

Research on the Application of Pragmatic Presupposition in English Writing Teaching

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v15-i3/25100> DOI:10.6007/IJARBS/v15-i3/25100

Published Date: 22 March 2025

Abstract

Pragmatic presupposition is not only related to discourse inference, but establishes a framework for the further development of the discourse and plays an important role in discourse cohesion. There has been some relevant research in discussing the discourse function of pragmatic presupposition. However, there is still a few researches on how to use pragmatic presupposition to improve students' discourse cohesion in English writing teaching. Therefore, in this paper, the concept and working principle of pragmatic presupposition are combined with organizational skills, stylistic skills and judgement skills of writing competence, trying to find an approach to cultivate the students' basic discourse cohesion awareness in teaching English writing and to improve their writing confidence.

Keywords: Pragmatic Presupposition, English Writing Teaching, Writing Competence, Discourse Cohesion

Introduction

Writing, as a means of language output, is one of the basic skills that English learners need to master, which can reflect the learners' comprehensive level of English and is of great significance in realizing communication. Heaton (1988) divides the writing ability into five, which are mechanical skills, language-use skills, organizational skills, stylistic skills, and judgement skills (Heaton, 1988), except the mechanical skills and language-use skills, the last three skills reflect the requirement of discourse coherence in terms of the relevance, layout and highlighting of the essay. Intermediate and advanced writing skills not only require accurate basic language knowledge such as grammar and spelling, but also focus on the coherence of the discourse. However, in reality, many students and teachers are obsessed with the use of grammar and other basic language knowledge in writing, but ignore the important role of discourse coherence, and fail to realize the interactive and communicative meaning of writing, which also deviates from the purpose of writing.

Pragmatic presupposition, in a broad sense, is the predetermined prophetic information, or background knowledge, of the communicating parties (He, 2000). Presupposition is a

common phenomenon in discourse and plays an important role in discourse organization and even discourse construction. Many scholars at home and abroad have studied the function of presupposition. French linguist Ducrot (1972) once pointed out that the basic function of presupposition is to establish a framework for the further development of the discourse (Ducrot, 1972). Chinese scholars Zhu and Miao (2000) believe that presuppositions can impose coherent constraints on the information flow of a discourse and have an important influence on the organization and coherence of the discourse (Zhu & Miao, 2000). Based on these theoretical research foundations, this study attempts to introduce pragmatic presuppositions into English writing teaching, trying to find out ways for English writing teaching to cultivate students' basic sense of discourse coherence and improve their confidence in English writing.

Theoretical Foundation

Pragmatic Presupposition

Presupposition refers to the assumption made by a speaker before speaking that the sentence he or she sends out must be correct or appropriate. Frege (1970), a famous German philosopher, was the first to propose the concept of presupposition, which has gradually become one of the focuses of attention in the field of linguistic research since 1892 (Frege, 1970). The understanding of presuppositions can be analyzed from three perspectives: logic, semantics, and pragmatics, and considering that presuppositions, although based on real linguistic structures, are more dependent on contexts, so most existing studies analyze it from a pragmatic perspective. Interpreting presuppositions as the choice of words and expressions in a discourse is made by the speaker in consideration of what is acceptable to both parties in order to ensure the success of the communication, and is made in advance of the expression of the discourse. As can be seen, pragmatic presuppositions are subjective and dynamic, emanating from the speaker on the basis of mutually acceptable content and implicitly on the basis of his or her own intentions, at which point the hearer can generate corresponding assumptions that give meaning to the discourse and provide a range for the communication to follow.

Pragmatic Presuppositions and Discourse

In the past research, the focus of presupposition is mainly on single sentences, then the French linguist Ducrot (1972) proposed that the basic function of presupposition is to establish a framework for the further development of the discourse, and that presupposition unifies the organization of information, highlighting of emphasis, and relevance of the article in the discourse into a single framework (Ducrot, 1972). Vennemann (1975) argues that the appropriateness of a sentence or segment in a discourse in a particular context is qualified by presuppositions (Vennemann, 1975). Chinese scholars Zhu and Miao (2000) argue that there exists a close relationship between discourse presuppositions and the information flow of the discourse, elucidating the role of presuppositions in the structure of supra-sentential sentences (Zhu & Miao, 2000). Thus, interpreting pragmatic presuppositions together with the discourse facilitates a deeper understanding of the discourse, which leads to a more coherent message.

