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Innovative Solutions to New Challenges in English Language Education: Aligning National Outcomes to Global Standards

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NOTE from Editors

Introducing Innovative Solutions to New Challenges in English Language Education: Aligning National Outcomes to Global Standards

The 24th MELTA International Conference discusses and deliberates on innovative solutions to meet new challenges in English language education, with the view of aligning national outcomes to global standards. The conference encourages ELT professionals to share innovations in policies, pedagogies and learning systems. MELTA believes that any attempt to innovate solutions to meet new challenges in English language education has to take into cognizance the evolution of the English language, both regionally and globally, its transforming purpose, its use in changing contexts and its role in reframing communication.

The 24th MELTA International Conference proceedings is our effort to gather the opinions, thoughts and concerns of the many national and international education policy makers, scholars and practitioners, who have painstakingly advocated the advancement of innovative solutions to the challenges within the context of English Language Education, and provide a pathway for their voices to be heard in aligning national English Language Education outcomes to global standards. Their professional views, research, best practices, theoretical perspectives and understanding of issues and research in English language education will hopefully inspire more English Language educators to be involved in advancing methodologies, policies, curriculum, materials and resources, programme design, ICT, differentiated instructions, linguistic and language awareness, professional development and teacher education, within their practice.

It must be noted that the 34 papers are not peer-reviewed but just copy edited for language suitability and appropriateness, typos, formatting and reference checking so as to ensure compliance with the formatting required for the proceedings. The papers are organized thematically into 6 main categories:

- i. Speaking, Listening & Communication
- ii. Reading & Writing
- iii. Technology & ICT
- iv. Creativity & Cognition
- v. Grammar
- vi. Others

It is our hope that these 34 papers will ignite rigourous academic discussions and encourage further scholarly initiatives, leading to effective and innovative solutions to new challenges. Eventually, it is hoped that the existing standards in nations will rise in par with the accepted global standards in the area of English language education.

Editors:

MUHAMMAD KAMARUL KABILAN

SUBARNA SIVAPALAN

CHUAH KEE MAN

May 2015

Developing EFL Learners' Metapragmatic Abilities in Interpreting Intercultural Jokes-Tests

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Introduction

Metapragmatics is the awareness by a speaker of the intentions and effects of one's speech. It addresses an area of the speakers' competence that "reflects judgments of appropriateness on one's own and other people's communicative behavior. It is concerned with what speech does in a particular context" (Caffi, 2006). Also, it is a part of "people's ability to identify with others and thus to work collaboratively towards common goals". Thus it is useful to understand language use better (Verschueren, 2000, 439). It is important as a part of learning a language. Bachman (1990) in Morón et. al. (2009) cited that L2 learners must internalize the importance of two kinds of language knowledge: (1) organizational knowledge- knowing how grammatically correct sentences are organized in texts or grammatical and textual knowledge, and (2) pragmatic knowledge- knowing how words and utterances serve particular meaning by their speakers in particular contexts including sociolinguistic knowledge.

When the learning addresses pragmatic expressions in a dialogue in question with the purpose of developing learners' awareness of pragmatic features, it constitutes a metapragmatic discussion. In other words, it focuses on the pragmatics of metacommunicative utterances in use as a means of actively referring to linguistic forms, structures and functions Through the discussion, the learners may develop their ability to frame utterances of the speakers', their own or their interlocutors' as true or false, precise or vague, cooperative or uncooperative, straightforward or misleading and so on, to secure or change the direction of the current talk, to create or maintain expedient social relationships" From the perspectives of the recipients, it is useful as it "carries information (on the meta level) about how to understand what is said and meant (on the object level" (Bublitz & Hübler, 2007).

By having this ability, the learners can recognize, understand, and learn to engage in pragmatically appropriate exchanges. It enables them to become more pragmatically fluent and facilitates effective communication (Glasgow, 2008) since they can use the pragmatic norms of English language in every social situation.

Humor is the most challenging form of intercultural communication (Reimann, 2010). EFL learners need this metapragmatic knowledge underlying communicative action to understand jokes, in particular intercultural jokes. Understanding intercultural or ethnic jokes means understanding a particular language group's culture, communication styles, strategies and perspectives.

