

CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS:

Appropriateness in terms of address

Preliminary Information

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 help students become aware of problems caused by an inappropriate choice of form of address

Activity

Description of the activity

The instructor introduces the topic of address forms to the learners by defining what terms of address mean and giving examples in the learners' native language and target language. After learners understand what terms of address are, the instructor distributes handouts describing situations involving forms of address. 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. who is teaching in this classroom!" What was the professor telling the student?

Situation II

Laura is a college student currently looking for a summer internship position. She found an interesting position as an assistant at a health science research center. She wrote a letter to the director of the center applying for the position. According to the center's brochure, the name of the director of the research center is M. S. Hess, MD. Laura addressed her letter to Mr. M. S. Hess. A few days later, she received a phone call from someone in M. S. Hess's office notifying her 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 groups of 3 or 4 students. Each group attempts to answer the questions at the end of the situations. After 10 to 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 similar troubles and episodes from their daily life having to do with choice of address. The teacher may wish to introduce key points from the Teacher Resource (below).

Procedure

1. Introduction: Explain what the terms of address are and give examples (Ms, Miss, Mrs., Mr., Dr., Professor, etc.)
2. Pre-group discussion: Read situations from the handout together in class. Clarify difficult words to help students understand the situations. Learners write down their ideas.
3. Group discussion: Divide the class into groups. Learners discuss possible answers to the questions posed in each situation.
4. Class discussion: Each group reports their answers to the class. Instructor summarizes learners' ideas. Students discuss similar personal experiences.

5. Conclusion: Conclude the discussion with the key points of the lesson (see Teacher Resource).

Rationale

Terms of address are important linguistic mechanisms by which a speaker's attitude toward and relationship to another person are reflected. Inappropriate choice of the address hinders good communication between the speaker and the hearer.

It is generally believed by many English language learners that the system of address in English is based on a choice between first or last names, preceded by forms of address such as Mr., Mrs., Miss, or Ms. Although this perception is accurate to some extent, it oversimplifies the system. It is often difficult for English learners to choose one form of address over another, and to understand what the criteria are for deciding the appropriate form to use. It is important for learners to be aware of the risks associated with choosing an inappropriate choice of address.

English language teachers in EFL settings tend to underestimate the importance of this issue, which is related to lack of exposure to real English communication. The activities suggested are particularly useful for teacher training programs and study-abroad preparation courses.

The procedures described have students working on two situations at the same time; however, teachers may choose to introduce and discuss each of them separately. Student discussions can be conducted either in the native or the target language.

Alternatives

Situation I

This is a situation in which the choice of Mrs. by the student was inappropriate. Jane Smith was telling the student that she did not want to be addressed as Mrs. Smith. It would have been more appropriate to address her as Professor Smith or, if she holds a doctoral degree, Dr. Smith. The system of address in English is generally described as a choice between first names only or a gender-suitable form of address (Mr., Mrs., Miss, Ms) with the last name. In a university setting, however, using these forms of address with last names is generally considered inappropriate for professors because to do so is to place greater weight on the person's gender and marital status than their professional status. Increasingly on some college campuses students are explicitly invited by instructors to address them by their first name. However, unless this happens, it is unwise and highly inappropriate to do so. If a student is uncertain about the appropriate form of address, there is nothing wrong—at least in the United States—with asking the instructor how he or she would like to be addressed.

Situation II

Laura made two errors. First, she should not have addressed the head of the research center as Mr. Hess because the position was actually held by a woman. When Laura saw M. S. Hess, MD., she mistakenly assumed that Hess was a man. To assume that professionals such as doctors, professors, or lawyers are men is very risky in today's world in which women increasingly are highly educated professionals. Laura's second error was her failure to recognize that MD stands for medical doctor, and whatever the gender of the person being addressed, Dr. is the only appropriate form of address.