

“Actually, Steve, the deadline was Friday of last week, not this week...” Polite ways of correcting or contradicting our conversation partner’s assumptions

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Level: Intermediate and upwards

Time: 50 minutes (with an additional 50 minutes for more advanced discussion)

Resources

The teacher will need two sets of conversations, the first for completion and modeling by the teacher, the second set to be completed by the students. In both, only the first lines of the conversations are used. In the first set, teachers use the first lines to open the conversation followed by second lines to model conversational turns with and without the use of *actually* to respond to or correct the first turn. The second set of conversations are to be finished by the students themselves to practice the conversational skill of contradiction.

Goal

To raise learners’ pragmatic awareness towards an important conversational function and to help them to be aware of the negative impression brought about by the non-use of *actually* (or other softeners of contradiction or correction; see also the previous chapters by Malamed and Wennerstorm). To learn to produce corrections or contradictions prefaced by *actually*.

Description of the activity

The teacher presents the learners with the opening (first) lines of conversations where the second line will carry the pragmatic function of correction or contradiction in relation to the first speaker's statement. In one set, the teacher's corrections or contradictions do not carry the pragmatic marker *actually*. In the second set, however, the corrections are introduced by *actually*. The learners are asked to observe the exchanges. They will have to listen for clues in order to be able to answer the questions:

1. How do the two conversations strike you?

(Teacher makes the statements sound helpful, cooperative, nice, and polite when *actually* introduces them; alternatively, (s)he makes them sound abrupt, non-cooperative, unhelpful, impolite when the statements are not prefaced by *actually*.)

2. How would you feel if somebody gave you either of those two different answers or reactions?
3. What seems to account for the difference in the overall impression the second type of statement produces? (Should learners fail to identify the function of the marker, the teacher may point it out by the help of guided questions.)
4. (As an optional, later stage, a comparison of learners' native language(s) and the English language realization of the correction may take place.)

Theoretically, students themselves could act out these conversations but teachers can also use their voices or certain sound patterns which are likely to accompany the pragmatic marker to greater advantage in creating the more favorable outcome, a smoother, more

polite response. After the preliminary stage the learners can be provided with similar exchanges and allowed to practice in pairs or in groups.

Procedure

1. Students initiate exchange.
2. Teacher responds with correction or contradiction, not using *actually* in the response.
3. Students again initiate exchange.
4. Teacher's response contains the pragmatic marker *actually*.
5. Discussion of results of learner observation. Relying on learners' impressions and observations, teacher sums up the conclusion: an interpretation of the pragmatic marker's function.
6. Students practice with open-ended conversations.

Rationale

Correcting or contradicting someone in English is a rather 'dangerous' task for any learner of English. These communicative acts carry an enormous risk as they are face-threatening acts (FTAs, Brown and Levinson, 1987). First and foremost, although not exclusively, they threaten hearer's positive face in that they indicate that speaker does not care about hearer's feelings or desires by expressing disagreement (correction or contradiction), for example . These acts make the hearer appear to be "wrong or misguided or unreasonable about some important issue, such wrongness being associated with disapproval" (Brown and Levinson, 1987). It is exactly because of these heavy "threats" on hearer's positive face that speaker has to find "mitigating" devices that could

minimize the apparent threat. This is one of the most compelling reasons why polite ways of disagreeing with someone, correcting or contradicting a person's opinions or background assumptions should be taught to learners in the formal setting of a language class. We do not have to stretch our imagination to see what adverse effects an exchange without discourse markers such as *actually* in it can have on our conversation partner and, consequently, on our chances of holding on to that conversation with its advantages for us as authentic language input. As Thomas (1983) said, "If a non-native speaker appears to speak fluently, (i.e. is grammatically competent), a native speaker is likely to attribute his/her apparent impoliteness or unfriendliness, not to any linguistic deficiency, but to boorishness or ill-will. While grammatical error may reveal a speaker to be a less than proficient language-user, pragmatic failure reflects badly on him/her as a *person*....Pragmatic failure, then, is an important source of cross-cultural communication breakdown."

It is generally true that learners do not find it easy to acquire the pragmatics of the target language on their own. As is the case with other pragmatic features of second and foreign languages, *actually* does not appear to be immediately salient to our learners. It seems necessary, then, that we should provide our learners with authentic input on one way that speakers of English soften corrections and contradictions. As a result of our joint work we may hope that, in the long run, our learners will be able not only to identify the function(s) of the pragmatic marker *actually*, but perhaps as importantly, they will develop a better understanding of the target culture.

Teacher's Resources

Short authentic dialogues are the basis of this exercise. As this is a phenomenon that does not easily lend itself to easy, spontaneous observation, NNS teachers are advised to rely on authentic material only. Exchanges of the following type can be found in various sources. As an EFL teacher I collect many examples from overhearing conversations by or with native speakers both at home and when I travel. For example, I recently heard many examples between an American mother and her teenaged daughter. The mother was tentatively "probing" the daughter about things she thought the daughter was going to do and the daughter kept "correcting" her, using *actually*. Such contradictions are also available on English language television, especially on interview shows where the host is likely to antagonize his/her conversation partner. Some textbooks also have lists of possible disagreement markers, but in that case the teacher would have to rely on a native speaker to help invent statements that students can disagree with. (See for example, Dörnyei and Thurrell (1991) *Conversation and Dialogues in Action*, 1992, p.91.) The following exchanges are examples that can be used by teachers.

1.A: Steve looks like he's good at sport.

B: Actually, he's not.

2.A: Do you mind if I smoke?

B: Well, (!) actually, I'd rather you didn't.

3.A: Where in the States do you come from?

B: We're not Americans, actually, we are Canadian.

4.A: Did you enjoy the film last night?

B: Actually, I didn't go to the cinema.

5.A: So you're going to the local music conservatory?

B: Actually, there's no music conservatory in this town.

For more advanced students, recordings (of native speakers from TV, film clips, etc.) can be used with the students. The importance of context cannot be overemphasized as these corrections react to a speaker's expressed (or unexpressed) assumptions. No single sentence examples can be worked with here.

Alternatives and Caveats

It is possible to find easier language input where correction or contradiction could refer to simpler things like likes and dislikes, colors, age, makes of cars, etc., making it suitable for lower levels. However, I would suggest that it is the very nature of the process of examining and finally modifying or correcting another person's opinions or background assumptions that makes this kind of exercise better suited to higher levels.

On a more advanced level, careful observation and discussion could reveal other, not entirely unrelated functions of *actually*:

1. It acts as a filler, giving the speaker a moment to think about the topic. On closer inspection it might turn out that the speaker needs this time exactly because (s)he needs to think about the correction;
2. It sets off the most important words effectively;
3. It may mark a shift in the topic;

4. It allows the speaker to go on record with the FTA, marking out the contrast or contradiction as such.

References

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