It is considered to be a difficult task for EFL learners because in the jokes there are many cases in which communicative situations are unique or culture specific and is difficult to interpret or transfer. Also, there are many cases in which the equivalent social situations do not exist thus there may not be a corresponding situation in the target language or culture. The learners still face hardship in being understood due to cross-cultural differences. For instance, many jokes, in particular sarcastic or ironical remarks that may be deeply tied to culture, are often unperceived, misunderstood or offensive. (Reimann, 2010).

The learners' lack of response to such jokes indicates the insufficiency of the pragmatic competence. Pragmatic aspects of meaning of the jokes involve the interaction between an expression's context of utterance and the interpretation of elements within that expression (Piller, 2011). The learners, in this instance, are users of foreign languages in the setting of intercultural encounters. Their problems in such intercultural communication usually are mainly in terms of message transmission. Since they are from a different culture, they will probably use information from their culture to interpret the message. The interpreted message may be very different from what the speakers in the jokes actually intended (Knapp et. al., 1987).

Interpreting the jokes means "understanding language and communication strategies, psychology and cognitive processes as well as social, personal or cultural values, beliefs, attitudes and perspectives". Also, it requires a deeper understanding of the structure and method of humour in a particular context, timing and intent. Awareness of

context includes knowing the audience, being sensitive to both cultural and personal taboos, values and perspectives as well as a basic sense of appropriateness. Timing is a factor of this and requires understanding of language, degree of shared background knowledge, sensitivity to environment and advanced discourse awareness. Intent is also crucial as it is often veiled and may well be part of the humour. Therefore if a joke is not understandable it may mean that one or more of these elements are either; misinterpreted, ignored or too ambiguous (Reimann, 2010).

The present paper addresses the importance of developing EFL learners' metapragmatic competence to comprehend intercultural jokes. If teachers are aware of the competence, the learners will not have a difficulty in understanding them.

The Importance of Metapragmatic Abilities for EFL Learners

Metapragmatics is the study of the “metalinguistic dimension of language”. It is broken down into two categories: explicit and implicit metalanguage. It is a necessary tool to understand language use. It is what EFL learners must be aware of when understanding a linguistic behavior (Verschueren, 2000, 441); whereas Kinginger and Farrell (2004) quoted in Yuka (2012, 122) stated that “meta-pragmatic awareness” is defined as “knowledge of the social meaning of variable second language forms and awareness of the ways in which these forms mark different aspects of social contexts.” This metapragmatic awareness is visualized in Table 1.

Table 1: Indicators of Metapragmatic Awareness

Explicit metalanguage	Implicit metalanguage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - metapragmatic descriptions (e.g. by means of metapragmatic lexical items such as speech act verbs or performative verbs) - self-referential expressions - discourse markers/particles or pragmatic markers/particles - sentence adverbs - hedges - explicit intertextual links - quoted and reported speech - 'mention' (vs. 'use') 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - most 'shifters': * deictic expressions (pronouns, tense, etc.) * aspect * mood and modality * (some) evidentials - many 'contextualization cues' (e.g. prosodic patterns, code switching, etc.) - implicit 'voices' - proper names

- some 'shifters' (e.g. some evidentials) - some 'contextualization cues' (many of the above can be included in this category)	
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(Verschueren, 2000, p. 441).

Table 1 indicates EFL Learners' metapragmatic abilities, in general, include: (1) The self-referential use- referring to the overall activity of which the chosen phrase and categorizes it as a specific genre of language use to give a frame of its interpretation, (2) the explicit intertextual links (i.e. introduced by *see ...*, *following ...*, etc.) - both informative and instructing the addressees how to interpret what is about to follow, (3) the metapragmatic description of a verbal activity carried out based on what the linguistic action verb defines, the introduction of a modality- drawing explicit attention to the status of the choice in the author's conceptualization of the ideational state of affairs referred to, (4) other metapragmatic markers- drawing attention to the lexical choice-making, and (5) properties of language use, categorizations, suggestions, claims, etc. (ibid. 445).

These metapragmatic abilities may serve some functions to help EFL learners understand actual language use. They include: (1) anchoring- the ways in which utterances or sets of structural choices are situated or anchored in a temporal, spatial, social or discourse context or connecting structure and context, and (2) reflexive contextualization- reflect assessments of the communicative status and meaning of the described speech events.

