

# PRAGMATICS IN THE CLASSROOM

## Don't take it literally

By Richard Roberts & Roger Kreuz

Among the first phrases that English-speaking students of Japanese learn are the equivalents of “hello” (こんにちは *konnichi-wa*) and “how are you?” (お元気ですか *o-genki desu-ka*). With these two phrases under their belts, students may fearlessly run around Japan greeting everyone they meet with “hello, how are you?” in the same way they would greet people back home. However, if they do, they would be making a mistake. Although Japanese speakers will certainly understand what is meant by *konnichi-wa, o-genki desu ka*, the second phrase is not generally asked of people one meets every day—unless they really don't look well. *O-genki-desu-ka* is also not used to greet strangers like cab drivers or the baristas at Starbucks. In Japan, aside from those who appear to be ailing, this form of “how are you?” is reserved for people one hasn't seen in a long time. Its use is more akin to “how have you been?” in English.

Subtleties such as these in the social use of language fall under the linguistic category known as pragmatics. Due to its complexity, the teaching of pragmatics is often postponed until after the sounds and basic words and grammar of a language have been mastered. As such, pragmatics, and its attendant rhetorical devices such as irony and metaphor, are often treated like the icing on a cake; the cherry on a parfait.

But can a speaker really be considered fluent in a given language if she is unaware of the social rules of that language? We believe that pragmatically competent speakers who make grammatical, lexical, or even phonological errors are more fluent than those with perfect grammar, a large vocabulary, and a near-native accent, but who speak their second language in the same way they speak their native language.

To return to our example of how to greet someone, many English speakers would be taken aback if the first thing a person said to them was, “have you eaten?” This might seem like an invitation to a meal in Toronto or Cleveland, but it is, in fact, a formulaic greeting used by speakers of Mandarin and Korean (Li, 2009). Although a perfectly appropriate thing to say in the right setting, *have you eaten?* fails as a greeting in a culture that doesn't recognize it as such. Once again, this is an example of getting the words right, but failing to take the social use of a language into account (Kreuz & Roberts, 2017).

It is easy to see how the pragmatics of greetings, farewells, apologies, compliments, and many more such speech acts should be taught along with the basic mechanics of a

language. But think about so-called “advanced” rhetorical flourishes that are also a part of pragmatics: idiomatic expressions, metaphor, simile, irony, exaggeration, understatement, indirect requests, and rhetorical questions (Roberts & Kreuz, 1994). When is it appropriate to introduce these topics to a class of second language learners?

The answer to this question will depend on the age and intellectual development of the learner, but as a general rule, if the concept has been mastered in one’s native language, then there’s no reason not to include it in second language instruction. For example, until children are about eight or nine years of age they often have trouble understanding the concept of irony (Capelli, Nakagawa, & Madden, 1990). But teenagers and adults are certainly intellectually prepared for learning about it, and since the use of irony differs cross-culturally (e.g., Barbe, 1995), they would benefit from direct instruction in its use in English.

Teaching second-language students about irony may be easier than it seems because there is plenty of research that shows that ironic utterances follow a recipe. Consider how, on a dreary, rainy day, a person could declare either “what awful weather we are having” or “what lovely weather we are having” and be correct in both cases if the first statement is meant literally, and the second is intended ironically. Ironic statements often involve a particular tone of voice, in which people speak more slowly, more loudly, and at a lower pitch than normal (Rockwell, 2000), perhaps accompanied with an eye roll for even more emphasis (Attardo et al., 2003). And to make sure that the nonliteral nature of an utterance is not missed, native speakers of English frequently sprinkle in extreme adjectives and adverbs as well (as in *what absolutely lovely weather we are having!*; Kreuz & Roberts, 1995).

ESL students who have been made aware of these conventions and encouraged them to craft ironic statements in this way are more likely to be successful in communicating and understanding nonliteral intentions. Better yet, their speech will be more interesting and more native-like (Roberts & Kreuz, 2015). And even better still, they will become acculturated to the fact that English may not work like their native language. This last point is important because this kind of practice will alert students to the need to look for alternative explanations when they encounter seemingly unusual turns of phrase, such as being told to “break a leg” or when asked, “just who do you think you are?”

In other words, what holds true for irony is true for all figures of speech, so there’s no reason not to start teaching them as early as possible. Take proverbs and idioms, for example. Teachers often wait to teach these expressions until students are at the intermediate or advanced level. And, when the time comes, students may just be given a list of proverbs and idioms to consider *en masse*. A more natural way to teach such expressions, however, would be to incorporate them into even the most basic lessons in vocabulary and grammar. For example, “cat,” “bag,” “let,” and “out” are all words that are learned relatively early in English language study. How easy, then, to reinforce the pronunciation and meaning of these words by teaching the expression “Let the cat out of the bag” as in divulging a

secret. There are many such expressions in English where the vocabulary and grammatical structures are elementary, but the underlying concepts are more complex.

Because figurative language is culturally dependent, folding in these rhetorical devices from the earliest stages of ESL learning allows students to develop cultural competence in tandem with linguistic fluency. Proverbs and idiomatic expressions facilitate this process naturally. For example, the equivalent of *a piece of cake* in Korean is “eating a rice cake while lying down.” Likewise, *pie in the sky* is “a picture of a rice cake.” And *the grass is greener on the other side of the fence* is “rice cakes are bigger on other people’s plates.” Korean students studying English, therefore, will be able to draw useful parallels between Korean and English when they learn these sayings. Imagine the self-confidence and sense of accomplishment a Korean ESL student would feel the first time they use an expression like *we’re all in the same boat* with a native speaker of English. The native speaker would likely be impressed because such an expression is not typically expected from those who are not yet completely fluent.

Even beyond these figures of speech, cultural differences become more obvious when students are asked to exaggerate or create metaphors or similes to describe emotions, experiences, or situations (Kövecses, 2003). Once again, the pronunciation, lexical choices, and grammatical constructions need not be any more complex or intricate than those used to create literal language at that student’s particular level. But since figurative language is everywhere in English, it’s a good idea to start getting used to it early on.

In sum, a pragmatically knowledgeable language student will be a more fluent language student. Just as important, practice in pragmatics will reinforce essential vocabulary and grammar. Our discussion is in no way meant to negate or take away from the pedagogical techniques that teachers are already using. Rather, we would like to emphasize that seemingly complex rhetorical devices can be incorporated into even the most elementary language learning lessons. And even if students make pragmatic errors, for example, by telling someone to break their legs before giving a speech (instead of breaking a leg), or suggesting they play something with their ears (instead of by ear), they will still be well on their way to making pragmatic competence part of their overall fluency.

## References

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