

# **“That’s wrong!” – Improving the friendly discussion of controversial issues.**

*Lewis Malamed – Tokai University, Japan*

## **Level**

Intermediate. This series of lessons was designed specifically for intermediate Japanese college students in an EFL situation, but is easily adaptable to other situations.

Intermediate students are generally familiar with the basic activities of working in groups and doing presentations.

## **Time**

Four lessons, 90 minutes each (Note: As presentations comprise part of the sequence, the number of lessons will vary with the size of the class. This estimate assumes an approximate class size of 40 students.)

## **Resources**

Handout for conversation practice, peer evaluation sheets, and blank paper for dialogues

## **Goal**

To introduce students to a variety of pragmatic routines and lexical phrases employed in disagreements between peers.

## **Description of the activities**

### **Day One**

#### ***Activity 1, - Student mini-discussion and summary by teacher (30 minutes)***

Ask the students to discuss, in groups, what they would do if the following people were expressing an opinion with which they totally disagreed: a) their boss; b) their friend; c) their child

After about 10 minutes, get representative views from the different groups. This creates the opportunity to discuss how culture and status may affect the decision to express disagreement, the extent to which disagreement is expressed, and the choice of language used to express one's views. Explain that this unit will focus on arguments between people of similar status.

***Activity 2 - Dialogue Practice (35 minutes)***

Pass out handouts for phrases and sample dialogues. (see Teacher Resource)

Read each of the phrases and have the students repeat. Demonstrate how to adjust the strength of the disagreement with your tone of voice. The students then practice the model dialogues with a partner. A few students can model the dialogue. Topics that have worked well with intermediate EFL learners included: Smoking, Gun Control, Genetic Manipulation, Cloning Human Beings, Fathers should/shouldn't do more to take care of their children, Women should/shouldn't be paid the same as men, What people do within any country is/isn't the business of any other country, The government should(n't) provide free food and health care to the poor and the other citizens should(n't) help pay for it, Drinking is(n't) a problem in Japan. Two dialogues, one on smoking and one on gun control are included in the Teacher Resource.

***Activity 3 - Topic Selection (remainder of class time)***

Tell the students to brainstorm issues and choose a topic of interest to them.

Tell students that both sides of an issue must be expressed. They should create a list of points on both sides of the issue before the next class by talking to others about the issue. Students may want to exchange phone numbers so they can continue their

discussion. They will begin to write their dialogues when they come to the following class.

## **Day Two**

### ***Activity 4 - Dialogue Creation (90 minutes)***

The teacher explains that students are to create and perform, without reading, a four-minute dialogue showing disagreement between friends in which both sides of the argument are adequately represented. Tell students that that they must support both sides of the argument, and that since they are arguing with someone of approximately equal status, they can be neither too polite nor too rude. The teacher circulates around the class answering questions and offering advice about appropriate language and pragmatics. Students who finish early should begin practicing their dialogues. Remind them that they are not allowed to read the dialogues (some will try anyway). Their homework is to rehearse their dialogues, which they will perform in front of the class during the next class meeting. General advice about speaking in a sufficiently loud voice is probably a good idea toward the end of the class.

## **Day Three**

### ***Activity 5 - Dialogue Performance and Peer Evaluation (90 minutes)***

Pass out peer evaluation sheets. (see Teacher Resource) Determine the order of presentations and ask each pair doing a presentation to write their names on the board before they start. Remaining pairs will give their presentations during the next class. Collect peer evaluations after each presentation and place in a an envelope labelled with the participants' names, as this will save time later.

## **Day Four**

### ***Activity 5 (continued), Activity 6 - Mini-discussion (50 minutes).***

After presentations are complete, a debriefing activity occurs during which students have an opportunity to share their observations in small groups and report their conclusions to the class. Students discuss which presentations stand out in their minds, whether or not they think these discussions would actually occur in their native language, and how the language and routines used might vary. At this time, the instructor will have the opportunity to summarize the objectives and clear up any misconceptions about pragmatic routines and language choices.

## **Procedure**

Unit sections: (Time estimates allow some leeway for daily classroom functions.)