Since Metapragmatics is "a crucial force behind the meaning-generating capacity of language in use" (ibid. 439), EFL learners must lift this metapragmatic awareness to metapragmatic abilities and take the metalinguistic or metapragmatic functioning into consideration when approaching instances of language use. As there is a link between metapragmatics and pragmatics in general, it is "a way to contribute to the development of the students' pragmatic consciousness or metapragmatic abilities" (Morón et.al. 2009, xv). The metapragmatic awareness is a part of pragmatic knowledge.

Bachman (1990) in Morón et. al. (2009, xiii) cited that pragmatic knowledge

involves knowing how words and utterances can be assigned specific meanings in context and function as the vehicles of their users' intentions. As the previous knowledge, this one is also structured in others: lexical knowledge, which amounts to knowing the meaning of lexical items and using them figuratively; functional knowledge, or knowing how to relate utterances to their speakers' intentions; and sociolinguistic knowledge.

Morón et. al. (2009, xiii)

This pragmatic factor is essential to the development of learners' communicative competence in their foreign or second language (L2). It is an important factor that affect interaction in order to obtain satisfactory results not only in the classroom but, more importantly, when learners use their L2 in real and authentic contexts (ibid). This is workable as well when they interpret jokes or humor since humor has also been linked to increased communication competence (Parks, 1994) as quoted by Gonzales and Wiseman (2005).

Using Metapragmatic Abilities to Interpret Intercultural Jokes

Intercultural jokes are a part of cross-socio-cultural or ethnic humor. Ethnic humor is defined as humor in which "perceived behaviors, customs, personality, or any other traits of a group or its members by virtue of their specific sociocultural identity" are scrutinized (Apte, 1987, 180). In a pluralistic society, in which contact with members of different ethnic, racial and cultural groups is inevitable, the use and analysis of humor offers important insights into intercultural relations (Hasenauer, 1988, 351).

Hasenauer (1988) further stated that the use of ethnic humor is

to raise awareness of racism, prejudice and ethnocentrism as a tool to examine every day talk about non-dominant social groups, discuss their own stereotypes and beliefs about persons of other cultures. to facilitate the open discussion of stereotypes, to illustrate a number of important intercultural communication concepts, and to provide a pro-social tool which individuals might use to combat racism and prejudice in their interpersonal networks.

(Hasenauer, 1988, 352)

Intercultural or cross-cultural jokes thus address cultural diversity among social groups- differences and similarities between cultural values and practices including concepts of race, cultural identity, discrimination and prejudice, stereotypes, etc. These jokes may

also imply “the pinning of an undesirable quality of particular ethnic group in a comic way or to a ludicrous extent”. They are clearly linked to the relative social, economic and political positions of the joke's subject and its teller noting the differences in values and class hierarchies that underpin these jokes (Davies, 1990, 4).

One example of such jokes is presented as follows:

(1) In Africa, a missionary visits the patients in a Black Village. In a hut, he finds a young man with fever. He caresses his forehead, gives him medicine, and tells him: “In a week, you will be well and you will be able to work like an elephant.” “This is good, replies the young man, it means I can fly to Sorbonne to teach my sociology course.”

(Popescu, 2011, 182)

Joke (1) portrays the stereotypical image of a young African man and his real status through the missionary's perception of what an African is. It is based on a superficial judgment, which takes into account merely the color of one's skin and his/her location. This phenomenon concerning the Black people can also be discovered both in real life situations as immigrants and as characters in American movies. Popescu (2011) further explains about the joke:

The surprise element of the punch line is the young man's actual high social and professional status. Humor arises from the clash between this real identity presupposing a highly-skilled, specialized job in an urban intellectual environment (the Sorbonne) and the preconceived identity that the missionary attributed to him based on the script of unskilled, physical work (“work like an elephant”).

(Popescu, 2011, 182-183)

The joke also requires complexity of humor interpretation. For example, one must understand “Sorbonne” which refers to Sorbonne University belonging to the intellectual elite. It constitutes a metaphor for civilized society and occupying a prestigious position. In this instance, the young man in making a strong statement about his actual identity. The identity and his choice of sociology as his specialty are ironical as well as sociology studies human relationship and the role that people play in society. “Sociology”, in this case, accordingly, implies unresolved contemporary social issues (ibid).

