

How Do You Say Good-Bye?

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Level: High intermediate to advanced.

Preparation: On-going

Time: The activity can be administered in 3 stages, each one being a separate lesson of 1 hour to 1 hour and 15 minutes.

Resources

Transcripts of naturally occurring conversations, preferably of interactional nature. Audio- and/or video-recordings of such conversations may also be used.

Goal

To gain confidence in conducting interactional conversations, with emphasis on conversational closings.

Description of the Activity

Adult ESL learners often experience difficulties with seemingly easy aspects of discourse and pragmatics such as conversation closings. Some of the problems appear to stem from the inability of an L2 learner to pick up on the closing signals of the interlocutor and/or to respond to these signals accordingly. The following instructional unit has been helpful to my adult students in gaining confidence in closing interactional conversational interchanges.

The teacher starts the unit by explaining that for the next 2-3 lessons, the students are going to work on developing a conversational skill many ESL/EFL learners find difficult, namely, closing a conversation without feeling awkward or rude. The students are going to use authentic conversations to learn some of the essential conversational moves.

The students break up in small groups and each group receives a transcript of a real-life conversation pre-recorded by the teacher. The conversations are spelled conventionally, but retain such spoken language traits as false starts, pauses, and repetitions. The students' task is to find out how English speakers achieve smoothness in the flow of small talk closings through discussion of authentic examples. The teacher guides the students by providing them with leading questions. In the process of their discussions, one of the main conclusions that the students are expected to reach is that English conversation closings are rather ritualized, and while there is a variety of ways to say "good-bye," the pattern itself is not very complex. The major steps in this pattern are:

- The speakers *indirectly* let each other know that they have nothing to add to the conversation. For example, they can summarize their point, reiterate the arrangements made, or comment on their pleasure in seeing the other communicant.
- The speakers confirm that they understand each other's intentions to finish the conversation, usually through the use of such utterances as "okay," "alright," "thank you," or "well."
- The speakers utter the leave-takings.

In order to give students a chance to practice the new skill in a controlled setting, the teacher asks them to prepare and perform a skit based on their transcript.

Now that the students are more aware of what elements constitute a closing section of a conversation, the teacher asks them to observe natural conversations on their own. The home assignment for the day is to listen to conversations outside the classroom, including those students themselves participate in, and pay close attention to the gambits people use to avoid

curtness in closing conversations. This task serves to heighten the students' pragmatic perceptions and increase their arsenal of closing strategies. The teacher asks students to report on their observations. Informal journaling incorporating the student's reflections on their learning progress can be a very effective way to see if the students are moving in the right direction and to provide them with individualized responses.

The next stage of this activity can be used for informal assessment of the students' progress in the acquisition of conversation-closing skills. This can be done either through skits or role-plays. In class, the teacher distributes cards with descriptions of communicative situations to small groups of students. If the students are to prepare a skit, each card will contain all the necessary information, for example, "Two classmates from the English Composition class run into each other in the park. One is walking her dog. The other is on the way to the gym. They stop to chat for a few minutes. Prepare and act out the conversation that they might have. Make sure that you finish the conversation in a friendly manner." If the students are to perform role-plays, each group member receives a card with a brief description of his/her role only. Role-plays are more challenging; however, they also bear more similarity to real-life conversations, in which the participants are not given "preparation time".

In the process of this activity, the students will acquire initial pragmatic competence in closing interactional exchanges and gain confidence in conducting small talk in English.

Procedure

1. Initial discussion of closings provided by the instructor
 - a. Collect samples of naturally occurring interactional conversations, transcribe them, and analyze their closing sequences (see Schegeloff & Sacks, 1973).

b. Divide students into groups of 3 or 4 and provide each group with a transcript (or audio- or video-recording) of one conversation.

c. Have students discuss the following aspects of the conversation:

Where is the conversation happening? What is its purpose? What is the relationship between the speakers?

How do the speakers let each other know that they are about to say “good-bye”? What formulas do they use to accomplish this? How do they avoid being rude and abrupt in closing the conversation?

Which utterances are leave-takings? How does the relationship between the speakers, their roles, the context of the conversation, and its purpose influence the choice of words for these utterances?

d. Have students role-play the conversation in front of their classmates and present the results of their discussions.

2. Student data collection, transcription, and discussion

This stage of the activity can be done during class time or as a home assignment.

a. Have students collect and transcribe one or two samples of interactional conversations.

Students can work alone or in pairs.

b. Emphasize that in their observations, students should look for conversational moves that allow the speakers to close their conversation in a polite, culturally acceptable way.

c. Have students report their observations in class. This can be done in several ways: individual presentations, journaling, or group discussion.

3. Production

- a. On index cards, write several descriptions of interactional situations similar, but not identical to those used at the previous stages of the unit.
- b. Divide students into pairs.
- c. Give each pair a card with a specific interactional situation. Instruct the students to prepare a skit or a role-play of the situation. Emphasize the importance of incorporating the essential elements of conversation closings in their act. Allow time for preparation.
- d. Have students perform their skits/role plays in front of the class.

Rationale

This activity allows L2 learners to observe specific elements employed by fluent speakers of the target language in conversational closings. It further allows for contextualized practice of these elements in skits and/or role-plays.

The purpose of using authentic materials for this activity is to expose students to real-life discourse. Close examination of textbook conversations and even dialogues from literary sources shows that while the written interchanges approximate the real-life ones in structure, they do not mirror them with 100% accuracy. This is especially true of closing sequences, which, should they be performed according to the textbook model, might be considered abrupt, and thus socially inappropriate outside the classroom.

The instructional approach based on the students' discovery of pragmatic conventions allows for a better internalization of conversational rules. Teacher guidance, however, is necessary at all stages of this unit.

Alternatives and Caveats

If the teacher is working in an EFL context, the amount of English conversation outside the classroom that both the instructor and the students are exposed to may be limited. In this

case, short scenes from English language TV shows, films, and educational videos can be used to introduce and practice conversational closings. However, one needs to be careful in selecting language samples from these sources – artificially created conversations may differ significantly from naturally occurring ones in their structure.

Whether the instructor chooses naturally occurring or pre-recorded language samples, students will need a lot of assistance during the first and second stages of this activity. Providing the students with a questionnaire worksheet that they will use as the basic guideline in their discussions and observations will facilitate their learning.

The activity itself can be tailored to develop pragmatic/discourse skills other than conversation closings. Conversation openings, turnover signals, bracket signals, and specific speech acts such as requests, invitations, refusals, etc. can be addressed in a variation of this activity. Depending on the students' need, the instructor may also limit the type of interactions addressed in this unit. Some of the possibilities may include closing formal or informal telephone conversations, finishing formal appointments (for differences between closing an interactional exchange and an academic advising session, see Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1992) or exploring cultural and pragmatic differences between conversation closings in the students' L1 and the target language norms. (An excellent example of such differences and their effect on communication is presented in Omar, 1993, which compares American English closings with those of Kiswahili.)

References

- Schegloff, E., & Sacks, H. (1973). Opening up closings. *Semiotica*, 8, 289 – 327.
- Hartford, B. S., & Bardovi-Harlig, K. (1992). Closing the conversation: Evidence from the academic advising session. *Discourse Processes*, 15, 93 – 116.

Omar, A. S. (1993). Closing Kiswahili conversations: The performance of native and non-native speakers. *Pragmatics and Language Learning*, 4, 104 - 125.