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Exploring the Path to Improve the Pragmatic Competence of English-Major Normal Students in Universities

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Abstract: English pragmatics is an important branch of linguistics, and it studies how to use language correctly and effectively in practical contexts to achieve smooth communication. This paper states the necessity of strengthening pragmatics teaching in English teaching for English majors, especially English majors majoring in teacher education. Besides, several practical suggestions and methods have been proposed to promote the improvement of students' pragmatic competence.

Keywords: pragmatic competence; English-major normal students; smooth communication

1. Introduction

As an important branch of English linguistics, English pragmatics plays an irreplaceable role in language learning [1]. English majors should not only learn pragmatics as knowledge, but also learn to apply it in practical contexts, especially for English majors majoring in teacher education. They should recognize the importance of pragmatics and pay attention to the improvement of their teaching abilities, ensuring that they can impart the correct communication methods to their students in future teaching, avoiding only focusing on memorizing rigid knowledge and neglecting the cultivation of good communication skills [2,3].

2. The Importance of Communication for English Learners

English learning is by no means merely about memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules, but a complete cycle of "input-internalization-output". Among these, communication, as the core link of "output", is crucial for testing learning outcomes and deepening language cognition. Language learning without real communication is like practicing swimming on the shore—one can never master the laws of water. Communication not only consolidates knowledge but also fosters an understanding of the essence of language, with its importance permeating every stage of learning.

Communication is the best way to "learn and apply" language knowledge. Grammatical rules and word definitions memorized in class will eventually become rigid symbols if not transformed into "operational language" through communication. For example, a learner may memorize the structure of the "present perfect tense" but struggle to distinguish the contextual differences between "I lived here" and "I have lived here" in actual conversations. They may know that "break up" means "to end a relationship" but fail to naturally say "I'm sorry to hear you broke up" when a friend confides in them. Communication forces learners to mobilize their knowledge reserves in real-time contexts, judging the appropriateness of tenses, tones, and collocations.

This "stress test" can expose knowledge gaps, making learning more targeted. As linguists put it, "We don't learn to speak by remembering rules; we learn rules by speaking" [4].

Communication cultivates "language sense," the "invisible ability" in language learning. Language sense is an intuitive grasp of language rhythm, logic, and emotion, which cannot be acquired through books but can be gradually formed through continuous communication. Learners who frequently converse in English will gradually realize that "Why not?" is more colloquial than "Why don't you?" and that "It's a bit cold" aligns better with the British habit of euphemism than "It's very cold". These subtle differences are hard to summarize with rules but can be internalized through immersion in communication. Once language sense is formed, learners can even intuitively recognize the error in "a interesting book" without knowing the specific grammar rules, and this ability is the foundation of language fluency. For English learners, developing language sense is far more decisive for their language proficiency ceiling than the number of words they master.

3. The Importance of Pragmatics for Communication

In English communication, pragmatic competence acts like an invisible bridge, connecting linguistic forms and communicative effects, and its importance far exceeds mere vocabulary size and grammatical accuracy. It determines whether language users can "say the right things and do the right actions" in specific situations, serving as the core element for effective communication [5,6].

From daily conversations to formal occasions, pragmatic competence directly influences the smoothness of communication. Imagine ordering in a restaurant: using the grammatically correct but blunt "You give me a coffee" can convey the message, yet it may cause discomfort by violating the politeness principles in English contexts. In contrast, switching to "Could I have a coffee, please?" not only conforms to expressive habits but also makes the communication more friendly. This difference confirms a fact: linguistic "correctness" does not equal "appropriateness", and pragmatic competence is precisely the yardstick for measuring "appropriateness." Even native speakers can cause communicative failures if they ignore contextual differences (such as using casual slang at a funeral), which highlights its universality in all language interactions.