Pragmatic Presuppositions and Discourse Coherence

Discourse coherence refers to the connection between the meanings of discourse or discourse segments to achieve the completeness and consistency of the discourse, Zhu and

Miao proposed that pragmatic presuppositions impose informational constraints on the linear arrangement of discourse propositions and the development of information flow so as to achieve discourse coherence, and emphasized the influence of the rational organization of information on discourse coherence, whose informational organization consists in making the information of the text have a certain degree of relevance to each other, and focusing on the main points (Zhu & Miao, 2000). While Heaton proposes to divide writing competence into mechanical skills, language use skills, organizational skills, stylistic skills, and judgement skills, the skills of the latter three are embodied in the layout and organization of discourse to meet the requirements of discourse coherence. Thus, this essay combines discourse presuppositions with article organization skills, stylistic usage skills, and essay judgment skills in writing competence to try to find out ways to cultivate students' basic sense of discourse coherence for junior high school English writing teaching.

Results and Analysis

Pragmatic Presupposition and Organizational Skills

organizational skills focus on the information that writers are required to think about, select, and arrange in an essay. When students are confronted with a writing topic, their minds will first generate a variety of information, then they will select this information and organize it in order of importance or relevance. However, the cognitive ability of middle school students is still immature, and their perception of the relevance of information to the text may be biased, so teachers should teach students to filter information and arrange information reasonably in the process of teaching writing.

(i) Interpretation of pragmatic presuppositions of writing topics, reflection and selection of relevant information

The topic of writing is a prerequisite for writing, and students usually determine the content and direction of writing through the topic, and the use of discursive presuppositions in the topic plays a key role in writing. Teachers need to make use of the semantic presupposition of the title to let students perceive the direction of writing from the title. Teachers need to consciously guide students to review the topic when teaching writing, because the clues in the title can help students to disperse their thoughts and think about the relevant information about the issue, and after collecting the students' ideas, teachers can then reasonably design the teaching of how to sift through the information. Among them, preset trigger words are certain words and expressions that can make the reader or the addressee produce preset words and expressions, and the effective use of preset trigger words in the title can help thinking about the information in writing, for example:

Example(1): Bob FORGET to lock the door.

Example(2): Bob ought to lock the door, or intended to lock the door.

(He Ziran, Lecture Notes on Pragmatics, P109)

In the example sentence, Bob forgot to lock the door. When readers see this sentence, they will be attracted by the verb firstly, and have two kinds of assumptions: the first one is Bob should have gone to lock the door, but because of his bad memory, he forgot to do it, and therefore should be blamed; the second one is, Bob wanted to lock the door, but because of something else delayed, he forgot to lock the door, instead of not locking it on purpose, and hoped that he would not be blamed for it. Thus, teachers can help students train their thinking in writing class by first presenting them with words or expressions from the topic that can

generate preconceptions, without presenting the topic in its entirety. After students have expressed their ideas, organize this information and select relevant information. As for the next example:

Example(3): Into the junior high school, it is believed that students have found more suitable learning methods, please use "My biggest change" as the title, write your biggest change in learning and how you change and your feelings.

(A secondary school in Ganzhou City, 2023-2024 academic year, first semester midterm joint examination)

When teachers meet this kind of essay topic for teaching, they can first present the word "change", let students discuss what they think of when they got this word, encourage students to speak enthusiastically, then present "Biggest change in learning", organize students' ideas through a mind map and categorize the information. Secondly, present "Biggest change in learning", organize students' ideas through a mind map, categorize the information and exclude irrelevant information. These processes can be fully demonstrated to students so that they can learn to select information.

(ii) Interpretation of pragmatic preconceptions of information levels and rational organization of information

As the writer's mental cognitive state is dynamic, with the text advances, in order to ensure the smooth flow of information in the discourse, the writer on the one hand has to consider the common knowledge with the readers, and on the other hand needs to incrementally process the information level of the text, and continually provide new presuppositions for the next content, so as to make the text develop reasonably and in an orderly manner. Therefore, in teaching writing, teachers should make them consider the relationship between information and organize information rationally.

The following quote is from a junior high school student's essay on the topic "My biggest change," a 13-point essay (The full mark for this writing is 15).

Example(4): ①There have been great changes in my life when I was young, I used to spend time playing with my friend, but now I have not time any more. ②The biggest change in my life is I used to be shy and hate English. ③This is because I joined an English club. ④It taught me how to learn English. ⑤After this, I dared to speak English in front of the class. ⑥Then I made speech in public. ⑦The another reason is I become humorous and like speaking English. ⑧I love reading English book and watching English movies. ⑨It seems that I have changed so much. You sure have change and so have I.

