

the more common uses of irony and some of the verbal and nonverbal cues that enable us to identify the trope's use will then be briefly outlined. As we proceed, those parts that could be incorporated into an approach to teaching irony will be identified.

Justification for teaching irony

So why teach irony at all? No time will be spent on attempting to convince the reader that irony should be high on their list of priorities of language points that need to be taught, but it will be strongly suggested that it has its place. If language is essentially a tool by which meaning is transferred from A to B, it is important to bear in mind the fact that much meaning is conveyed indirectly. Irony is an example of an indirect speech act in which certain inferences need to be made to access the intended, or at least what we believe to be the intended, meaning. So, can this be taught? The assertion here is that it can; or at least that it is possible to heighten the awareness of our students to the use of irony in the L2. Because irony is an indirect form of language, meaning retrieval is highly dependent upon a reading of the context. To this extent, it is important that students learn to trust their reading of the context – here used in the broadest of senses to include knowledge of the world, of the speaker's values, of the way gestures and affect display and so on inform our interpretations – even when the verbal message appears to be in conflict with it.

The importance of context

That is not to say that a reliance on context alone is

guaranteed to lead us to the intended meaning, after all, defining context itself is a difficult problem. Understanding of context is always to some degree idiosyncratic, but certain elements can be shared. In telling a joke or using irony, the aim is to open up access to that shared context, or common ground. When this is attempted cross-culturally, there is, naturally, a higher risk of failure in this respect. Humour, according to Apte (1985) is “deeply embedded in cultural context” and as Davies Evans (2003) points out, the socio-cultural knowledge, schemas, associations, assumptions and presuppositions that constitute our particular cultural perspective are likely to represent points of departure or difference. One such point of departure that may form a barrier to effective communication is related to what counts as an appropriate context for the use of irony, not least because students from cultures significantly different from that of the language studied may have a very different notion of what is an appropriate context for the use of irony, especially when it is used jocularly. This point is particularly pertinent within the classroom setting in which the student-teacher roles and expectations about the relationship between teacher and students may not be shared, and may indeed lead to miscommunication.

Because of this reliance on context, any discussion of irony naturally falls within the bounds of pragmatics, a point with which Nelson, Mahmoud, and Waguida (2002) concur in their cross-cultural study of comprehension of indirect requests, in which they note the importance of understanding social conditions, under which umbrella they include place, status, gender, age, relationship of interlocutors and social constraints. In the following section a few standard

pragmatic accounts of irony will be considered and assessed in terms of how they can inform our approach to teaching this particular use of language.

Statistical justification for teaching irony

The findings of the research carried out by Deborah Tannen (1984) and by Raymond Gibbs Jr. (2000) may be regarded as justification enough. Tannen's research, which was a systematic analysis of conversational turns, revealed that irony constitutes 7% of the sum of turns between 20-30 year-olds in the U.S. The research conducted by Gibbs, based on informal conversations between college students in the U.S. supports the findings of Tannen, in that irony accounted for 8% of the conversational turns. This is a significant figure, especially if we consider that, not to have an awareness of irony could mean that we fail to understand 7-8% of a conversation.

Cross-cultural justification

Irony and the frequency of ironic turns vary across cultures and situations. For example, Davies Evans, referring to Hofstede points out that, "the typical international student from a more authoritarian culture, brings expectations and attitudes about appropriate roles of teacher and students that preclude establishing the necessary context" (Nelson et al., 2002): For example, there are likely to be rules related to its use at a funeral as opposed to a business meeting in contrast to a party, that may show variation across cultures. However, if the assumption that a significant number of English language learners will be engaged in conversation with a