In cross-cultural scenarios, pragmatic competence serves as a "firewall" against misunderstandings. In English-speaking cultures, "refusals" are often expressed euphemistically (e.g., "I'm not sure if I can make it"), while a direct "No" might be considered rude. In contrast, in Chinese contexts, refusals among acquaintances tend to be more straightforward. Without such pragmatic awareness, Chinese learners may be mistaken for "agreeing" due to excessive euphemism, or labeled as "impolite" for direct refusals. Similarly, the frequent use of "Thank you" in English (even between spouses when passing items) contrasts with the Chinese logic of "no need for politeness among family". A lack of pragmatic competence may lead to mutual misinterpretations of being "too distant" or "not polite enough".

For English learners, pragmatic competence marks the qualitative leap from "being able to communicate" to "knowing how to communicate." Many people still feel "difficult to speak up" after passing exams, not because of insufficient language knowledge, but because they do not know how to adjust expressions according to the audience and scenario. When learners can naturally switch between formal and informal styles, and understand that "Sounds good" implies "agreement" rather than the literal "sounds nice", they truly grasp the "soul" of the language. Acquiring this ability not only improves communication efficiency but also enhances cultural adaptability and self-confidence, allowing language to truly become a bond connecting people from different backgrounds [7].

4. The Importance of Pragmatic Competence for English-Major Normal Students

As the main force of English teaching in basic education, English-major normal students' pragmatic competence is not only a reflection of their personal language proficiency but also a key variable affecting the development of students' core language literacy. Compared with ordinary English learners, normal university students' pragmatic competence carries the dual mission of "demonstrator" and "guide"—they not only need to be able to use English appropriately in real contexts themselves but also need to teach students how to use language "correctly and appropriately" in different scenarios. Therefore, improving pragmatic competence is not only a necessary professional quality for English-major normal students but also a guarantee of educational quality [8].

4.1. Pragmatic Competence Is the Core Support for the Effectiveness of English-Major Normal Students' Classroom Teaching

The classroom is the main battlefield of language teaching, and teachers' pragmatic expressions directly affect teaching effects. In English classes, teachers' instructions, questions, feedback, etc., all need to conform to pragmatic norms: using "Could you please read after me?" instead of the blunt "Read after me!" can guide students to participate more gently; saying "I see your point, but maybe we can try this way" to students' wrong answers is better than directly denying "Wrong!" in protecting students' learning enthusiasm. These details seem trivial, but they determine the fluency of classroom interaction and students' sense of participation. If normal university students lack pragmatic awareness, they may cause students to misunderstand instructions due to inappropriate expressions (such as misinterpreting "Take your time" as "waste time"), or dampen students' interest due to harsh tones, ultimately affecting the achievement of teaching goals.

4.2. Pragmatic Competence Is an Important Carrier for English-Major Normal Students to Convey Cross-Cultural Awareness

English teaching is not only the imparting of language knowledge but also the enlightenment of cross-cultural understanding. Normal university students' pragmatic competence is reflected in their ability to convey cultural differences through their own expressions: when explaining the usage scenarios of "Thank you", they should not only explain the habit of "thanking even among family members" but also let students feel the concept of independence and equality behind it through demonstration; when comparing the ways of expressing "refusal", they should not only analyze the differences between English euphemistic expressions ("I'm afraid I can't") and Chinese direct expressions but also guide students to understand the common social logic of "maintaining the other person's face". If normal university students themselves lack a grasp of the cultural connotations of pragmatics, teaching will easily become "word-for-word translation". Students may master "how to say" but never understand "when to say", making it difficult to form real cross-cultural communication skills [9].