In terms of mechanical skills and language-use skills of writing, there is not much of a problem with the spelling of words and the use of punctuation and grammar in this essay. The essay is written according to the requirements of the topic, and the information is all relevant to the topic and not off-topic. However, when scrutinized from the point of view of pragmatic presuppositions, there are still some problems. First of all, as a whole, since the essay is written by a junior high school student, it is easy to understand, the reader can literally understand what the writer expresses, but the problem lies in the fact that the two reasons for the "change" in this essay are in an inclusive relationship, not a juxtaposition or an incremental relationship, and that what the writer is trying to express is that she learned how

to learn English and liked it because of joining an English club. Here he presents only one reason, but in the essay he uses “the another reason”, which will make the reader have a kind of information other than “joining an English club” in their mind, which makes the coherence of the passage problematic; secondly, Looking at the details, in the ① sentence, it is said that “one of the changes in life is that there's less time for playing” , and sentence ② talks about the biggest change that happened in the writer's study. From the word “biggest”, it can be predicted that there is a recursive relationship between the two sentences, but there is no proper use of articulators to connect the two sentences, which makes the reader need to make a greater effort to understand and reduces the accessibility of the information.

It is clear that students do not consider and appropriately deal with the relationships between information such as containment, transitions and progression when writing, but simply lay the connectives on the text. Teachers should focus on this aspect when marking. If students are only graded on their basic language and topic relevance or if too much weight is given to their marks in this area, it will create certain misunderstandings in students writing. In teaching, teachers can present some essays and ask students to organize the information in the essays, list the information conveyed and guide them to sort the information so that they can develop a sense of hierarchical progression among the information in their writing. Coherence of discourse should be developed from the beginning of elementary writing.

Pragmatic Presupposition and stylistic Skills

Stylistic skills refer to the ability to use linguistic knowledge to achieve desired results, such as organizing logical articulations between sentences and paragraphs, and making sentence transformations in order to highlight the key points of the text. Filtering and organizing information in a discourse requires not only thinking about the relevance of the information to the topic as well as the relationship between the information within it, the use of sensible logical connectors, and in constructing a discourse, in order to highlight the focus of the text, but also requires thinking about the importance of the information in question, since all relevant information is not of equal importance.

Conjunction are interpreted in a pragmatic presupposition to present the focus of the text The use of conjunctions can make the text coherent, end the content of the previous text and skillfully connect the following text, which contains pragmatic presuppositions that pave the way for the text. In writing teaching, teachers can present some excellent texts and guide students to find out the conjunctions, then guide the students to think about the function of these conjunctions. Next, the teacher can summarize the content of the passage and further analyze the role these connecting words and phrases play in presenting the focus of the text. Finally, students are taught when and how to use these conjunctions. As in the student composition presented in example (4), "but" " this is because" "after this " "then" "the other reason is" , all these are the use of conjunctions, which shows that students have some knowledge of conjunctions, but they are unable to have a deep understanding of how to use these words or phrases. “This is because I joined an English club” and “The other reason is I become humorous and like speaking English”, these two sentences show that the student does not understand the relationship between the two reasons is an incremental, and does not have a deep understanding of when it is necessary to use such connecting words and phrases, and at this point, the teacher should instruct the student to use “this is because” and “the other reason is” in leading to more than one reason, but need to meet the condition that

the two reasons are not contained in each other; Another example is “There have been great changes in my life when I was young, I used to spend time playing with my friend, but now I have not time any more”. In this sentence, “but” is used as an adversative conjunction. Generally, the content after the adversative conjunction is to reflect where the focus of the article is, or to negate the content of the previous text, but in this student essay, it only reflects the negation of the previous text, resulting in a segmentation with information on the content below, which can not produce the appropriate presuppositions.

(i) The pragmatic presuppositions of sentence transformation are interpreted to highlight the focus of the article

(ii)

The focus of the article can be realized by sentence transformation, which is usually reflected in the form of main and subordinate clauses, in which the parts that are not part of the main information of the article are processed as predetermined information, and the predetermined information is placed in the subordinate part of the sentence. If all the information is presented in the form of a segmentation, then the information will appear to be cumbersome, wordy, and unable to reflect the key point. For example, a fragment from an essay written by a student on "What is Success":

Example(5): “What is the definition of success? Different people will have different opinions about it. Someone asks me what is success. I tell him progress is success. I can have small goal or great aim in my whole life. I set a goal. It is too large for me. So I will not taste the feeling of success.”

