

How Are You, Auntie Elizabeth?

Melinda Edwards, Pázmány Péter University, Hungary

Level

Intermediate and above, class with common first language, EFL or ESL.

Time

15 minutes

Resources

Dialogues in the students' mother tongue, written or collected by the teacher before class

Goal

To discuss pragmatic differences between the students' mother tongue and English, with special attention to openings and closings

Description of the Activity

In this section the implementation of the activity with a particular group will be described. The class was an advanced group of Hungarian EFL learners at Pázmány Péter University. In preparation for the class, I wrote a short dialogue in Hungarian that posed different pragmatic problems, such as different forms of greeting, leave-taking and forms of address.

In class, I introduced the topic to the students and told them that they were going to translate a dialogue from Hungarian into English. It was made clear that the dialogue might appear to be simple and "exaggerated," but the point was to bring up a range of problems and issues. The class then was organized into pairs and students were given slips of paper with the dialogue. They were asked to work in pairs for about 5 minutes.

Following this, one pair was asked to perform their dialogue, while other students listened and noted problems and their alternative solutions.

The situation and the literally translated dialogue is presented here:

An elderly woman and a man in his twenties meet in the street. They have known each other for some years, but very superficially. Translate the following simple dialogue and think about how it would be different in England/ the US.

A: Good morning Auntie Elizabeth!

B: Good morning John!

A: How are you?

A: Well, I'm not too well. I've been struggling with backaches recently... and you know my salary is quite low, we can hardly make ends meet at the end of the month.

B: Oh, well. I think this is all the government's fault, party so and so would do a much better job...

A: Hmm, maybe. Well, here is my bus. I have to go. Bye.

B: Hello.

Short and simple as this dialogue may seem to be, it provided a very good opportunity for a thorough discussion concerning the pragmatic differences and problems between the two languages. In the discussion the following issues were brought up:

- In English *How are you?* is usually considered a greeting, and not a genuine question.
- Topics of financial state, health and politics are usually considered “taboo” in English unless close friends are involved. Bringing up these topics, a Hungarian speaker may seem rude to an English-speaking person, though the fact is that they speak English with the grammatical rules and vocabulary of England, but the pragmatic rules of Hungarian.
- *Hello* is not a leave-taking in English.
- You cannot address anyone “auntie/uncle” unless you are a child or they are your family members. In Hungarian and other languages a similar form is possible. As English does not have formal and informal forms, politeness has to be expressed by other means.
- In English you are required to shut down the topic and use preclosing when ending a conversation, in other languages speakers may finish a conversation “more abruptly.”

An interesting remark in the discussion was when students pointed out that although grammatically there were not any problems with the dialogue, it still “wasn’t English.” This pointed to the fact that language proficiency cannot be complete without knowing the appropriate pragmatic rules of the target language.

Procedure

1. In preparation for the class, the teacher writes a simple dialogue in the students’ mother tongue. Or, for authenticity uses an authentic opening or closing collected through note taking or tape recorder, or transcribed through English language TV or movies. This can be any dialogue containing greeting and leave-taking between two or more participants.
2. As a lead-in activity, the teacher can ask students to brainstorm “cultural” differences that exist between their mother tongue and English, in regards to degrees of politeness, greeting and leave-taking (formal and informal forms, the use of preclosings or lack thereof, etc.)
3. The teacher tells the students that they will get a dialogue in their mother tongue, which they will have to translate into English. The teacher asks students to pay attention to the pragmatic issues they have just discussed.
4. Students work in pairs for about 5 minutes.
5. The teacher asks one or two pairs to perform their dialogue, other students jot down the differences, problems, and comments.
6. A discussion follows when students share their observations with the class. This is also the stage when the teacher can raise students’ awareness to overlooked problematic issues.

Rationale

In the literature of pragmatics many studies have been conducted involving advanced learners of English as a Second Language (for an overview see Bardovi-Harlig, 1999). These

studies concluded the unsatisfactory pragmatic competence of advanced ESL learners, the “shock value” of which draws our attention to the importance of this component of communicative competence. In an EFL context, where there is even scarcer “natural input” than in an ESL setting, providing for these needs is essential.

This activity can draw EFL learners’ attention to pragmatic differences between their mother tongue and English they might not have been aware of. Concerning greetings and leave-takings, there are some issues that this activity can focus on, depending on the students’ mother tongue. The usage of *How are you?* as a greeting, for instance, may be a source of misunderstanding for EFL students. In other languages this phrase may communicate genuine interest in the other speaker’s well-being, and the EFL student might be surprised or worse yet, insulted when not given adequate time or attention to describe his/her stomach problems.

Another issue might be that English phrases, such as greetings, are used in other languages but take on a different role. In Hungarian, for instance, *Hello* has a different usage. As well as being a greeting, in Hungarian it is used as leave-taking as well. One can see many astonished native speakers’ faces when Hungarian acquaintances say goodbye with *Hello*, which is perfectly accepted in Hungarian. Translating the dialogue in pairs, performing it and discussing the problems may give students first-hand experience in these issues and deepen their understanding by letting them discover these rules themselves.

Alternatives and Caveats

1. Working with Hungarian EFL learners, I have designed this activity for their needs. However, it can be tailored to other first languages, and teachers can prepare the simple dialogues and the issues for discussion accordingly.

2. This activity was designed for a monolingual class. With multilingual classes, however, students with the same mother tongue can work together and come up with their solutions. At the next stage, an interesting discussion can follow among students of different mother tongues, comparing their observations.
3. Although the activity can be done at lower levels as well, as was mentioned under **Rationale**, advanced students often lack the necessary pragmatic knowledge that would “match” their high linguistic competence. For this reason, even advanced learners and teacher trainees have found this activity challenging.

References

Bardovi-Harlig, K. (1999). Exploring the Interlanguage of Interlanguage Pragmatics.

Language Learning, 99, 677-713.