To interpret intercultural jokes, one therefore needs to combine both content-general and content-specific knowledge about a certain culture. It is problematic for several: message interactants must take into consideration the message sender's intention, the semantic rules, the verbal and nonverbal message, who the target is, which taboos are exploited, and the potential criticisms/offenses of the topic (Zabalbeascoa, 2005). Such intercultural jokes scarcely communicate perfectly at all. It is because the interpretation of the jokes is dependent on shared cultural meanings of linguistic rules and cues (Franks, n.d., 13-14).

There are differences in humor in various nations, which one cannot find in his or her culture. For example, "one can find many jokes about drinking and fist fighting in Irish humor. Jokes on these topics are practically nonexistent in Israel" (Ziv, 1988, xi) as in Gonzales & Wiseman (2005). Encoding and decoding jokes can be a complex process. This may become even more complicated when an intercultural element dwelling within humor is introduced to EFL learners. It is because a humorous message, content or situation varies from culture to culture (Gonzales and Wiseman, 2005). EFL learners, however, need to understand all the problematic nature of this form of communication in order to improve the way they use it to communicate.

Developing EFL Learners' Metapragmatic Abilities to Interpret Intercultural Jokes

Pragmatic instruction in a foreign language classroom serves three functions: (1) providing exposures for learners to appropriate target language input, (2) raising learner's pragmatic awareness, and (3) arranging authentic opportunities to practice pragmatic knowledge. To raise EFL learners' pragmatic awareness, the teacher may provide illustrations or use of authentic language samples and then ask the learners to discover similarities and differences between the pragmatic norms of the first and the target language. Finally, the teacher may arrange opportunities for the learners to practice the pragmatic norms and develop the EFL students' pragmatic competence. The pragmatic competence includes ability to perform speech acts, ability to use and understand non-literal meanings, ability to use the speaking rules, ability to taking turns, pauses or silences, and ability to use cultural aspects of the language (Yined-Tello, 2006, 178).

In EFL learning, metapragmatic discussion generally occurs when the learners and teacher engage in a dialogue in the jokes about pragmatic expressions (i.e. how language is in use and how it works) that they have just seen and heard or read. They need to know which utterances to use in order to perform a specific action. They also need to understand the way people speak in particular situations or social context. They will therefore to know how to perform the different speech acts at the right time and place with the right person using the appropriate way. Consequently, they will not face problems in understand others' speeches including ones in intercultural jokes.

The purpose is to highlight and make the learners aware of pragmatic features of the jokes. The discussion and awareness can take place explicitly or implicitly. The teacher and learners can discuss the pragmatic rules and analyze different pragmatic features directly and explicitly they find in the jokes. Or the teacher can have the learners learn implicitly, in which the learners experience the pragmatics and draw inferences themselves about what they have seen or read and what was implied in the jokes.

To address the metapragmatic awareness or abilities to interpret the intercultural jokes, the teacher should facilitate a meaningful discussion and debrief the humorous content in order that the learners reflect on their own patterns of humor cognition, intercultural issues, and overall learning (Andrew, 2010). Organized and explicit instruction focusing pragmatic aspects is suggested in order to attain the goal (Yuka, 2012).

Some instructional methods as suggested by Grossi (2009) included focus on-form, feedback, discourse completion tasks and recasts, and viewing and identifying pragmatic infelicities, followed by role play provide further insights into the benefits of both implicit and explicit teaching of pragmatic skills, as well as instructional methods for teaching and testing them.

