

Study of Junior Middle School English Teachers' Discourse from the Perspective of Speech Act Theory

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Abstract: English classroom is a real communication environment. The communication between teachers and students constructs a special classroom culture. Teachers' discourse plays an important role in the effectiveness of the classroom, the enthusiasm of students and the communicative feature of English. This paper will start from Austin's speech act theory, analyzing effective and ineffective classroom discourse based on the classroom discourse of junior middle school English teachers. The paper draws the conclusion by analyzing the theory and by the case study. The classroom discourse of junior high school English teachers should conform to the characteristics of the students they teach. Secondly, teachers should pay attention to the standardization of their own discourse in class. Finally, teachers should pay attention to the quality and effect of classroom discourse.

Keywords: Speech Act Theory, Teacher Discourse, Junior Middle School Teaching.

1. Introduction

The purpose of English teaching is not only to teach students to memorize words and phrases or let alone to enable students to cope with English exams. But to cultivate the core competences of students, so that students can understand the communicative nature of English, not just rote learning. The English classroom is a communicative environment, and the dialogue between teachers and students in the classroom plays a great role in the cultivation of students' English. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the discourse of English teachers. At the same time, the teacher's discourse in the classroom also plays an important role in promoting students' interest and motivation in English learning. Therefore, based on Austin's speech act theory, this paper analyzes junior middle school English teachers' classroom discourse in order to promote a more efficient, effective and meaningful English class.

2. Speech Act Theory

In the 1960s, Austin created speech act theory, which was later improved and continuously developed by Searle, Grace and other scholars. In the process of studying pragmatics, this theory occupies an important position.

From this theory, language is not just a combination, to some extent, language can form an effect. Austin believes that daily speech is divided into two types: declarative sentences and prescriptive sentences. Declarative sentences are used to explain, report, or describe the state of things or state a fact, with the purpose of referring to things and narrating things with words. Prescriptive sentence is a sentence used to complete a certain action, that is, "words of action" sentence. The purpose is to do things with words and deeds, with words to do things. On this basis, Austin also systematically elaborated that speech acts can be divided into three types: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts [1]. This theory was later inherited and developed by Searle, one of Austin's students. Searle (1969) wrote in *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Act* comprehensively discuss the classification standard of speech act, the analysis of the constitution of speech act, meaning

reference, indirect speech act and so on [2]. Searle further developed this theory to explain the process of human language communication.

This paper reviews the history of Chinese teachers' speech act research and finds that in recent years, the study of speech act theory has become an increasingly important research field in China. For example, Pan Cunbing (2009) pointed out that teachers' speech behavior plays a core role in teachers' classroom behavior, and the key to good teaching lies in how to accurately use classroom language, which can improve students' interest in learning and create a good classroom atmosphere [3]. Wu Jinhua (2013) divided teachers' classroom language into five types according to the functions and roles of teachers' teaching language: greeting language, instruction language, questioning language, explanatory language, and feedback language [4]. In combination with speech act theory, she discussed the characteristics of language forms respectively and made pragmatic analysis. She believed that teachers should properly apply speech act theory to classroom language to guide their own language teaching practice. So that teachers' discourse has a typical demonstration and clear purpose.

In classroom teaching, speech act theory has been applied to teaching language, ancient poetry teaching, English teaching, classroom questioning and so on.

The teacher's classroom questioning includes three kinds of behavior: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary behaviors. The locutionary behavior is to detect students' learning situation by transmitting literal meaning, so that students can express appropriately and learn effectively [5]. The illocutionary behavior of teachers' classroom questioning is the expression of the speaker's intentional behavior. Through questioning, teachers can highlight the important and difficult points of teaching or check the content and skills that students have mastered and have not mastered at different levels, and timely guide teachers to improve and perfect the teaching process [6]. The perlocutionary behavior refers to the effect of the teacher's questions, which usually means that it will have a certain "consequence effect" on students' feelings, thoughts or actions. Combining the theory of speech act, the study of classroom questioning by senior high school

English teachers aims to understand whether the teacher, the language impostor of current classroom questioning, transmits his or her own speech behavior through questioning, and achieves the implication of questioning between the words and the consequences on students.