- 1. Student discussion and teacher summary (30 minutes on Day One)*
- 2. Dialogue practice (35 minutes on Day One)*
- 3. Topic selection (15 minutes on Day One)*
- 4. Dialogue creation (90 minutes on Day Two)*
- 5. Performances and peer-evaluation (90 minutes on Day Three; about 35 minutes on Day Four)*
- 6. Discussion among students and teacher debriefing (about 50 minutes on Day Four)*

## **Evaluation**

The unit is best evaluated as a whole, giving appropriate weight to participation in discussions before and after the presentations, as well as to peer evaluations. Each pair receives a unit grade. If one member did significantly better than the other, note the specific strong or weak points in a comment on the evaluation. Include peer evaluations

and a cover sheet with the grade and the teacher's comments in the labeled envelope, and give this to the students during the following class period.

### **Rationale**

The central idea in this unit is to move students from the familiar, learning and memorizing dialogues, to something more creative, expressing opinions in a dialogue they create using "lexical phrases" (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992), and finally to a meta-awareness of pragmatic routines. Students also have an opportunity to test whether pragmatics routines that exist in their native language can work in English. Kasper (1997) mentions that although positive transfer from L1 to L2 "can also facilitate learners' task in acquiring sociopragmatic knowledge," the students "...do not always make use of their free ride." She argues that there is "a clear role for pedagogic intervention...not with the purpose of providing learners with new information but to make them aware of what they know already and encourage them to use their universal or transferable L1 pragmatic knowledge in L2 contexts." In this unit, through dialogue creation and discussion of pragmatic issues, students can engage in this kind of hypothesis testing.

### **Reflections and Caveats**

1. When helping students with dialogue creation, I expected students to be either too rude ("That's wrong!"), or to be too polite. However, a third category surfaced as well, a particular type of negative transfer I like to call the "phantom limb." This is when a student struggles to create a politeness form that exists in the native language, but not in the target language. Students are often frustrated by being unable to find a suitable equivalent, and will twist and turn their dialogues in order to satisfy their pragmatic need. Not only is there a difference in the way a pragmatic goal is accomplished in another

culture, there is sometimes a different set of goals. Harmony may be preferred to argument, which may be associated with anger. An expression of politeness required in one culture may seem fawning in another. These are subtle issues, and encouraging students to develop a “meta-view” of these situations is more effective than dealing with them on the basis of language alone.

2. The use of the phrase, “We’ll just have to agree to disagree,” which appears in the sample dialogues, is probably not a high-frequency expression in English. However, the idea that such a resolution is possible is something that I wanted to implicitly introduce in the lesson. It is not necessarily a given that a non-resolution of conflict, however minor, is an acceptable outcome in every culture.

### **References and Suggested Reading**

Kasper, G. (1997). Can pragmatic competence be taught? (NetWork #6) [HTML document]. Honolulu: University of Hawaii, Second Language Teaching & Curriculum Center. Retrieved September 5, 2000 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.lll.hawaii.edu/nflrc/NetWorks/NW6>.

Tateyama, Y., Kasper, G., Mui, L., Tay, H., & Thananart, O., (1997). Explicit and implicit teaching of pragmatic routines. In L. Bouton (Ed.). *Pragmatics and language learning*, Vol. 8. Urbana, IL: Division of English as an International Language (DEIL), University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Nattinger & DeCarrico (1992 ). *Lexical phrases and language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## Teacher Resource

### Handout for Phrases and Sample Dialogues:

#### *Expressing Agreement and Disagreement*

##### Agreement

I agree.  
I think so, too.  
I'm in complete agreement with you.  
That's true, and...  
That's right, and...

##### Disagreement or Partial Disagreement

*Note: These expressions are common in the discussion of an issue:*

Well, maybe. But .....(Note that the word "Well..." often precedes expressions of opinion, especially disagreement. )

Well, that might be true, but...

Well, I think that....

Well, in my opinion, ....

Well, my feeling is that....

*Note: The following may show rather strong disagreement:*

I can't really agree with that. I think that....

Oh, I don't think so. I think that....

*Note: The following show rather strong disagreement:*

I don't agree with that. I think....

I completely disagree. I think that....

##### Questions about opinions

(The word "So.." often precedes a question about someone's opinion.)  
So, what do you think about....?  
What's your opinion about....?  
What's your feeling about...?  
What's your point of view about...?