4.3. Pragmatic Competence Is the Core Competitiveness of English-Major Normal Students' Professional Development

English education in the new era requires teachers to transform from "knowledge transmitters" to "language use instructors". In the new curriculum standards for English in primary and secondary schools, "language ability" is clearly defined as "the ability to use language effectively in real contexts", which means teachers need to have the ability to interpret contexts and design pragmatic tasks. For example, when teaching the topic of "invitation", excellent normal university students can design hierarchical scenarios such as "inviting friends to a birthday party" and "inviting teachers to a parent-teacher meeting" to guide students to experience the differences in wording; when dealing with students' pragmatic errors (such as using "Please give me a pen" to ask teachers for help), they can correctly point out the problems and demonstrate appropriate expressions. This kind of teaching design and feedback ability based on pragmatic competence is the core professional quality that distinguishes normal university students from ordinary English users and is also the key for them to stand out in teaching competitions [10].

4.4. Pragmatic Competence Is the Internal Foundation for English-Major Normal Students to Establish Educational Confidence

Many normal university students face the dilemma of "being able to do exercises but not being able to teach" during internships, and one of the root causes is the lack of pragmatic competence. When they can freely organize classroom games in English, communicate with foreign teachers in appropriate expressions, and interpret textbook content from a cross-cultural perspective, they can not only gain students' recognition but also establish the professional confidence of "I can teach English well". This confidence will be transformed into teaching enthusiasm, prompting them to explore teaching methods more actively, forming a positive cycle of "improved pragmatic competence—better teaching effect—enhanced professional sense of achievement". Conversely, if classroom

embarrassment occurs due to insufficient pragmatic competence (such as being unable to respond to students' unexpected questions), it may weaken teaching confidence and even affect career choices.

The pragmatic competence of English-major normal students is a bridge connecting their personal language level and teaching practice, and a key hub for the transformation from "learning English" to "teaching English". Improving this ability is not only to enable normal university students to "use English" but also to enable them to teach students to "use English well", and ultimately realize the fundamental transformation of English education from "exam-oriented" to "literacy-oriented". This is not only the need for the growth of normal university students themselves but also an inevitable requirement for improving the quality of English teaching in basic education.

5. Methods of Cultivating the Pragmatic Competence of English-Major Normal Students

Cultivating the pragmatic competence of English-major normal students requires breaking away from the traditional model of "valuing knowledge over application" and building a closed-loop path of "theoretical foundation —situational practice—reflective iteration—cultural immersion." This integrates pragmatic awareness into the entire process of teaching skill training, achieving a capability leap from "knowing" to "applying".

5.1. Restructuring the Curriculum System to Solidify the Theoretical Foundation of Pragmatics

Enhancing pragmatic competence must be premised on systematic theoretical cognition. The curriculum should break the limitation of isolated teaching of "listening, speaking, reading, and writing" and establish a pragmatics-oriented curriculum network.

Offering core pragmatics courses: Systematically teaching basic theories such as speech act theory, cooperative principles, and politeness principles, combined with case studies of teaching scenarios to analyze pragmatic strategies for teachers' common speech acts like "requests", "instructions", and "evaluations". For example, how to use "Would you mind repeating that?" instead of "Say it again!" in the classroom to demonstrate politeness.

Integrating pragmatic training into subject courses: Adding a "classroom pragmatic scenario design" module in the "English Teaching Methods" course, requiring normal university students to design appropriate expressions for different teaching links (e. g., introduction, error correction, summary); in the "Cross-Cultural Communication" course, comparing pragmatic habit differences between Chinese and English teachers. For instance, the commonly used "Everyone be quiet" in Chinese classrooms can be transformed into "Shall we focus on the task?" in English contexts to avoid the bluntness of direct instructions.

5.2. Creating Diverse Scenarios to Strengthen Immersive Practice

The essence of pragmatic competence is "situational response ability," which requires practical activities combining simulated and real scenarios to help normal university students grasp rules through "application":

On-campus simulated training: Building a "micro-teaching classroom pragmatic laboratory" and setting up scenarios such as "handling unexpected classroom situations" (e. g., students being distracted, questioning answers), "communicating with parents" (e. g., feedback on students' grades), and "cross-cultural cooperative teaching". Normal university students are required to complete communication tasks in English and then analyze the appropriateness of their pragmatic expressions through video replay. For example, for the scenario of "students doing perfunctory homework", compare the pragmatic effect differences between "Your work is terrible" and "I notice you could try harder—let's see how to improve".