Beyond the foundational framework of Austin's and Searle's contributions, it is critical to unpack the practical relevance of speech act theory in the context of junior middle school English teaching-where language learning is intertwined with adolescent psychological development and cognitive characteristics.

Firstly, the tripartite division of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts is not merely a theoretical construct but a dynamic continuum that mirrors the layers of classroom interaction. For junior middle school students, who are transitioning from mechanical memorization to communicative application, the illocutionary force of teachers' discourse carries unique weight[7]. Unlike adults, adolescents are highly sensitive to implicit cues; a teacher's question or feedback does not just convey literal meaning (locutionary) but also signals expectations, encouragement, or correction (illocutionary), which in turn shapes their willingness to participate (perlocutionary). For instance, a teacher's seemingly simple question like "Can you try to rephrase that?" is not merely a request for linguistic adjustment (locutionary) but an implicit affirmation of the student's effort (illocutionary), potentially boosting their confidence to attempt further (perlocutionary). This interplay suggests that in junior high classrooms, the illocutionary act acts as a "bridge" between words and outcomes, making it the most strategically significant component for teachers to master.

Secondly, existing research often categorizes discourse by function, but less attention is paid to how the intentionality behind speech acts aligns with students' developmental needs. Junior middle school students are prone to self-doubt in language learning; thus, the illocutionary intent of teachers' discourse should prioritize "scaffolding" over "judgment." For example, when a student makes a grammatical error, a teacher's response of "Let's see-how might we make this sound more natural?" (illocutionary intent: collaborative problem-solving) is far more effective than "That's wrong" (illocutionary intent: negation). The former triggers reflective thinking (perlocutionary effect), while the latter may suppress participation. This indicates that the success of a speech act lies not in its form but in whether its illocutionary intent resonates with students' need for security and competence.

Thirdly, the cultural dimension of speech acts in EFL classrooms deserves deeper scrutiny. Austin and Searle's theories are rooted in Western communicative norms, but in Chinese junior high classrooms, teachers' discourse must navigate a dual cultural context: the target language culture and the local educational culture. For instance, a teacher using overly direct criticism (a speech act acceptable in some Western contexts) may violate Chinese students' face-saving needs, leading to counterproductive perlocutionary effects. Thus, adapting speech act theory to local cultural nuances is not a dilution of the theory but a necessary localization-teachers must calibrate their illocutionary acts to balance target language authenticity with students' cultural familiarity, ensuring that the perlocutionary outcome is achieved.

In summary, speech act theory in junior middle school English teaching is not a static set of categories but a flexible

tool that demands teachers to: (1) recognize the primacy of illocutionary intent in motivating adolescent learners; (2) align speech acts with students' psychological needs for encouragement and scaffolding; and (3) contextualize speech acts within both target language and local cultural frameworks. Only by doing so can the theory transcend academic analysis and become a practical guide for fostering meaningful classroom communication.

3. The Application of SAT in Junior Middle School English Teacher's Discourse

The positive speech of teachers refers to the effective questioning, evaluation, and feedback of teachers to students in class.

The positive comment is first the effectiveness of questioning. Teachers' questioning should reflect the induction and encouragement. For example, for students at different levels, teachers' questioning in class should reasonably allocate the internal, external, and post-verbal behaviors reflected in the question. Through questioning, teaching difficulties can be highlighted, or students mastered and unmastered content and skills at different levels can be checked, and teachers can be timely coached to improve and perfect the teaching process. Second, the positive evaluation discourse refers to the constructive and valuable feedback to students. After listening to the teacher's evaluation, students can understand what the teacher means, can know what to do, and can understand how to improve after class. Third, the positive feedback refers to the teacher's feedback discourse in class can make students at different levels understand. The teacher's instruction in class is very important and cannot be limited to "very good", "well done", "not good enough" and other perfunctory feedback.

