

## **Appropriateness in Terms of Address**

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**Level:** EFL, Intermediate to Advanced, teacher preparation course, study abroad preparation course

**Time:** 45 minutes

**Resources:** Handouts and Teacher's notes (see Teacher Resource)

**Goal :** To learn to be aware of troubles caused by inappropriate choice of address forms.

### **Description of the Activity**

The instructor first introduces the topic of address forms to the learners by defining what terms of address mean and giving examples in the learners' native language as well as their target language. After learners understand what address terms are, the instructor distributes handouts to the class. The learners read the written situations to grasp their meaning. The instructor invites the learners to ask questions if the descriptions of Situations I and II are not clear.

#### Situation I

A professor, Jane Smith, was lecturing in a university class on psychology. A

foreign student from an Asian country started to ask a question to the professor saying, 'Mrs. Smith, I have a question...' The professor apparently felt upset and said 'There is no Mrs. in this classroom.' What did the professor want to say?

### Situation II

Laura is a college student currently looking for a summer internship position.

She found an interesting position in the internship brochure as an assistant at a

health science research center. She wrote a letter to the head of the center

applying for the position. According to the internship brochure, the name of the

head of the research center is M. S. Hess, M.D. She addressed her letter to Mr.

M. S. Hess. A few days later, she received a phone call from M. S. Hess, the

head of the research center. Laura was notified that she did not get the position.

In addition, she was told to be more careful the next time she addresses someone

in a letter. What did Laura do wrong?

The instructor divides the class into three- to four- member groups. The students meet in a group to answer the questions at the end of the situations. After 10-15 minutes, each group reports what they have been discussing to the rest of the class. The instructor summarizes

their opinions and leads the class to further discussion by encouraging the learners to think of the similar troubles and episodes from their daily life regarding the choice of address. The teacher may wish to introduce the key points from the Teacher Resource.

## **Procedure**

Total time: 45-50 minutes

1. Introduction (5 minutes): Explain what the terms of address are. Give examples.
2. Pre-group discussion (10 minutes): Read situations on the handout together in class. Clarify difficult words to help students understand the situations. Learners write down their ideas.
3. Group discussion (10-15 minutes): Divide the class into groups. Learners exchange ideas.
4. Class discussion (10 minutes): Each group reports the ideas to the class. Instructor summarizes learners' ideas. Discuss similar experiences.
5. Conclusion (10 minutes). Conclude the discussion with the key points of the lesson (see Teacher Resource).

## **Rationale**

Terms of address are the important linguistic items reflecting the speaker's attitude toward the hearer and the speaker's interpretation of their relationship with the hearer.

Inappropriate choice of the address hinders good communication between the speaker and the hearer.

It is generally believed by English language learners that the American address system is based on the choice between first names and last names with titles such as Mr., Mrs. , Miss and Ms. Although this description is true to some extent, it is dangerous to oversimplify the system. In some cases, it is rather difficult to grasp when to choose one form over another, and the criteria for deciding in English is sometimes different from that in the learner's native language. It is important for learners to be aware of the difficulty and the risk of an inappropriate choice of address.

At the same time, English language teachers in EFL settings tend to underestimate the importance of this issue due to the lack of exposure to real English

communication and this issue tends to be neglected in the EFL classroom. The activities described above will be particularly useful for students in teacher training programs and study abroad preparation courses.

### **Reflections and Caveats**

The procedure described above deals with the two situations at the same time, but they can be introduced and discussed separately. This series of interactions can be done in the learners' native language or their target language.

### **Teacher Resource**

#### Situation I

This is a situation where the choice of "Mrs." by the student was inappropriate. Jane Smith wanted to let the student know that she did not want to be addressed as Mrs. Smith. It would have been more appropriate to address her as Professor Smith or Dr. Smith, if she holds a Ph.D. degree.

The American system of address is generally described as a choice between first names and *Mr./Mrs./Miss/Ms.* with last names. In a job situation, occupational titles such as doctor and professor, are also possible. In a university setting, *Mr./Mrs.* with last names

would be rarely used for professors. If they are used for professors, they sound like the professors' gender and marital status are acknowledged more than their occupations as professors. *Mr., Mrs., Miss, and Ms.* are the titles which describe gender, and *Mrs.* and *Miss* show marital status as well.

There are some times where the students are invited to call professors by their first name. In this case, the use of first name will be appropriate, but if this is not the case, the professional title with last name will be a safe choice. This will show the speaker's acknowledgement of the professor's occupational position.

### Situation II

This is a situation which actually happened to an American student. Laura should not have addressed the head of the research center as Mr. Hess because the head was a woman. M.D. stands for a medical doctor, and when Laura saw M. S. Hess, MD., she unconsciously thought Hess was a man. It is still a frequently occurring assumption that professional positions such as doctors, professors, lawyers and directors are held by men.

However, this is clearly not always the case.

The lesson to learn here is that addressing a woman by a man's title is inappropriate

and often offensive, although Laura did not mean to be rude. There are two things to be careful of in Laura's situation. First, Laura could show her consciousness of gender equality by not assuming that doctors are always male and using "Mr." automatically. Second, Laura could show her recognition of the head's professional accomplishments by using "Dr. Smith" instead of "Mr./Mrs. Smith." In Laura's case, it would have been safe to address the head of the research center as Dr. M. S. Hess in the letter.