

CAPE Alumni Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk

CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what they know and deepen their understanding of issues and interest in the ESL field.

Aloha former CAPE participants and friends. We hope you are well and having a good week. Here at the University of Hawaii, we have had an exciting week. The fourth PACSLRF (Pacific Second Language Research Forum) was held last week. Researchers and teachers from all over North America and Asia came to present their work and attend the conference. There were colloquiums on JFL, learning English in study abroad contexts, second dialect acquisition, SLA, and learning Korean as a foreign language through web-based media. It was a very well-run and diverse conference and I think everyone learned a lot.

Food for Thought

One interesting presentation I attended was about teaching pragmatics to Japanese EFL learners. The researcher had developed a book that had different lessons to teach different areas of pragmatic competence such as accepting invitations or asking to borrow things. It is important to note that the pragmatics were from the United States because there are differences between U.S. pragmatics and British or Australian pragmatics (not to mention the pragmatics of the other countries that speak English). For example, North-Americans are known for saying “thank you” and “I’m sorry” far more than their British counterparts. This leads some people to think North-Americans are friendly while other people think they are insincere.

The featured area was English refusals. This is the most typical pragmatic difference cited between Japanese and English. A simplified explanation of the difference is that when Japanese people refuse an invitation it is normal and polite to hesitate and be vague while North-Americans tend to give a very specific excuse. An example of an excuse I gave the other day when refusing an invitation to a party was, “I really want to come, but it’s late and I have to be at the PACSLRF conference at seven o’clock tomorrow morning. Thanks for inviting me, though.” This elongated explanation might seem unnecessary and ridiculous to people in other countries, but in the U.S. it is acceptable. Conversely, in the U.S. if someone refuses an invitation and says “I’m sorry, I’m busy,” the person who gave the invitation may feel hurt and might assume the other person doesn’t like them.

The study found that pragmatics could be learned. By the end of the semester, the students were able to correctly use American-English pragmatic forms. So, teachers can teach pragmatics, but should they? I have included some questions to get you thinking

about the issue. If this topic interests you, try discussing it with friends and colleagues. Let us know what you think.

1. What do you think about teaching pragmatics to students?
2. Many people think requiring students to use American-English pragmatics in English class is a form of cultural imperialism. Do you agree?
3. Do you ever teach pragmatics in your classes? What and when?
4. Did you ever learn pragmatics in English? Have you ever had a need for them?
5. Based on your knowledge and experiences in other countries do you think that the social conventions in your country are very different than those in other countries? Explain.

Teaching Tip

Last year a visiting scholar from Asia gave a presentation in my sociolinguistics class. He had surveyed a number of English textbooks and found that most of them only taught how to accept invitations. It seems unrealistic to pretend we will automatically accept invitations. So, for this week's teaching tip, we will include an activity to help students practice refusing invitations. You could combine this with a pragmatics lesson (if you believe in them) or use the pragmatics from your own country.

Materials: Two weekly schedules (copied out of a date book or seven horizontal boxes; one for each day of the week) with days of the week labeled. Each schedule should have different pictures of an activity drawn for each day (e.g. draw a tennis racket under Monday on one schedule and a bicycle under Monday on the other). The idea is to give a different schedule to each member of a pair.

Procedure: Pre-teach refusals (e.g. "I'm sorry but I have to _____. Thanks for inviting me, though." or "I told (name) I would _____. Maybe we can do it next week" etc.) You might want to leave a scaffold on the board.

Divide the students into pairs. Give each member of the pair a different schedule. Students should look at the schedule and take turns asking each other something like "Would you like to (whatever picture represents) on Monday?" The other student should refuse, looking at his or her schedule for the reason.

Alternative: A better, more communicative idea would be to let students make their own schedules and do the same activity in small groups (however, make sure they don't just draw a picture of school for 5 days). If they happen to have the same activity on the same day, they can either accept the invitation or make up a lie.

Classroom Speech

This week's section on classroom speech deals with excuses. Before we begin, think about what you do or say when a student is late to class. Do you prefer the student come talk to you right away or slip into their seat so they don't disturb the class? Here in the U.S. (as discussed above) excuses are typical and expected. In an ESL class, lateness and excuses often provide an opportunity for spontaneous discussion. Here are some examples of things a teacher might say in front of the class or after class.

- Hello, Marina, you're late today. What happened? Is anything wrong?
- Sue, you're tardy again. Do you have a pass? (pass: note from teacher or office)
- (after class) Ryo, you were rather late today. Did you miss the bus?

Common excuses for being late:

- I missed the bus.
- The bus was late.
- My alarm clock didn't go off.
- I had a doctor's appointment.
- I didn't feel well this morning so I came late.
- There was a traffic jam/ We got stuck in traffic.
- I was helping my teacher/ finishing a test.
- I got called to the office.
- I was at the clinic (nurse's office)/ in the bathroom.

Accepting an excuse:

- Well, never mind today/this time but next time, try to be on time.
- It doesn't matter just this once, but try not to be late again.
- I'll let you be late this time, but next time bring a pass/ note from your mother.
- All right, but you'd better not be late again.
- Okay, but could you please try to be on time in the future?

Chastising a student:

- Well, you should have come on time.
- Well, you shouldn't have been doing that.
- Next time you should get up earlier.
- You should have asked someone to tell me.
- You are supposed to bring a pass/note if you are late.

Getting back to work:

- Right! Back to what we were doing.
- Let's get on with the lesson.
- Let's get back to work.
- All right then, we'll go on with the lesson.

Well, that's it for this edition of Teacher Talk. I hope you and your students have a productive week. Don't forget to let us know your opinions and comments about the newsletter and keep sending in names of colleagues and friends. Mahalo for your support.

Until next time,

Sarah Toohey and the CAPE family