

How to Enhance Functional Adequacy in Senior High School Students' Writing

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Abstract

With the reform of the new college entrance examination, senior high school English writing has received great attention. The English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2017 Edition Revised in 2020) proposes that English teaching in senior high schools should focus on cultivating students' core competence in the English discipline. In particular, English writing, which can fully reflect students' comprehensive English application skills, plays a significant role in English learning. However, according to current learning situation, the writing performance among senior high school students is not satisfactory. In the recent years, the importance of functional adequacy as an essential component of L2 proficiency has been observed by some scholars. Based on this, this study highlights the effectiveness of functional adequacy in facilitating students' writing performance and emphasizes the importance of developing students' pragmatic writing ability. Also, this study explores how to develop functional adequacy in senior high school students' writing and puts forward some pedagogical implications of improving pragmatic performance in writing for English teachers.

Keywords

Functional Adequacy; English Writing; Senior High School Students; Pragmatic Performance.

1. Introduction

This section briefly introduces the background, purpose and significance of this study, including the theoretical and practical significance.

1.1. Background of the Study

As is known to us, writing reflects the linguistic ability of English learners. English teachers in senior high schools are keen on improving students' English writing performance. They pay attention to cultivating students' writing ability, constantly giving students training with different materials in various ways, setting aside extra time for evaluation in class and assigning tasks for students to practice after class. However, students still find writing difficult and make mistakes in the learning process, even though they follow teacher's instructions and keep training. One of the most evident weaknesses in students' writing is the poor pragmatic competence, since they only focus on the grammar and vocabulary.

Functional adequacy is a task-related construct that features a robust correlation between the successful completion of a task and the appropriateness of linguistic output (Ran Wei & Xiaoyan Zhao, 2024). Recently, it has been introduced as an addition to the evaluation of writing performance, underscoring the importance of pragmatic appropriateness in linguistic output.

1.2. Purpose and Significance of the Study

This study aims to explore how to enhance functional adequacy in students' writing and offers some pedagogical implications concerning writing pragmatic performance.

In terms of theoretical significance, functional adequacy is of great significance in exploring the laws of L2 proficiency. This study further enriches the current theory about functional adequacy.

In terms of practical significance, this study can encourage English instructors to take into account students' pragmatic performance when teaching writing and will give some advice on enhancing students' functional adequacy, which provides a useful reference for further teaching practice.

2. Literature Review

This section is divided into three parts. The first part is about the introduction of functional adequacy, the second part focuses on the two theoretical basis of this study, and the last part gives a brief review of previous studies on functional adequacy.

2.1. Functional Adequacy

Functional adequacy, as a construct in linguistics and education, has gained significant attention in recent years. It refers to the ability of a language learner to use language appropriately in a given context to achieve a specific communicative purpose (Pallotti, 2009).

Kuiken and Vedder (2017) have developed holistic rating scale to assess functional adequacy, and four dimensions are divided: content, task requirements, comprehensibility, and coherence/cohesion. The content dimension involves assessing whether the learner includes an appropriate quantity of ideas relevant to the task topic. The task requirements dimension examines how well the performance meets the register, genre, and speech act demands specified by the task instructions. The comprehensibility dimension refers to the clarity of the message and ease with which the listener/reader can understand it. Lastly, coherence and cohesion relate to the textual features used to create logical flow and connections between ideas.

According to Kuiken and Vedder (2022), functional adequacy aligns well with the objectives of task-based performance assessment, as it focuses on task fulfillment and conveys the interactive, co-constructed nature of pragmatic competence. With its emphasis on effective communication within specific contexts and tasks, functional adequacy has emerged as a pivotal construct in contemporary studies of L2 pragmatic ability and its measurement.

2.2. Theoretical Basis

Functional adequacy is closely linked to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT).

