

E-mail requests

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Level: Intermediate to advanced

Time: 10 minutes in one lesson, about 20 minutes of homework for students, and about two hours in subsequent lessons

Resources

E-mail access (in or out of the classroom) for all students and teachers

Goal

To develop appropriate written request strategies

Description of the Activity

This lesson begins with requests written by the students. In this activity, written requests made via e-mail from the students to the teacher are used in order to illustrate various points of pragmatic appropriacy. Students individually submit their requests and the teacher puts useful ones together on worksheets and distributes them. The students then work in groups to analyze and revise the messages with advice from the teacher. Exactly which pragmatic points are taught is dependent upon what can be mined from the messages students write, but the teacher wields some control by pre-selecting the messages that will be analyzed in class. Messages that clearly show typical errors made by ESL/EFL learners work best. Messages containing appropriate structures that can be used as models are also useful. For example, in our class we selected the following request written by one of our students:

Hello Shelly!! If you think it's OK, please give me some source. I'll bring introduction and questions on Tuesday's class, so please advise me and give me some comments about that. So if you have any idea or suggestions about them, please tell me.

This message allowed us to focus on three important points with our students:

- 1) Overreliance on the word *please* to disguise speaker-centered, *me-* imperatives (*give me, advise me, tell me*);
- 2) Lack of politeness strategies that would allow for an easy refusal of the request (note the absence of modals and question marks);
- 3) And, on a positive note, the writer's skillful inclusion of if-clauses to signal acknowledgment of the request's imposition (*if you think it's OK, and if you have any ideas or suggestions*).

We have found that if students working in groups are given ample time to analyze

messages, they are often able to come up with such points on their own. Also, students appear to be highly engaged during this activity because it involves materials created by their classmates rather than a teacher or textbook writer.

Procedure

1. E-mail requests assigned as homework
 - a. Ask students to send you a message in which they make a request regarding any appropriate topic (e.g., a future class activity, a class party, an assignment clarification).
 - b. Assign a due date
 - i. Allowing at least one week will increase the likelihood of authentic requests as opposed to forced ones.
 - ii. Drop hints for possible requests during lessons that precede the due date. (For example, after a new activity, you might ask, “Was today's activity helpful? Do you want to do it again in a future lesson? If so, how can we make it better? If you have any ideas, please e-mail me.”)
2. Creation of worksheet (or OHP)
 - a. Sort through all the requests and choose ones from which a few easily grasped points can be illustrated and taught.
 - b. If available, include positive examples on the worksheet as well to serve as models.
3. Analysis of request messages
 - a. Distribute worksheets and have each student rate the messages according to appropriacy.
 - b. Put students in groups in order to compare their ratings with each other.
 - c. Tell students to support their ratings by explaining at least one clue in each message that helped them to decide how to rate it.
 - i. Circulate during this time so that you will know from whom to elicit remarks in the subsequent discussion.
 - ii. Listen for students using explanations based on the pragmatic rules of their native languages in order to address cross-cultural issues.
 - d. Discuss the worksheet as a class.
 - i. Elicit student ratings and explanations.
 - ii. Offer your own rating along with concrete reasons for your choices.
4. Revision of request messages
 - a. Have groups revise selected messages based on what they learned in the discussion.
 - b. Have each group share and explain one of its revised messages.

Rationale

Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) have found that non-native speakers' e-mail messages to faculty differ pointedly from those of native speakers, particularly in their lack of downgraders and acknowledgements of the degree of imposition of their requests. Because students have a lot to lose if they unintentionally offend their instructors, it is worthwhile to help students develop their abilities to make pragmatically appropriate requests when addressing faculty members.

The medium of e-mail has been chosen for this activity due to its rising status as a preferred medium of communication in institutional settings, and also because it allows the teacher to easily collate and edit student messages. Although e-mail requests from students to teachers may at first appear to be a relatively limited niche of communication, they fall within the broader category of lower-status to higher-status requests in institutional settings. Thus, lessons learned from this activity will not only be immediately relevant to students in their school settings, but also when acting as lower-status requestors in the wider spheres of work and officialdom.

Alternatives, and Caveats

This activity perhaps works best towards the beginning of a new class as a diagnostic tool because the open-ended nature of the assignment allows a wide variety of both anticipated and unanticipated pragmatic issues to surface. Also, it can easily be adjusted to focus on other written speech acts such as compliments, suggestions, or apologies.

It might be argued that the requests used in this activity are not very authentic because they were written in response to an assignment. However, if enough time is given for the assignment and if the teacher repeatedly suggests class-related topics for which students are likely to have real opinions and desires, then the authenticity of the messages will be enhanced. At any rate, we suggest creating a folder for saving all unsolicited e-mail requests from students because they are a great source of typical pragmatic problems that can be used for this activity and many others.

If students have not experienced many other pragmatic activities, they will likely focus on surface problems (e.g., grammar errors, spelling mistakes) when asked to analyze. One way to encourage learners to focus on pragmatic issues is for the teacher to edit the messages before distributing the worksheet. We prefer to simply remind the students to focus on the *mood* of the message and to analyze how that mood is created. Usually this leads to some extremely helpful class discussions about cross-cultural differences (e.g., differences in the assumed obligations of teachers, differences in politeness strategies) that are the roots of students' pragmatic problems in English.

Reference

Hartford, B. S. & Bardovi-Harlig, K. (1996). "At your earliest convenience:" A study of written student requests to faculty. In L. F. Bouton (Ed.), *Pragmatics and Language Learning*, Monograph Series, Vol. 7 (pp. 55-69). Urbana Champaign, IL: University of Illinois, Division of English as an International Language (DEIL).