native speaker of that language at some stage is a reasonable one to make, an aptitude for recognizing irony would seem to be at the very least helpful. After all, the ability to communicate with native speakers of the L2 is surely an important element of communicative competence; that is, language teachers are essentially concerned with maximizing the interpretive and productive expertise of students in the target language. In another sense, the language teacher's role is to prepare students in such a way that the incidence of successful cross-cultural communication is maximized, and that of cross-cultural miscommunication is kept to a minimum. It may be argued that native speakers are less likely to use irony in interactions with learners of English as a 2nd language. That may or may not be the case, but native speakers may only avoid producing irony if they judge their addressee to be unreceptive to it. Recalling that irony is an indirect form of speech, the observations made by Holtcroft (2007) in his paper on L2 comprehension of indirect, or as he terms it, "implicit" speech acts, are useful. He discovered that it was not necessarily the case that L2 learners were unable to recognize the intention of native speakers' indirect utterances or speech acts, but that they often merely exhibited slower processing times. Surely as language instructors, part of our role is to help students to accelerate their processing of indirect speech, something that can only be done by creating the appropriate environment and providing the necessary guidance. Scaffolding is crucial to this guidance process, and Davies Evans (2003) noted in her study that native speakers in interactions with even elementary level students took the lead in providing this scaffolding, and thereby facilitated jocular exchange.

Irony and its effects

It may, of course, be argued that if a learner of English as a 2nd language cannot infer the meaning from an ironic utterance, meaning can simply be conveyed through a direct use of the language. But this is to miss the point. If a message conveyed directly were to have the very same effect on the addressee as a message conveyed by way of an ironic utterance, surely nobody would ever bother to go to the extra effort of communicating in this way. Use of irony generates a number of additional effects and it is used to achieve certain predictable ends. These ends will be examined more closely in due course, but for now Pinker's observations in *How The Mind Works* (1997) about humour as a means of separating the in-group members from those persons outside the group appear pertinent. Those persons who recognize the ironic intent of another's utterance are naturally drawn together, whereas those who fail to notice it are to some extent excluded. In the case of the L2 speaker, this may not be intentional on the part of their interlocutor, but may nevertheless be the result. Inclusion in the group, whether that group is the class or a group of friends, is closely related to Dornyei's notion of cohesion and its impact on student motivation. Although irony is often associated with an in-group and can be seen as exclusive in some ways, this is not necessarily the case. Humour in the classroom can be a valuable tool in respect of the class dynamic and overall motivational levels of the class as a group. In his book *Laughing Matters*, Peter Medgyes (2002) provides a range of activities whose aim is the development of student skills in understanding humour, and argues that humour is an ideal way of building bridges between cultures. Humour, of which

irony is a kind, provides a platform for understanding and friendship that can lead to greater cohesion in the classroom. Cohesiveness, according to Dornyei (2001), is one of the basic conditions of a framework for motivational strategies.

Understanding irony

To understand more clearly what irony is, two working definitions, which are largely complimentary, though by no means perfect, will be introduced. The first definition comes from Abraham's Glossary of Literary Terms (1981), the second from Muecke (1972): a seminal scholar on the nature of irony.

Verbal irony is a statement in which the implicit meaning intended by the speaker differs from that which he ostensibly asserts. Such an ironic statement usually involves the explicit expression of one attitude or evaluation, but with the implication of a very different attitude or evaluation. (Abrams, 1981)

Irony involves a contrast between text and context whereby an utterance or written sentence such as "I'm very fond of George" must be "contradicted by the context of facts" if it is to be taken as being ironical. Ironical uptake is very often dependent on the addressee's knowledge of the facts. Contradiction for Muecke is a key element of irony, but he notes that other features of irony that may help us to recognize an utterance as such, include self-contradiction, exaggeration, innuendo, and ambiguity. (Muecke, 1970)

To illustrate these definitions, a simple anecdotal example of irony, which the author of this paper is responsible for producing, arguably ill advisedly, will be discussed. The context of this example is a discussion between the teacher and a small group of three students who had been taking a special course to help improve their TOEFL scores. The teacher knew two of the students well as he had taught them previously. He was also aware that one of the three students had registered for another course he was teaching this semester. The teacher asked the students why they were in the building and they explained that they were studying for the test. He then asked them about the duration of the special course and they informed him that it had lasted about 3 weeks. The teacher then commented by saying, "It must be a lot of fun". This prompted the students to look at each other with rather confused expressions on their faces before one replied, "No, not really". The teacher then felt compelled to explain that he was joking, which prompted laughter, indicating understanding on the students' part.