2.2.1. The Communicative Language Teaching

According to Munby (1978), CLT emphasizes the development of communicative skills over mere linguistic knowledge. It argues that language is primarily a tool for communication and that learners should be able to use the target language to express themselves and understand others in authentic contexts. What's more, CLT promotes a focus on meaningful communication and authentic language use. Learners are encouraged to engage in interactive and collaborative activities that require them to use the target language to accomplish tasks and solve problems. Through these activities, learners develop the ability to understand and produce language in context, which is crucial for functional adequacy.

2.2.2. Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT)

Task-based language learning (TBLT) is another theoretical basis that underpins functional adequacy in L2 learning. TBLT involves the use of tasks as the organizing principle of language teaching and learning. Tasks are activities that learners perform using language in order to achieve a particular goal or outcome (Nunan, 2004). In TBLT, tasks are designed to be authentic

and meaningful, reflecting real-world communication needs. Willis (1996) pointed out that learners are required to use the target language to complete tasks that involve information exchange, problem-solving, and decision-making. By engaging in these tasks, learners develop the linguistic and communicative skills necessary for functional adequacy in L2 learning.

2.3. A Review of Relevant Studies on Functional Adequacy

A number of studies have investigated functional adequacy in language learning. In the 20th century, Labov (1972) examined the functional adequacy of non-standard vernacular (e.g. Black English) in society. Halliday (1978) discussed various aspects of language as a social signifier, including the role of functional adequacy in verbal communication. In the recent years, Herraiz-Martínez (2018) and Herraiz-Martínez and Alcón-Soler (2019) found that greater exposure to English and higher proficiency led to superior written functional adequacy in English-medium instruction contexts. Xiao and Xu (2021) conducted a comparison of the predictive power of functional adequacy and language features (accuracy, fluency, and complexity) in relation to writing scores. They analyzed Chinese picture compositions written by 132 Indonesian students and found that the functional adequacy indicator was relatively independent of CAF, thus indicating the potential for using objective text features to evaluate functional adequacy. Strobl and Baten (2022) observed weak relationships between functional adequacy and fluency and no correlation between functional adequacy and syntactic complexity in L2 writing development during study abroad.

To summarize, previous studies have mainly focused on the relationship between linguistic features of accuracy, fluency and complexity and functional adequacy in writing and factors that could promote functional adequacy. However, little research has been conducted on the development of functional adequacy in a specific pedagogical context. To this end, this study will offer some feasible suggestions to teachers to enhance functional adequacy in writing.

3. Pedagogical Suggestions on Improving Functional Adequacy in Students' Writing

In this section, the author will put forwards some conducive advice on how to enhance functional adequacy in senior high school students' writing.

3.1. For Writing Teaching

Functional adequacy highlights the importance of focusing on communication in language teaching. Firstly, teachers should design writing tasks and activities that require learners to use language for meaningful purposes and in real-world contexts. This can help learners develop the ability to use language functionally. Secondly, teachers should strive to create authentic communication environments in the classroom and utilize instructional strategies that promote real language use. Furthermore, they should attend to learners' needs and variables, such as motivation and self-confidence, to support their development of functional adequacy in writing tasks.

3.2. For Writing Assessment

First, writing should be assessed based on how well it fulfills its purpose within a specific context or situation rather than grammar or spelling accuracy. Functional adequacy is inherently linked to authenticity and context. This means that the writing should be evaluated in terms of its relevance, appropriateness, and effectiveness in achieving the intended goal. Second, writing should be evaluated as a whole, rather than focusing on isolated aspects such as grammar, spelling, or punctuation. Functional adequacy calls for a holistic approach to writing assessment. The overall coherence, purpose, and effectiveness of the writing should be taken into account when making an assessment.

4. Conclusion

Functional adequacy is a crucial concept in language teaching and learning. It represents the ultimate goal of language learning: to be able to use language effectively in real-world contexts. To improve senior high school students' writing, English teachers should pay more attention to students' pragmatic performance and communicative competence so that they can outperform in English learning.

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