According to the theory of speech act, the teacher's feedback language should be different according to the students' answers. The feedback language should not only have internal behavior, but also have external and post-verbal behavior. After students understand the teacher's feedback, the teacher's feedback language can also make students think, and after thinking, they can make corresponding efforts to change. For example, the teacher's feedback language is "this composition is very good, compared with the last time there is a great progress, but in the article can also reflect more of their own theme content, such as their own ideas and comments on something. At the same time, you can read more excellent model essays, and take more notes to exercise their critical thinking" [9]. Such positive feedback not only reflects the internal, external, and post-verbal behavior, but also students can maintain their enthusiasm for English writing, and the motivation for English learning will increase.

Provide immediate feedback and evaluation: Good English teachers provide clear and timely feedback and evaluation to students to help them understand their progress and problems. Through specific advice and guidance, teachers can help students improve their language skills and learning strategies to promote their learning and growth. Good English teachers focus on encouraging students, focusing on their efforts and progress. They will give students affirmation and praise, stimulate students' confidence and motivation to learn. Through positive encouragement, teachers are able to stimulate students' interest in learning and help them become more engaged in their studies and achieve better results. They

respect their students and use kind and respectful language to communicate with them. They encourage students to express their ideas and opinions and listen to and respect students' opinions. This kind of positive language environment can build good teacher-student relationship and promote students' participation and learning effect. Good English teachers encourage students to actively participate in class activities and provide ample opportunities for interaction. They encourage students to ask questions, discuss and share ideas, promoting collaboration and communication among students. Through active participation and interaction, students are able to better understand and use English knowledge and improve their language expression and communication skills. Meanwhile, English teachers pay attention to students' individual differences and provide personalized teaching according to students' learning needs and ability level [8]. They will use different teaching methods and resources to meet the learning needs of students and help each student achieve the best learning results.

In short, good middle school English teachers give students plenty of feedback in the classroom, actively encourage students, use kind and respectful language, promote student participation and interaction, and pay attention to students' individual differences. These practices can stimulate students' learning interest and motivation, improve their learning effect and self-confidence, and create a positive learning environment and good teacher-student relationship.

Negative teacher speech mainly refers to the teacher's speech in the classroom without letting students make locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary behavior. For example, in the teacher's classroom questioning, students cannot understand the teacher's meaning, and naturally will not make corresponding behaviors. Such classroom instructions are obviously invalid. The negative evaluation of teachers in the classroom does not refer to the criticism of students, but to the evaluation of students without help. The negative feedback of teachers in the classroom refers to the shallow and basic feedback on students' answers and behaviors, without in-depth analysis, without illocutionary and perlocutionary behaviors. Then students will find it difficult to improve after class and cannot enjoy the fun of English learning.

Teachers fail to provide sufficient feedback and evaluation to students, resulting in an inability to understand their learning progress and individual needs. This lack of personalized guidance and support hampers students' learning outcomes and motivation. Teachers excessively focus on students' mistakes and shortcomings while neglecting their efforts and progress. This criticism-oriented teaching approach can lead to feelings of discouragement and diminished self-confidence, thereby reducing students' motivation and engagement in learning. Teachers use unfriendly or disrespectful language, such as mocking, sarcasm, or belittling remarks towards students. This type of language not only damages students' self-esteem but also undermines positive teacher-student relationships, resulting in a negative attitude towards learning. Teachers overlook student participation and interaction in the classroom, merely delivering knowledge in a one-way manner without providing opportunities for expression and speaking. This teaching approach limits students' cognitive development and improvement in language expression, hindering their learning outcomes. Teachers fail to consider students' individual differences and adopt a one-size-fits-all teaching approach.

This approach fails to meet the diverse learning needs and abilities of students, resulting in some students being overlooked or falling behind, thereby affecting their learning outcomes and self-confidence.

In conclusion, the negative language used by middle school English teachers in the classroom can have adverse effects on students. The lack of timely feedback and evaluation, excessive criticism, unfriendly or disrespectful language, neglect of student participation and interaction, and disregard for individual differences all impact students' learning outcomes and motivation. Therefore, teachers should focus on providing timely feedback and evaluation, striking a balance between criticism and encouragement, using friendly and respectful language, encouraging student participation and interaction, and adopting personalized teaching methods based on students' individual differences to promote holistic development and a positive learning experience.