It is clear from this episode that the literal meaning of what was said was at odds with, or conflicted with, what was meant. For the students, however, understanding the literal meaning of what was said appeared to mark the end of their processing of the remark. This suggests that L2 students are less likely to question the speaker's sincerity, whether they agree with the statement or not. Also, it appears that the verbal message was being interpreted with minimal dependence on contextual factors, suggesting that the literal meaning overrides other interpretations in the L2. Admittedly, no further investigations have been conducted to verify the truth of this, but intuitively, it seems to be the case.

Worth noting is the possible influence of the teacher role, and preconceptions about what constitutes appropriate behaviour on the students' interpretation.

Irony is often used as a *safe* method of criticism in that, should the addressee take offence at our comment, we can always claim sincerity; that is, that the literal meaning of our utterance was intended. For instance, were the TOEFL instructor to overhear the teacher's comments and pick up on the irony, he or she would likely be upset, and justifiably so, and may even feel compelled to confront the teacher. To diffuse the situation and save face for both, the teacher could state that he meant literally what he said. In a similar way, L2 speakers may feel that their face is threatened by the potential for misunderstanding/miscommunication. They are therefore intuitively more likely to fall back on the safety net of the utterance's literal meaning. Research designed to verify the truth of this hypothesis would be an interesting avenue to explore.

In the example introduced above, there is a touch of hyperbole with the use of "a lot of fun", which has the effect of foregrounding the irony. Intuition suggests a potential clash between "TOEFL" and "fun", which is heightened by the intensifier "a lot of". This intuition can be supported with the use of a corpus. In fact, using the Cobuild Concordance & Collocations Sampler for a concordance search on "test+fun" and "exam+fun" caused look up errors and there were no matches. This was not unexpected since the average person's schema for studying for an exam is unlikely to admit *fun* as one of its most prominent features, and since TOEFL is essentially nothing more than study for an exam, it is more likely to include feelings of tedium, stress and hard

work. In fact, looking at the following results of a further search in the Cobuild Collocations Sampler, these intuitions about *exams* are confirmed: “which are often worsened by **exam** nerves and tension”; “on career options outside the retail trade. An **exam** anxious, career clueless student”; “of puberty in girls or boys. Mimulus (a kind of plant)—for **exam** nerves”; “furiously inhale the key books just before an **exam**”. In short, exams frequently exhibit negative associations or negative semantic prosody (Louw, 1993).

Fun then, we can conclude, clashes with TOEFL, which is far more likely to be associated with nerves, tension, anxiety and so on. The use of the intensifier “a lot of” therefore serves as a further sign that “fun” is not meant sincerely. The question of what the teacher was trying to communicate by using this ironic utterance is a question that remains to be fully answered. It depends largely on the inferences made, but it is not at all certain that even the addresser had a full understanding of what those inferences might be.

The Abrams and Muecke theories of irony given above are useful in that they provide us with some notion of the function of irony as an evaluative use of the language. Also, they point to the contradiction or conflict characteristic of irony, and we learn from Muecke (1970) that there are certain key features that accompany irony, such as hyperbole and ambiguity, both of which are in evidence in the example given above. However, these definitions do not really reveal much about the inference process involved in understanding irony. By turning our attention to two pragmatic theories that have been employed in the pursuit of an account of irony, it may be possible to take a step closer towards an understanding of how inferences are drawn.

Two pragmatic theories and irony

The definitions above provided a partial account of irony, but they do not really reveal much about the process of drawing inferences or about what we are actually doing when producing ironic utterances. Two pragmatic theories will now be considered with the hope that they might provide some insight into how the irony trope might be taught. Let’s look first at the Maxims of Paul Grice, a philosopher whose short account of irony has had a far-reaching influence on subsequent work of linguists in this area. The following maxims follow the terminology used by Grice in his 1967 series of papers *Logic and Conversation*:

***Maxim of Quantity:** concerns the degree of information normally demanded. Participants should be as informative as required; but not more than is required.*