Basically, to teach metapragmatic abilities, the presentation of each of the metapragmatic features can follow a scaffolding structure as adapted from Ghosh (2012) that includes: (1) Introduction to the concept, (2) General information and examples, (3) Field-specific structured exercises, and (4) Field-specific open-ended activities. To introduce the concept, the teacher can begin with a general introduction to the concept by providing a list of various metapragmatic features as previously shown

in Table 1. It is recommended to reveal the contrast of some cultural points and pragmatic features between the target culture and the students' native culture and engage the students in discussion on the variations. Then, the teacher may provide the list along with examples of each feature. To give field-specific structured exercises, the teacher may ask the students to study the provided intercultural jokes and engage the students in discussion on the variations of humor devices, for instance variations in sentence structure and vocabulary, and the cultural aspects of the jokes. It will then be useful to discuss situations when a particular pragmatic point is preferable for the given situation or context. The next practice may be more open-ended creation of dialogs and role-plays with a variety of field-specific scenarios and interlocutors. One way to do this is to provide a general description of a difficult or uncomfortable situation and have the students use the strategies to discuss the scenario incorporating the metapragmatic points studied. Another very useful exercise involves showing the class a video of a field-specific interaction and prompting the students to analyze the metapragmatics of the conversation. The final session is an effective follow-up activity. This activity also allows the instructor to assess (formally or informally) the students' understanding of the concept and their ability to have appropriate pragmatic exchanges.

This section reveals several ways of developing metapragmatic awareness or abilities of EFL learners in interpreting the intercultural jokes. They are: (1) using intercultural movies or videos, (2) using stand-up comedies, and (3) using role-plays.

Using intercultural humorous movies or videos

Research by Briam (2010) discovered that intercultural humorous movies or videos help students engage in interpreting intercultural jokes. Through such movies or videos, the students analyzed issues such as cross-cultural adjustment, cultural shock, and discrimination. The movies or videos also bring about potential to create power imagery and metaphors from which to explore broad and complex intercultural topics. By doing so, it is possible to explore examples of humor usage in various cultures for the purpose of understanding the pragmatic strategies applied by another's culture in the jokes. It may take the politeness rituals such as one in Japanese humor as a point of pragmatic investigation. This may also be used for a cross-cultural analysis and comparison (Andrew, 2010).

Briam (2010) also suggested that the teacher could ask the students to analyze, observe, and inquire by breaking down and picking apart various cultural and components and pragmatic features of the jokes and by analyzing how the pragmatic features perpetuates intercultural issues, such as cultural stereotype, discrimination, prejudice, hegemony, etc.

Using intercultural stand-up comedies

EFL teachers may use stand-up comedies for engaging their students in creative problem solving in interpreting the jokes. The teacher may ask the students to investigate how stand-up comedians use their pragmatic strategies to raise intercultural matters. The teacher can also observe how the students show their increased engagement and participation by laughing alongside the audience when violations of cultural norms were made evident in the stand-up comedies. This may also include identifying verbal and nonverbal content related to the cultural norm (Washburn, 2001).

Using role-playing

Role-playing involves the students' participation to play roles according to different social situations. Students' role-playing may be applied in the production stage. In this stage, teachers should engage the students through role-playing activities and social experiments, such as a social justice campaign, in order to assess how students' intercultural communication skills including their meta pragmatic awareness have developed over time, and what they look like in action. The teacher may also use the role-playing strategy for the students' self-reflection as a way to assess their metapragmatic abilities in pragmatic exchanges in real-life contexts and to assess how students' pragmatic fluency developed and whether and how the development of fluency benefits from metapragmatic awareness (Liddicoat, 2005).

To present intercultural jokes for EFL learners this can be considered a problem because the jokes may contain rudeness that can make the mentioned ethnic group feel insulted and react negatively to the joke or to the teller. Therefore, the teacher should take into account the teller's and the listener's perception and their objection regarding this type of humor.

Conclusion

In conclusion, discussions of linguistic pragmatics, that is, discussions of what speech *does* in a particular context are meta-pragmatic, since they describe the meaning of speech as action. As part of learning a foreign or second language, it is important that EFL learners develop an awareness of the metapragmatics of the target language. The development of metapragmatic awareness and abilities in EFL learners has received increasing attention in EFL classrooms. It is a part of pragmatic competence, in particular, and of communicative competence, in general. It is of importance to interpret intercultural jokes and it serves as an opportunity to develop EFL learners' intercultural awareness. The gained metapragmatic abilities are of importance for EFL learners not only on an interpersonal level but on a global level as well. Possessing the metapragmatic abilities leading to the pragmatic abilities, EFL learners will have the ability not only to use the linguistic code but also the socio-cultural aspects of the English language in which they need to be competent, and realize success in communication.

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