Real scenario immersion: Organizing normal university students to participate in international student mutual assistance, online transnational teaching exchanges, and other activities. In interactions with native speakers, they observe pragmatic details—such as English teachers often using "Great effort!" instead of "Very good" to respond to students' imperfect attempts, experiencing the pragmatic strategy of "encouraging evaluation"; encouraging them to keep a "pragmatic log" to reflect on "communication deviations caused by incorrect context judgment", such as overusing the formal expression "May I suggest you...?" in informal occasions, which may seem distant.

5.3. Focusing on Teaching Transformation to Strengthen Professionally Targeted Training

The pragmatic competence of normal university students needs to be accurately aligned with the needs of teaching positions, highlighting the pragmatic particularity of the "teacher identity":

Specialized training in teaching pragmatic skills: Designing the task of building a "pragmatic expression database" for core teaching behaviors such as classroom instructions, questions, and feedback. For example, instruction expressions need to be graded: gentle guidance ("Shall we start?"), clear requirements ("Please open your books"), and urgent stop ("Wait a minute"), and training the ability to flexibly switch according to students' reactions.

Using cases for reverse correction: Collecting "pragmatic failure cases" in primary and secondary school English classrooms—such as teachers making students embarrassed by saying "Who can't understand?"— guiding normal university students to analyze the root causes and reconstruct expressions (changing to "Is there anything you'd like me to explain again?"), cultivating pragmatic sensitivity from the "student perspective."

5.4. Deepening Cultural Understanding to Build Bilingual Pragmatic Conversion Ability

The appropriateness of language is rooted in cultural contexts, which requires transcending "superficial language forms" to cultivate in-depth cultural cognition:

Conducting comparative studies on Chinese and Western teaching cultures: Understanding the cultural logic of pragmatic expressions by analyzing differences in "classroom discourse power distribution" and "teacher-student interaction modes". For example, English teachers often use "I'm not sure—what do you think?" to reflect equal dialogue, while the tradition of "listening to the teacher" in Chinese teaching may lead normal university students to overuse directive language, requiring targeted training in "negotiated expression."

Designing "cultural pragmatic micro-projects": Having normal university students group up to study Chinese-English differences in scenarios such as "festival greetings" and "praise methods." For example, praise for students in English is more specific ("I like how you analyzed this sentence") rather than the general "Good job", and transforming research results into operable teaching pragmatic strategies.

5.5. Improving the Evaluation Mechanism to Establish an Ability Development Orientation

Traditional written examination-based evaluation can hardly reflect pragmatic competence, so a multi-dimensional evaluation system of "process + scenario + reflection" needs to be established:

Situational assessment: Adding a "pragmatic ability observation scale" in teaching internships, scoring from dimensions such as "expression appropriateness", "context adaptability," and "cultural sensitivity". For example, evaluating whether normal university students can adjust their language according to students' ages (using "Let's play a game!" for primary school students and "Shall we try a discussion?" for high school students).

Introducing "pragmatic reflection reports": Requiring normal university students to regularly analyze their pragmatic performance in simulated or real teaching, recording "successful cases" and "areas for improvement". For example, "Today, using 'I see your idea—maybe we can also...' to guide students to correct mistakes was more effective than direct negation", achieving continuous improvement through self-iteration.

In conclusion, enhancing the pragmatic competence of English-major normal university students is not isolated language training but comprehensive cultivation of "language knowledge + teaching skills + cultural cognition". Only by enabling normal university students to understand rules in theoretical learning, practice responses in situational practice, grasp differences in cultural comparison, and promote growth in teaching reflection can we cultivate qualified English teachers who not only understand English but also are good at communication, and can truly guide students to "use language well".

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