How do you feel about the issue of....?

Do you have any opinions about...?

##### Expressions of opinion

I think people should...

I don't think people should...

People shouldn't .....

I don't think..... is a good idea.

In my opinion, people should(n't).....

From my point of view, \_\_\_\_\_ is(n't) a good idea.

I can see/understand \_\_\_\_\_, but I can't see/understand \_\_\_\_\_.

I don't think people should be allowed to .....

### **A Friendly Argument about Smoking** (Useful words and phrases in italics)

A: Hi \_\_\_\_\_ .

B: Hi \_\_\_\_\_ . What's happening?

A: Nothing much. I'm just watching a debate on TV. It's about banning smoking in public buildings.

B: Oh, yeah. I heard that that was going to be on. *So, what do you think about it?*

A: *Well, I don't think people should be allowed to smoke in public places, so I support the ban.*

B: *Really? I'm surprised. I'm a smoker, so I should have the right to smoke whenever I want.*

A: *But don't you think that non-smokers have rights, too?*

B: *Sure. You don't have to smoke if you don't want to. What's the problem?*

A: *Well, I think that I should have the right not to breathe smoke.*

B: *So why can't you just go outside if it bothers you?*

A: *I could ask you the same question. Why can't smokers just go outside if they want to smoke?*

B: *Well, smoking is part of my lifestyle. I can think better if I have a cigarette.*

A: *I can breathe better if I don't have to breathe smoke. Smoking is bad for your health. Doctors say that even breathing second-hand smoke can cause cancer.*

B: *Well, I'm a smoker, and my health is good.*

A: *Yes, but will it be good in fifteen years?*

B: *I hope so.*

A: *I hope so, too. Listen, I think we'll just have to agree to disagree about this subject. Do you want to watch the debate with me?*

B: *Sure.*

## An Argument about Gun Control

- A: Hi \_\_\_\_\_ .
- B: Hi \_\_\_\_\_ . What's up?
- A: Nothing much. Say, what did you think about those shootings at that high school?
- B: It was terrible. *We should just* ban all guns. That would solve the problem.
- A: *Oh, I don't think so.* If we banned guns for private citizens, only criminals would have guns. *Besides*, the right to own a gun is protected by our Constitution.
- B: The Constitution can be changed if people agree that it should be. Do you have a gun?
- A: No, but my father does. It's a rifle. He uses it for hunting. Are you against hunting?
- B: Why does your father need to hunt? You can buy food in a supermarket.
- A: My father isn't rich, so when he goes hunting, it can help feed the family. The meat is healthier, too. The meat you buy in supermarkets is from cows and chickens that have been fed some very strange things to make them grow faster and fatter.
- B: *Well, maybe. But what does that have to do with* kids in high schools shooting each other? They didn't get those guns legally. They were probably stolen. If we ban all guns, soon there wouldn't be any guns to steal.
- A: *I don't agree with that.* Criminals will always be able to get guns. *Shouldn't* private citizens *be able to* protect themselves?
- B: That's why we have police. Their job is to protect us. *We just need to* have more police to do the job properly. This isn't the Wild West anymore. Private citizens shouldn't need to have guns to protect themselves. There are just too many crazy people with guns these days.
- A: *Well, that might be, but I just can't agree with you about* banning guns completely.
- B: *Yeah, I guess we'll just have to agree to disagree.*

Please write your own dialogue. Consider these issues, or choose one of your own.

Smoking, Gun Control, Genetic Manipulation, Cloning Human Beings, Fathers should/shouldn't do more to take care of their children, Women should/shouldn't be paid the same as men, What people do within any country is/isn't the business of any other country, The government should(n't) provide free food and health care to the poor and the other citizens should(n't) help pay for it, Drinking is(n't) a problem in Japan, Your Own Subject.

- A: Hi, \_\_\_\_\_ .
- B: Hello, \_\_\_\_\_ .
- A:
- B:
- Etc.

---

**Peer Evaluation Sheet**

Names of speakers \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Topic \_\_\_\_\_ Could you hear the speakers well?

(Yes) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 (No)

What is one thing you enjoyed about the presentation?

What is one suggestion you have for improving the presentation?

Other comments?