

ESR' s Polite English Course: an Approach to Understanding Language Appropriacy

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Abstract: This report describes the objectives and methods used in one of the mini-courses offered at Tokushima University and sponsored by the ESR program. This course is entitled ‘Polite English,’ and will consist of six 45- minute sessions. The purpose of the course is to better prepare students to identify culturally sensitive situations and enable them to interact with the appropriate language in the appropriate register. This will be achieved by providing students the tools that encourage them to incorporate and interpret verbal cues, vocabulary, and body language relative to the environment. The student should also become better aware of cultural differences and how those can affect behavior. North American cultural norms will be the primary basis.

1. Objectives

In order to achieve full literary competence when interacting in a foreign culture, grammatical competence and discourse competence is often insufficient in conveying thoughts, emotions and purpose. This is particularly true with casual conversations that necessarily require an exchange of personal information. Even as benign a statement as ‘I’ m hot’ may contain a number of intended or unintended nuances. Is this statement just a comment or is the speaker asking the listener to open a window? Is this an indication that the speaker wants to end the conversation, or change the subject? To fully understand the implication of the statement, the listener must understand its sociolinguistic context. Is the speaker in the above example an unknown passenger on a bus, your boss, or a girl you are out with on a second date? All of these factors must be

considered in forming appropriate responses in carrying out meaningful conversations or actions. Assuming that the parties have a fundamental understanding of the target language, miscommunication is very often the result of a misinterpretation of cues. This course will attempt to help resolve some of that.

2. Methodology

Language is formed within a specific cultural context, which it cannot be separated from. Therefore all speakers of a second language have a basic understanding of its cultural background. However, that context is interpreted (or misinterpreted) through the student’s own cultural perspective. In addition to this, often a student’s primary exposure to modern culture is through media such as movies, or You Tube, which in most cases are perfect examples of how best not to behave in any given context. This course begins with an awareness of these limitations through a discussion of stereotypes, cultural taboos and expectations. This will be followed by a series of hypothetical situations that the students will be required to role-play. To ensure that the student understands the impact that the speakers’ relationships have on the choice of language, a variety of different roles, objectives, and complications will be introduced into the acts. The acts will be followed with peer review, evaluations and discussion. Prior to the role-plays, there will be a short dialogue to establish the objectives of the situation, and a review of the formulaic and routinized expressions that would be generally appropriate under most conditions. For example, an

apology begins with a formulaic utterance such as, 'I'm sorry.' This may then be followed by an explanation, an offer of repair, or a promise of non-recurrence. Based on the nature of the offense, damage incurred, and the victim, most of this language will vary. Of course, attention will be mostly placed on how the students respond to the unique qualities of their situations, not simply the recollection of past expressions. Since the course is very short, and in the interest of making it most relevant to the students' needs, students will be provided with a list of topics to choose from. Each week will focus on one or two of those topics.

3. Conclusion

Choosing the appropriate register and incorporating all the verbal and visual cues expected in culturally sensitive situations is a tremendous task that native speakers even struggle with. The purpose of this course is not to attain perfect mastery, but to help develop an awareness of the sociocultural and sociolinguistic differences that exist between Japanese and English in order to provide the students a better understanding of English speaking environments. This will be achieved through a combination of discussion, a review of applicable customs and expressions, and role-plays. As a result, students should be better prepared to interact with English speakers in the proper context using appropriate language with respect to generally accepted etiquette standards. Attendance in this course should help students to minimize unintended pragmatic failure and avoid communication breakdown in a variety of different social situations.