***Maxim of Quality:** concerns truthfulness. We should not tell lies, for instance.*

***Maxim of Relation:** describes normal expectations or relevance*

***Maxim of Manner:** concerns clarity. We should avoid obscurity, ambiguity, prolixity, and be orderly.*

Non-adherence to the conversational maxims above reveals a great deal about a speaker’s intended meaning and is therefore an invaluable tool with regard to making inferences. Non-adherence to the maxims may be a straight violation, in which the speaker does not intend the addressee to recognize that a maxim has been broken; or it might be a

flout, which is when a maxim is purposely broken, but the non-adherence is meant to be recognized by the addressee. Returning to the TOEFL example above, the maxim of quantity has not been violated. The same cannot be said of the maxims of quality, relation & manner, however. We have said that *TOEFL* and *fun* clash semantically, and it is for this reason that the maxim of relation is flouted. Similarly, we infer that the speaker's description of study for TOEFL is not accurate, that is, it is not a true representation of the average student's image of TOEFL training. As noted above, the students apparently fail to recognize the flout of the maxim of relation mostly due to the identity of the comment's producer, i.e. an English teacher. This is understandable and begs the question of how/why the teacher could have expected the students to recognize the ironic intent. The answer to this most likely rests on the fact that the teacher was making an attempt to empathize with the students, who were, after all, sacrificing a considerable amount of their summer vacation to study. But, as a teacher, putting himself in the students' shoes and empathizing or taking up the contextual position of the students and mildly criticizing the language study they were engaged in, was clearly inappropriate and not what the students would have expected. We can take from this section the ideas of relation, quality and manner all of which are *teachable*. Also, the notions of empathy and expectations may, to some extent, inform an approach to teaching irony.

In terms of the conventional theory of *speech acts* (Austin, 1962), recall that there are three levels of communication:

1. Locutionary Act – the act of uttering
2. Illocutionary Act – the act performed in saying something

3. Perlocutionary Act – the act performed as a result of saying something

The locutionary act of the teacher in the above example was simply to utter the comment “That must be a lot of fun”. The illocutionary act is not so simple, however. Taken literally, what act is performed by saying “That must be a lot of fun”? It seems to amount to a positive assessment or evaluation of a situation. The test of prefacing an utterance with “I hereby...” would license “I hereby judge”, “I hereby determine...” or “I hereby consider...”, for example. Yet this is not the act performed, which, as suggested above, is more of an act of mild criticism, or negative assessment, and “I hereby insinuate...” might be a better fit. In terms of Speech Act Theory, this counts as a breach of the felicity conditions of the utterance, which is a characteristic of indirect speech. This apparent conflict between speech acts, or at least the failure of one speech act in favour of another, is a feature of irony. This can be seen clearly in the following example:

A teacher calls on a student who, despite a warning, has continued to talk to his neighbour and asks him what he has just said; the student, who has no idea, answers: “Well, uh, ...”. The teacher retorts: “Correct so far”.

Here the teacher is apparently praising or encouraging the student, but the context tells us differently and that the teacher's implicit speech act is an act of admonishment or chastisement—he is scolding the student whilst at the same time avoiding losing face himself. From this brief discussion, we can take the idea that one speech act often stands in for another in an ironic utterance.

Analysis of speech acts leads to the next part of this paper, which involves a very brief survey of the common uses of irony in everyday communication. As has already been seen, irony is used to criticize, whether weakly or more vehemently. It is used also to disparage (even oneself) and complain. Conversely, it can be used to praise and to empathize with another. It can also be used jocularly or acerbically. When teaching, or raising the awareness of our students to the use of irony, it is important that we pay attention to appropriateness, both in terms of frequency of use and in relation to the addressee and their relative level of authority.

The clash between context and the literal meaning of what is uttered is certainly one important indicator of irony. But what are the other cues that help to signal the intended interpretation? Hyperbole has already been mentioned, but we should also include understatement (litotes). In terms of face-to-face verbal irony, affect display also plays a crucial role, as can other nonverbal factors such as gestures. Inflection, the way we modulate the pitch of our voice also serves as a cue to our ironic intent.

