufficient speech act ability, limited mastery of idioms, and so on. Another research studied by TangLin, proved that students' pragmatic competence is teachable, that means it could be improved through effective classroom pragmatic teaching and practice(TangLin,2006:24). English teachers' teaching contents and methods affect the development of their pragmatic competence. So it is necessary to improve high school students' pragmatic competence through classroom pragmatic teaching.

#### **4. Strategies to Cultivate Students' Pragmatic Competence**

##### *4.1 Enhancing Pragmatic Awareness*

Promoting pragmatic competence should initiate by enhancing pragmatic awareness, both of foreign language learners' awareness and teachers' awareness. The purpose of learning a language is to develop various kinds of abilities to use language. Only if both language learners and teachers have realized the importance of pragmatic competence and be active in promoting their pragmatic competence, could they make some improvements in the English teaching and learning process, and could their pragmatic as well as communicative competence be promoted. Changes in situation affect the use of languages, such as differences in purpose, occasion, and topic, and the identity of the communicator affects the choice of different expressions, such as formal and informal, polite and impolite, direct and euphemistic. In teaching, where appropriate, teachers should create a communicative language environment and workplace situation, improve students' pragmatic awareness through different typical cases, and make students realize that improvement of pragmatic competence needs long-term practice in real situations.

##### *4.2 Introducing Pragmatic Knowledge*

The new curriculum standards clearly point out that pragmatic knowledge should be included in high school English curriculum content. Pragmatic knowledge refers to the knowledge that helps language users accurately understand others and appropriately express themselves in specific contexts. Mastering pragmatic knowledge helps students choose formal or informal, direct or indirect, spoken or written language according to the purpose of communication, the degree of formality of the communication occasion, and the identity and role of the participants, so as to communicate with others appropriately and achieve the goal of communication. When teaching pragmatic knowledge, teachers can carry out activities by explaining, using videos, and simulating real scenes so as to enhance student's awareness of the formality of communication occasions, procedures of doing things, and the roles of the communication participants so that they learn how to select the formal or informal language according to the formality of the communication occasions.

### *4.3 Integrating Language Function and Language Form in English Teaching*

In traditional English teaching, teachers always put more emphasis on students' accurate mastering of language form, spending much time on mechanical exercises, which consequently leads to a lower level of students' pragmatic competence than their mastery of grammatical structures. The curriculum standard emphasizes that teachers should realize that grammar knowledge in language use is the unity of form, meaning, and use. The ultimate goal of learning grammar is to understand and express meaning effectively with the help of grammar knowledge in context. So, teachers should make their students know how to perform a particular function or express an intention clearly by using different language forms. Especially in grammar teaching, teachers must point out what function the grammar has and what it can be used for. That means doing things with grammar. For example, when learning about imperative sentences, teachers can use various examples to show students the implicit meanings that imperative sentences carry. Besides, teachers should also guide students to distinguish the meaning of different tones, like "Open the door" and "Please open the door", which seemingly have the same meaning but express discrete attitudes and emotions. And, in the usage of modal verbs to express speculation, the emphasis of each modal verb and the intention expressed need to be put forward by teachers in teaching, so that students can practically realize the real use of language, so as to gradually cultivate students' pragmatic awareness and improve their pragmatic competence.

### *4.4 Developing Students' Cultural Awareness*

People with different cultural backgrounds would have different understandings even of the same word. As Thomas (1983) pointed out, different cultures have different ways of thinking, rules of speaking, social values, and relative weights of pragmatic principles, and these cross-culturally different assessments of social parameters have negatively affected language users' linguistic choices, which finally result in sociopragmatic failure. Without an accurate understanding of the culture of the target language, foreign language learners would misunderstand or misuse the foreign language, which is the main reason for senior high school students' pragmatic failure. For example, when the Chinese are complimented by others, they tend to show their humility. But, western countries always confidently accept others' praise by saying "thank you". There are so many cultural differences between the west and east. And, the lack of knowledge of English and American culture is very evident in most high school students. Such cultural differences can never be understood through the mere study of linguistic knowledge.

Language is learned in context. Putting language learning into exploring western culture allows students to learn a language in context. Contextual learning not only allows students to change their perception of grammar knowledge as simple and boring but also helps students to better understand knowledge beyond books and broaden their horizons. So, teachers can use one class per week to input the cultural knowledge of western countries and introduce a lot of western countries' customs and cultural practices with the help of modern multimedia teaching tools.

#### *4.5 Designing Various Real Contexts*

Many linguists claim that language learning should through authentic contexts. In teaching English, teachers should focus on context. Whatever he/she teaches, he/she should take context into consideration. In the previous discussion, we have seen that the same sentence may have different meanings and functions in different contexts. Teachers should help students understand the significant role that context plays in language use.

The New Curriculum Standard puts forward six major elements of high school English curriculum content, which is required to include three thematic contexts: man and self, man and society, man and nature. In teaching, teachers can combine the context of these three themes and create real contextual activities to help students put what they have learned into practice and improve their pragmatic competence. They can design diverse classroom activities according to the actual situation, such as drama, reading, writing, and speaking competitions; create English corners, organize class meetings, and parties for various major festivals, etc. Diversified activities can play a very positive role in creating a good English learning environment and atmosphere. Not only do they motivate students, but they also provide students with sufficient language input information and a variety of opportunities to communicate in English as a way to gradually improve their English pragmatic competence.

#### *4.6 Focusing on Non-Verbal Language Instruction*

As we all know, pragmatic competence can relate as much as to non-verbal communication. It can also relate to knowing when to speak and when to be silent, or what to say in certain circumstances. For example, in Eastern cultures, silence is given a more positive meaning, while in Western cultures it is given a more negative meaning. Westerners avoid silence when speaking or talking with others, and emphasize the importance of an audible response in all situations. While in China, people value the role of silence in the conversation, believing that pauses and silence have rich meaning and that a well-timed pause can have a surprising effect, with the effect of no sound being better than a sound at this time. Another obvious example is body language, which includes basic gestures, postures, and basic courtesies, such as handshakes, hugs, and smiles. It also includes the communicative messages provided by the movements of the human body, such as facial movements, eye contact, hand movements, and so on. Cultures differ in the degree and rules of control and display of these body languages and movements.

Therefore, foreign language teachers should recognize the importance of developing students' non-verbal communicative competence. Teachers are supposed to introduce and explain the differences and conflicts between non-verbal communicative behaviors and means in the target language and native culture during the teaching process. For example, when learning the word 'glance', teachers can explain to students the usage of this verb and the difference between it and other related verbs such as 'stare'. On the other hand, the teacher can introduce the general knowledge of Chinese and Western visual behavior, so that the students can learn both the language and the culture. What's more, foreign language teachers should make full use of modern teaching tools, such as multimedia, the Internet, or

visual aids such as pictures, slides, and movies, to help students learn the language and observe the non-verbal communication behaviors and means of the target culture at the same time, and guide them to “speak” and “see” at the same time.

This will enable students to move from a piecemeal, isolated understanding of nonverbal communication to a relatively comprehensive, integrated understanding and mastery.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the current situation of pragmatic teaching in senior high school, this paper explored what pragmatic teaching is, why it is important and how to carry out pragmatic teaching by literature analysis method. It provided some theoretical and practical guidance for high school English pragmatic teaching. Teachers need to pay attention to the development of student’s pragmatic competence in their daily teaching, adopt appropriate methods to motivate students, and gradually improve their language skills.

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