If changed to the following passage:

Example(6): “What is the definition of success? I believe different people will have different opinions about it. If anyone asks me what is success for me, I will tell him progress is success for me. I can have small goal or great aim in my whole life. If the goal what I set is too large for me, I will not taste the feeling of success..

The writer in this passage wants to define success, so information about the writer's understanding of success is more important. In example (6), The writer processes all descriptions other than his or her own as predetermined information through subordinate clauses, highlighting his or her own understanding of success, because the information in the subordinate clauses is information that is shared by the reader and the writer. However, in example (5), the sentences are basically in the form of segmentation, which appears that the primary and secondary relationships between sentences are not obvious, and all the information is equal important, making it difficult to emphasize the theme.

Thus, in writing teaching process, on the basis of mastering the rules of grammar, teachers should also make students understand that different sentence forms present different emphasis, teachers can compare different sentence expressions of the same information to make students understand the role of sentence changes for emphasis, so that make students slowly master this skill in actual writing training.

Pragmatic Presupposition and Judgement Skills

Judgement skills refers to writing for a specific purpose, in an appropriate way and for a specific reader, making the article relevant, including the reader, style, purpose. Utilizing this

skill in writing can make the essay more target oriented. Based on this, teachers should develop readership awareness in writing instruction so that students can write to a specific reader and make their essays more target. This specifically requires students to think about the contextual information that they share with their readers before and during writing, and to convey information in the text that readers can understand. This means that writers need to consider the reader's needs and try to cater for the psychological factors that the reader needs in order to construct a specific purposeful context. This is especially true if the readers are in a different cultural context than the writer, in which case the reader's psycho-cognitive factors need to be taken into account.

The following passage is from a student's essay, The topic of the essay is "If you are Li Lei, your American pen pal Tom is interested in traditional Chinese culture. Write him an e-mail in English to introduce one or two traditional Chinese festivals."

Example(7): I am very glad to tell you something about spring festival.It's a traditional festival in China. It comes in winter.It's time to get new. We usually clean and decorate our houses carefully before it comes. I always help my mother clean the windows and wash the clothes. We put up Chunlian on the doors and Chuanghua on the windows.It's time to say goodbye to the last year, and say hello to the New Year.Everyone goes home to get together with their families, no matter how far it is. They must have dinner together on that day. They must visit their relatives and friends and say"Happy New Year"to them.

From the topic of the essay, it can be assumed that the first reader is Tom, an American pen pal. Generally, it is easy to have presuppositions here due to the specificity of the writing object, but it is obvious that in example (7), the student does not fully realize the special cultural background of the reader of this letter, "Chunlian" and "Chuanghua" are all iconic features of the Spring Festival, but it is difficult for Americans to understand them if these concepts are just laid out in the essay. It will not be possible to create common knowledge with the reader, so making the message difficult to understand. At this point, teachers should remind students of the nationality of their pen pals, introduce them to the corresponding American holiday culture, let them know that the United States also has a holiday similar to the Chinese New Year, that is Christmas, so that students can use common features in different cultures to help readers understand in the process of writing. Thus, it can be changed to the following statement: "I am very glad to tell you something about Spring Festival.It's a traditional festival in China,like Christmas in your country. We usually clean and decorate our houses carefully before it comes just like you.But We stick Spring Festival couplets and window grille not the bells and other Christmas decorations." In this way, Westerners can better understand the characteristics of Chinese New Year. The modified discourse places the presuppositions in their cognitive, caters to the Eastern culture, and maximizes the accessibility of the information.

Therefore, when students are able to achieve the ability to sift and organize relevant information and highlight the key points of the essay, they should focus on the targeted of the essay. Before writing, teachers should let students to consider the shared knowledge between themselves and their readers, and after writing, they are asked to check and revise the essay based on the reader's cultural background, identity status, and other factors.

Conclusion

When teaching writing, teachers should not only pay attention to students' use of basic knowledge such as punctuation, spelling, grammar, but also make students focus on the coherence of the essay. Teachers should put pragmatic presuppositions throughout the classroom in the process of teaching writing, firstly, teaching students to select and organize information, then teaching students to use different sentence patterns, logical conjunction and other ways of highlighting the focus of the essay, and finally cultivating students to write targeted essays based on the reader's cultural background, identity and other factors. The method of combining pragmatic presuppositions and writing skills should be used throughout the teacher's classroom instruction. The shortcoming of this paper is that its feasibility has not been proved through empirical research, and the author will do further research in the future.

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