

Introducing Pragmatic Awareness at Low Levels

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Level: Elementary and upwards

Time: Ten to twenty minutes at a time

Resources: Mood-cards, simple course-book dialogues, role cards

Goal: To raise awareness of communicating more than what is said

Description of the activity

Pragmatics, among other things, is the study of communicating more than what is said (Yule, 1996). This is easy to illustrate on simple examples not only at higher levels but also at a stage when the learners barely speak a word of the foreign language. In the awareness raising activities described below, the “more” that is communicated is the speaker’s mood.

The term ‘mood’ is used here in a broad sense of the word. Speakers are always in a definable mood, they are happy or angry, anxious, worried or upset, bored or eager, impressed or wanting to impress. The fact that the mood influences what we say and how we say it does not come as a revelation to the foreign language learner, but awareness needs to be raised and practice needs to be provided in the foreign language classroom. Via simple conversational exchanges students can practice expressing their real or assumed mood and can observe how the mood changes their own language and the language of their conversational partner.

The activity described here consists of different phases and it is possible to do only some or all of them in one class. In fact, it is a series of activities, which can be presented as a whole or in successive parts. The way it is described in the procedure

section suggests a gradual lead into pragmatic awareness. In the focus of the activities are so called 'mood-cards.' These can be made using magazine cut-outs, photocopies of pictures in books, 'happy-face' type simple drawings as suggested by Wright (1979 pp. 123-124), or can be word-cards as well.

In the activity, the students practice scripted and non-scripted dialogs. Although textbook dialogs are intended to be realistic we find, at a closer look, that they are stripped of everything that would make them real. In order not to be accused of any "ism," course-book writers have learnt to be cautious. The language is carefully chosen, it is polite and friendly, neutral to the border of sterility. The characters in the books have everything but character. However, we all know that anything we say is influenced not only by our character but also by our temporary mood, our attitude towards the person we are speaking to, the power relation between the speakers, and by the situation itself. Going to the office in the morning, one might utter the greeting "Good morning" in a dozen different ways. When said to the newspaper boy in the street, the neighbor whose party kept the whole street awake last night, the boss with a threatening look in his face, the colleague, who looks a bit distressed or the secretary looking particularly pretty today, the receptionist who one passes hurriedly, the executive who always pretends not to hear, and so forth, the short phrase carries a range of additional meanings. Behind the simple sentence "Mother, I'm home, " there is a whole life story. When doing "mood" activities, teachers can kill two birds with one stone: they can raise pragmatic awareness on the one hand, and on the other, they can make a routine practice of the speaking skill be a lot more fun.

Procedure

1. The teacher puts the letters “Mm...” or “Oh..” on the chalkboard and asks the students to try to read out loud what they see in as many different ways as they can. Volunteers demonstrate. After three or four different intonation patterns the teacher asks the volunteers to repeat what they said before, and asks the class to put in words what they have heard. Expected interpretations for “Mm” can be: pleasure (“Delicious”), astonishment (“What?”), disagreement (“No, no”), desire (“Let’s have that”). How the interpretations are verbalized depends on the level of the group. This phase is closed by the teacher eliciting from students that it was the intonation of the speaker which carried the meaning.

2. The teacher brings in three or four pictures of people’s faces depicting different facial expressions, for instance anger, happiness, excitement, boredom, and asks the students to say simple words or phrases as the people in the pictures would. Words to practice on could be practically anything, e.g. “Money, ” “Ice cream, ” or “Here.” One student says the chosen word in a particular way and the others match one of the faces to it. The phase is closed by the teacher introducing 4-6 more mood-cards.

3. In this phase the students get a simple dialogue, preferably one they know from their course-book. Two students act out the dialogue as they normally would. Then the teacher asks two different students to “choose a mood” and act out the dialogue again. Following each scene students attempt to identify in what mood each speaker was. After a few turns the students reflect on how the adopted mood affected the language that was used. Comments usually refer to the lengthening or shortening of utterances, the rhythm

of speech, and the intonation of the sentences. At somewhat higher levels, the students usually change the text of the scripted dialogs slightly by adding a few words or phrases.

4. At very low levels phase four should follow on a different occasion. At higher levels this phase can actually replace phase three. Students are given role-cards (Figure One) or are asked to act out a scenario (Figure Two). Course-books written with the functional-notional approach (e.g. *Functions of American English* by Jones & von Baeyer, 1983) contain a wide variety of situations that can be used successfully, such as giving opinions, refusing invitations, and complaining. When students are familiar with their roles, a mood-card is given to everyone. These can be picture cards or word cards describing a particular mood or attitude. In the feedback session students can be asked to reflect on how the “mood” affected their language use. An interesting alternative is to set up the role-play in the usual way and then stop it while it is still in progress and slip a mood-card into the students’ hands (Figure Three).

Rationale

At the dawn of the communicative approach many teachers believed that first the language, i.e. structures and lexis, had to be taught using traditional methods, and only then could the students be initiated into communication. Although many years have passed, that attitude has not completely disappeared from the foreign language teaching scene. Today, it seems, pragmatics is being given similar treatment. If pragmatic awareness raising is given any emphasis in the foreign language classroom, it tends to be at the upper intermediate or advanced levels, often as high as the non-native teacher education classroom. In the above activity I intended to demonstrate that there is no

reason for the delay, as awareness raising can start at low levels, it can be effective, and what is more, it can be fun.

Teacher Resource

Figure One: Role-cards

Student A. You have just moved into a new apartment. In the morning you try to make yourself a cup of coffee, but realize that you have no sugar. See if you can get some from your next door neighbor.

Student B. You live in an apartment block. It is early in the morning. Someone rings the bell. Answer it.

Mood-cards: St A eager to make friends, St B terribly tired with a hangover

Or: St A in a real hurry to get to class, St B a sad and lonely person.

Figure Two: Scene - Making requests

Using post-it labels the teacher gives everyone a tag to say who they are, e.g. : boss, boss's wife, receptionist, colleague, visitor, elevator boy, best friend, a child, etc.

On a card, everyone gets a list of favors to ask for, e. g.: answer the phone, lend an umbrella, lend \$200, make some tea, feed the cat, call a cab, etc.

Possible moods: friendly, rude, busy, tired, nosy, jealous, etc.

Format: Students mingle, anyone can go up to anyone. It is up to the students to decide whether they grant the favor or not.

Figure Three: Changing the mood

A student is trying to find a place to rent, calling different numbers from ads in the paper. The conversation partner is the owner of a place to rent. Students usually start out the conversation in neutral and polite language, but if the landlord's mood-card says that this is the fiftieth call today and he is fed up having to repeat the same things all over again, or the student's card says that it is getting late and he has to find a place today no matter what, the conversations take interesting turns.

References

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- Yule, G. (1996). Pragmatics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.