

CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS: Spot the Problem!

Preliminary Information

Level:

- Intermediate and above

Time:

- 15 minutes

Resources:

- Role cards written or collected by the teacher before class

Goal:

- To discuss and raise students' awareness of pragmatic violations in the areas of openings, closings, and requests

Activity

Description of the activity

This activity was implemented with an advanced group of Hungarian EFL learners. Before class, I selected some role-play activities from a resource book that involved two people in a formal or informal encounter. I designed some "problem cards" as well, each of which contained a pragmatic error.

In class the topic was introduced and two students were asked to volunteer to perform a role play. They received role cards and one or both of them were given problem cards, according to the situation. While they were reading their cards, I asked the rest of the class to observe the role plays carefully because there would be something wrong that they should spot.

Here are some examples of the role cards:

- Person A: You have just moved to England for a study trip. You don't know too much about the town, public transport, health facilities, etc. You meet the neighbor in front of your house. Ask him or her questions to find out where you can find the post office, how you can buy tickets for public transport, and what kind of entertainment facilities there are in town.
- Person B: You have lived in the same town for 10 years. You have found out that a foreign university student has just moved in next to you. You meet him or her on the street. Give information about public transport, entertainment facilities, etc.

The problem cards for the above mentioned scenarios and other situations state the following:

- You live alone, have a lot of spare time, and love speaking to people. Try to maintain the conversation as long as you can; ignore your partner's intention to leave.
- Be very direct in your questions. When asking for information, avoid question forms such as Could you please tell me...? Instead use more direct ways to ask for information, such as Please tell me where....
- You don't know that How are you? is a greeting. When your partner asks you this question, give a detailed account of how you really are.

After the dialogues were performed, students shared their observations with the class. The discussion involved issues such as pre-closings, formal and informal forms, and opening and closing the conversation politely. By seeing the actors' surprise, uneasiness, or embarrassment when their communication partner committed a pragmatic error, students were amused, but they could also consider the seriousness of these errors.

Procedure

1. In preparation for the class, the teacher prepares role cards in matching pairs, appropriate to the students' level. These can be from their regular course book, exam prepa-

ration resources, or written by the teacher. In addition to this, the teacher prepares problem cards (see previous page), each containing a pragmatic mistake.

2. The teacher asks two students to volunteer to perform a role-play dialogue, then gives them the role cards as well as the problem cards. Other students are asked to observe and spot mistakes.
3. The pair performs the role play, and other students jot down their observations.
4. A whole class discussion follows in which all the students share their observations with each other. The teacher elicits the forms or phrases that caused the problems and possible ways to overcome them. Any problems created by differences between the students' native language(s) and English can also be discussed.
5. If time allows, more pairs can be asked to perform other role plays.

Rationale

Research has shown that EFL learners and their teachers tend to undervalue the seriousness of pragmatic mistakes and consistently ranked grammatical errors as more serious than pragmatic errors, whereas ESL learners and teachers showed the opposite attitude (Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei 1998). This tendency points out how important it is to draw EFL learners' attention to the seriousness of pragmatic violations.

Concerning openings and closings, Dörnyei and Thurrell (1992:37) give more than 20 phrases used by native speakers to bring a conversation to a close (e. g., I'd better let you go, I (really) must go). However, in their study of closings in ESL/EFL textbooks, Bardovi-Harlig et al. (1991) found that very few of the textbooks they examined showed complete conversation closings. Likewise, I have found that the conversational models in EFL course books I've examined contained few full openings and closings. What this means is that few dialogues contained a "post-opening" (such as How are you?), a pre-closing, or shutting down the topic. Adjacency pairs in openings and closings were frequently incomplete as well. It is necessary, therefore, to complement the input of course books in the EFL classroom and draw students' attention to the importance of pragmatic issues.

As for pragmatic errors concerning politeness, in many languages, for example, German, Russian, Spanish, French, and Hungarian, there are formal and informal forms marking the degree of politeness and the forms of address. There are relatively clear-cut sociocultural rules about when to use which form, which may be hard to grasp for a native speaker of English. Similarly, for EFL students of these languages, it can be problematic how to express politeness in English.

This activity was designed to provide a tool for this purpose. The fact that the students have to perform the dialogues and observe each other can help raise their awareness of pragmatic violations. At the last stage of the class, different forms of greetings and the concept of pre-closings can be discussed.

Alternatives

1. The activity is designed as a whole-class activity. In the case of large classes it can be done as group work. In this case the teacher asks two people from each group to perform the role play, which the group discusses, then a spokesperson reports their observations to the whole class.
2. The problem cards quoted contained general examples of pragmatic violations, but these can always be tailored to the students' needs and problems (considering their native language or proficiency level, for example). Depending on the focus of the task and the situation, both people involved in the role play can receive problem cards, or it can be only one of them with the other student reacting to the violations.