

‘Leave A Speech Act After The Beep’: Using the Telephone to Teach Pragmatics

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Level: This activity can be adapted for beginning through advanced levels

Time: Out-of-class: 15-20 minutes (for transcription)

In-class: 45 minutes (Depending on the amount of time available, this activity can be adapted for shorter or longer times)

Resources

Telephone answering machine or voice mail system

Goal

To learn to make requests, extend invitations, and offer congratulations (or other speech acts); to learn how to open and close telephone conversations when leaving a message.

Description of the Activity

In this activity students have the opportunity to become discourse analysts by studying speech acts left on answering machines/voice mail systems. Rather than teaching speech acts through the use of scripted dialogues or decontextualized examples, this activity puts the focus of learning in the hands of the students as they search for language patterns in a database of language samples which they themselves have collected.

The database of speech acts is created by having the students ask a native-speaker friend to call their home and leave a message on their answering machine or voice mail. The native speaker is given a card which briefly mentions the type of message to leave.

In my English class we are studying how Americans talk on the telephone. Could you please call me and leave a message on my answering machine asking to see my notes from yesterday’s class that you missed? My telephone number is 555-5555. Thanks!

Although the general speech act is given to the native speaker, there are no explicit instructions about what to say when leaving the message. Depending on the number of native speakers available, students can ask from one or up to ten native speakers to call and leave a message. (If 15 students each collect five messages, that will yield a database of 75 speech acts!) Students then transcribe their collection of messages which are used later for individual, paired, or group analysis.

The teacher can also facilitate discussion of the speech acts by highlighting various linguistic or discourse features about the messages such as verb forms, politeness strategies, and openings and closings. Students can practice leaving messages on each other's answering machines and compare their messages to those left by native speakers. In sum, this activity creates a sizeable database from which students can work as discourse analysts, searching for both consistent patterns of language use as well as sociolinguistic variation about speech acts in the samples.

Procedure

1. Choose one or more speech acts for students to investigate (see sample below). Depending on the size of the class and the time available the students can all study the same speech act or be divided into pairs or groups and assigned different speech acts.
2. Write down the instructions for the callers which the students can later distribute to their native-speaking friends. One example is given above. The instructions may vary depending on the focus of the lesson. Remind students not to pick up the phone!
3. After recording the messages on their answering machines, each student should make a written transcription of each caller's message.
4. Students can analyze the data individually, in pairs or in groups and can later discuss the

results with the entire class.

In order to get a more complete picture of how speech acts fit into the larger discourse activity of leaving a message, encourage students to look also at the beginnings and endings of the messages. That is, investigate the openings, pre-closings and closings of the phone calls.

a. What greeting is used is used by the caller? (*hello, hi, hey*)

b. What form of personal identification is used by the caller? (*It's John, It's me, This is Dr. Smith's office*)

c. What pre-closing signals are used by the caller? (*Well, I guess that's it; See ya soon*)

d. What closing is used by the caller? (*Bye, Later, Ciao*)

e. Compare the openings, pre-closings, and closings with other dialogues in the students' text and with other recorded conversations. How are they the same/different?

f. If possible, have students record the same interactions with speakers of their native language. Discuss any similarities/differences between the opening, pre-closing and closing signals in the recorded messages with those of their native language.

5. If possible, students can bring in the tapes of the messages so that examples can be played and paralinguistic cues such as intonation, pausing, hesitation, etc. can also be studied.

Rationale

Language teachers are often encouraged to use authentic pieces of discourse in the curriculum; however, collecting and analyzing extended segments of discourse can be cumbersome and impractical for a classroom setting. This activity remedies that problem by using answering machine messages, which naturally elicit a smaller stretch of discourse while maintaining their integrity as a complete speech event. The method of data collection is fairly straightforward since the short length of each message makes for easy transcription. Yet the

database of discourse samples can be recycled for a variety of teaching and learning opportunities.

By encouraging students to become discourse analysts, this activity helps students to develop their critical thinking skills as they search for patterns of language use in the speech samples. They not only develop a greater sense of how language is used in context, but they also gain a greater understanding and awareness of language variation.

Alternatives and Caveats

This activity allows for considerable variation in its implementation. For example, teachers can assign different speech acts to different groups in the classroom thereby increasing students' exposure to more than one speech act. Also, the data collected can be recycled at other times to study other discourse features such as openings and closings, formulaic expressions, or politeness strategies. The data can also be used to examine specific linguistic structures in context such as specific verb forms, article usage and question formation or paralinguistic elements such as intonation, pausing, and pacing. By altering specific aspects of the prompt, students can also learn about sociolinguistic language variation as callers alter their messages to meet the changing demands of the prompt (e.g. requesting \$10 versus \$100). Results can be compared with descriptions found in the students' textbook and/or with their own L2 production. Students can practice leaving messages on each other's answering machines and compare them with each other and/or with the NS data. Finally, by collecting L1 samples students can engage in cross-linguistic comparisons of speech acts in their native language versus English.

Teacher Resource

Some suggestions for speech acts:

<u>Making a request:</u>	<u>Extending an invitation:</u>	<u>Offering congratulations:</u>
1. for money	to a party	on the arrival of a new baby
2. for car/bike	for a date	on a recent wedding
3. for a book	to a lecture	on an engagement
4. for a ride to class	to the movies	for someone's anniversary
5. for a food item (sugar)	to lunch/dinner	for HS/college graduation
6. for clothing/jewelry	to a concert	on the purchase of a new house
7. for a computer	for coffee	on a pregnancy
8. for a CD, videotape	to a sports event	on a new job

Additional Reading

Hatch, E. (1992). *Discourse and Language Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Riggenbach, H. (1999). *Discourse Analysis in the Language Classroom: Volume 1. The Spoken Language*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.