4. Conclusion

Through the above analysis, it can be seen that effective and reasonable feedback can play a boosting role in classroom teaching, which is conducive to strengthening the communication between teachers and students, stimulating students' passion, and thus promoting the improvement of teaching work. The teacher's rational application of intonation repetition can not only improve the students' thinking ability, but also promote all students to analyze the problems, and give appropriate help in the process of students correcting mistakes; When giving feedback to students, teachers should fully consider students' feelings and carefully consider some words; Reasonable and appropriate feedback can help students get great satisfaction and improve their interest in learning English.

The teacher's discourse serves as the primary means of transmitting knowledge and information to students. Through clear and accurate language expression, teachers can deliver subject knowledge and help students understand and grasp relevant concepts and skills. The teacher's discourse has the power to ignite students' interest and engagement. By using vivid and interesting language, humorous expressions, and captivating stories, teachers can capture students' attention and enhance their motivation and enthusiasm for learning. The teacher's discourse contribute to creating a positive learning atmosphere. Through encouragement, praise, and affirmation, teachers can boost students' confidence and learning motivation, cultivating their interest and positive attitudes towards learning. The teacher's discourse can guide students' thinking and foster discussion. By asking questions and using guiding statements, teachers can stimulate students' thinking, help them organize their thoughts, and cultivate critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Lastly, teacher's discourse plays a significant role in the development of students' language and communication skills. By modeling language expressions, providing correct grammar and pronunciation guidance, teachers can assist students in improving their oral and written English proficiency, fostering good language habits, and enhancing communication skills.

In conclusion, the importance of communication by junior middle school English teachers in the classroom should not be underestimated. Their words serve not only as a tool for knowledge transmission but also as a means to spark interest, stimulate thinking and discussion, create a positive learning atmosphere, and promote language and communication skills

development. And teachers should pay attention to the practical usage of speech act theory, understanding the significance of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary behaviors to design the class discourse in teaching. Therefore, teachers should prioritize accuracy, liveliness, and inspiration in their language expression to enhance teaching effectiveness and students' learning outcomes.

To further consolidate the findings, it is necessary to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The case analysis focused on only two junior middle school English teachers and one specific unit (Go for it, Grade 8, Unit 6), which may restrict the generalizability of the conclusions. A larger sample size involving more teachers, diverse textbooks, and varied teaching contexts would provide a more comprehensive understanding of junior middle school English teachers' discourse from the speech act theory perspective.

Moreover, practical implications for teaching practice can be expanded. Schools and educational institutions should prioritize integrating speech act theory into teacher training programs. Workshops and seminars could be organized to help teachers systematically master the connotations of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, enabling them to design more targeted classroom discourse. For instance, training sessions might include role-playing activities where teachers practice formulating questions that trigger not only literal understanding but also deeper thinking and behavioral responses, as demonstrated in Case 2. Additionally, curriculum developers could collaborate with frontline teachers to compile teaching resource manuals that exemplify effective discourse strategies based on speech act theory, offering concrete references for daily teaching.

Future research could explore several directions. First, longitudinal studies tracking the long-term impact of teachers' discourse (shaped by speech act theory) on students' language proficiency and intercultural competence would shed light on the sustained effects of such pedagogical practices. Second, comparative studies between different teaching modes such as traditional in-person classes and online teaching could reveal how the application of speech act theory in teacher discourse adapts to varying instructional environments. Third, investigations into the relationship between teachers' professional development stages such as novice and experienced teachers and their mastery of speech act theory

in discourse design would provide insights into targeted teacher training.

In essence, the cultivation of effective teacher discourse is a dynamic process that requires the synergy of theoretical guidance, practical reflection, and continuous innovation. By persistently refining discourse strategies through the lens of speech act theory, junior middle school English teachers can better fulfill their role as both knowledge transmitters and communicative facilitators, ultimately fostering a more engaging and effective English learning environment for students.

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