How to teach irony: outline of an approach

The question of whether irony could be taught was asked at the beginning of this paper, and answered in the affirmative. However, this answer was accompanied by a slight caveat; that *teaching* irony involves raising the students' awareness of it and their ability to recognize and understand it. So how can irony be responsibly taught? Obviously, lecturing our students on the different accounts of how irony may be understood would not be advisable, so how can their

awareness of the trope be raised and how can they be helped to both understand it and be capable of producing ironic utterances of their own? Truth, relevance, speech acts (being indirect), hyperbole, litotes, facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice: how might these elements feed into activities designed to practice comprehension and use of irony?

Appendix 1 is a lesson plan for teaching irony that will be explained briefly below. The lesson plan incorporates some of the theoretical issues that have been discussed above and its objective is to guide the students towards the recognition of irony. As noted above, context is vital to an understanding of irony, which is an indirect form of speech. In part one of the approach to teaching irony, therefore, the emphasis is on taking account of the context of a series of examples of irony. The students are simply instructed to read each example sentence and fill in a table that tells them who, where, when, why and what. Having broken down the context in this way, it is then necessary for the students to learn to take account of it. In terms of *ironic contexts*, mismatches or clashes are a common feature, and students should be instructed to identify any elements within their context tables that exhibit such clashes. For each example of irony, the teacher should have a set of questions prepared that enables them to guide the students towards the appropriate interpretation. The overriding purpose of these questions is to encourage students to question the sincerity of what is stated in these examples.

In order that a person's utterance might be judged as being purposely insincere, certain signals are necessary. These signals can take the form of linguistic-contextual mismatches in the form of hyperbole. Hyperbole can be created through

lexical choices or the use of intensifiers or superlatives. Students should therefore be encouraged to analyze the language of each example of irony to heighten their awareness of this aspect of irony. Hence, in the lesson plan, the students are asked to look at antonyms and synonyms for the out-of-place *lucrative*. In this way, the students can learn to assess the linguistic choices made, whether apparently good or not. This is clearly an important step towards appreciating irony and concurrently, learning *how to be ironic*. If a word choice is judged to be inappropriate, the addressee has then to determine the nature of this inappropriateness, whether it be intentional or otherwise and, if the former, what the desired effect is. The question prompts in the approach to teaching irony are designed to heighten the students' sensitivity towards the use of irony.

Irony is very often used in a critical way and it is important to both make students aware of this usage and provide them with practice in using it in this way. Hence, the writing review in the approach to teaching irony. Students need to be made aware or how to use the language ironically, and one way of doing this is to begin with the literally meant sentence and to adapt it as in the example given in which "The service was absolutely terrible" is modified so that it becomes, "The waiter was so perfectly well-mannered I thought he might even smile at one point." By having the students share their reviews and discuss them, they have a chance to check their understanding of irony and to gauge their ability in producing ironic utterances.

Finally, role-play can be used to provide students with practice in using irony and signaling its use through non-verbal cues. If students can learn how to employ nonverbal

cues such as affect display and intonation, they should naturally be more able to identify irony when they encounter these cues in the future in irony-favoring situations.

Conclusion

By focusing on elements from definitions and theories of irony, as well as general observations about the characteristics of irony, it is possible to devise a strategy for teaching this difficult trope. The approach as briefly outlined above and given in full in the appendix below, incorporates the notions of opposition and conflict that tend to accompany irony, as well as heightening the students' awareness of some of the typical techniques involved in producing ironic utterances, such as the use of superlatives for hyperbolic effect and the use of nonverbal communication techniques such as tone of voice. Although as yet untested, it is proposed that the approach outlined, adapting elements of the theory to heighten the students' linguistic awareness, would be successful.

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Appendix 1

Teaching Irony: An Approach

1. Begin with an example of irony either in the form of a video, text, or your own example. Ask the students to listen/read and answer the question words (who, where, when, how, why, when, what).
 - i. Yeah, Frisbee-golf is so lucrative, I mean, I do it for the money and nothing else.
 - ii. I mean, this is what, the fourth time she rejected him, but he asked again because obviously you don't stop there.
 - iii. Gus just graduated from high school and he didn't know what to do. One day, he saw an ad about the Navy. It said that the Navy was not just a job, but an adventure. So Gus joined up. Soon he was aboard a ship doing all sorts of boring things. One day, as he was peeling potatoes, he said to his buddy, "This sure is an exciting life."
 - iv. One can barely await the best-selling book detailing the absolute hell of enduring the harsh conditions of a single cell on a restricted housing unit for 21 days... without a camera.

Example (i)

Who	A person who plays Frisbee golf
Where	?
When	?
Why	For the large amount of money that can be won
What	Frisbee golf

2. Ask students to look at the different parts of the context. Do any parts seem not to fit? Are there any mismatches or clashes? Do you believe the speaker? Have students think about shared knowledge. Ask students about the sports in their country that make money. Ask students about sports such as badminton and table tennis to find out whether they are “lucrative”. Have a brief discussion about shared knowledge, when it is culture-bound and when it is shared between cultures.
3. Ask students to look at the language carefully. First, focus on the adjectives.

Lucrative

Have students identify synonyms and antonyms of lucrative and define this word. Which has the strongest meaning *lucrative* or the synonyms?

Synonyms: e.g. profitable, worthwhile, money-making

Antonyms: e.g. unprofitable

Looking again at the contextual information, ask the students to select the adjective that they associate with Frisbee golf.

4. Ask students to look for any other words that increase the strength of the sentence such as “very”.

Elicit: so

Have students identify synonyms and antonyms of *so*.

Synonyms: e.g. really, tremendously, intensely

Antonyms: e.g. slightly, a bit, a touch

Explain exaggeration/hyperbole and point out that this is

sometimes used as a sign that an utterance is meant to be ironic. Brainstorm other ways of exaggerating. Also, explain understatement/litotes and how this can also be used to indicate an ironic intention and brainstorm other ways of understating.

5. Explain the word “sincerity” as having a meaning close to truthfulness. Ask the students to look for any words or phrases that show the speaker is being sincere.

Elicit: I mean

Ask students to judge whether or not the speaker believes what he says.

6. Have students look at some other examples of irony (ii-iv). They should analyze them in the same way as above:

Who	
Where	
When	
Why	
What	

Question: Are there any mismatches? What are they?

Adjectives	Synonyms	Antonyms

- Are the adjectives stronger or weaker than the synonyms?

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- Do the adjectives or antonyms best fit the context?
 - Are any words used to increase or decrease the strength/force of the utterance? What are they?
1. Have students discuss the function of the irony in each of the examples. Is it used to criticize, to praise; is it used in a self-disparaging way, and so on?
 2. *Writing a review*
 - i. Tell students that they are going to write a review of one of the following: a movie, a restaurant, a holiday
 - ii. Put the students into pairs and have them think about what expectations they have from a holiday or when going to a restaurant.
 - iii. Ask the students to write down as many potential bad points as they can, related to their chosen focus.
 - iv. Explain that these sentences express the direct meaning. Instruct the students that you would like them to write a review using as much irony as possible. Model a sentence or two to show how it could be done. Point out that the importance of establishing the context in their reviews, e.g. “The service was absolutely terrible” becomes: “The waiter was so perfectly well-mannered I thought he might even smile at one point.”
 - v. Students read out their reviews and discuss how the ironic meaning was achieved.
 3. Role play
 - vi. Alternative: A letter of complaint
 - i. Explain that irony is not only signaled through the language choices that we make, but also by how we utter the words and through other nonverbal cues.
 - ii. Model a few examples of this using intonation, affect display and gestures
 - iii. Explain that you would like the students to create a role-play in which they should try to use as much irony as possible.
 - iv. Have the students work out the context in as much detail as possible using the Wh-words as a guide.
 - v. Students then work on building a dialogue in which one or two of the participants use irony to criticize, evaluate negatively, make a joke, praise etc.
 - vi. Ask students to use as many of the techniques or cues as they can
 - vii. Have each group perform and conduct feedback on how the ironic meaning was produced.
 - viii. Finally, discuss with the class the effect of irony on the audience or addressees. Does it have a positive influence on the group? When does it fail to make the group closer? What are the dangers of using irony too often?