

The Pragmatics Action Maze

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Level: High Intermediate to Advanced

Time: 50 minutes

Resources: A computer—preferably one computer for each group of three students

Goal

To learn to navigate requests by identifying pragmatically appropriate language.

Description of the Activity


This activity was developed using the authoring software, Toolbook. In this activity, called an action maze, students are asked to navigate two requests. The computer functions as a platform from which the situations, participants, and actual wording of the requests is presented. Using the information presented to them, students come to a consensus in small groups as to an appropriate course of action. In other words, students agree on what to do next and then click an icon to take them to the next screen. The action the students take may involve the particular timing of a request, the medium of the request (e-mail, telephone, in person), and the wording used to make the request.

Students are helped in navigating the action maze through the advice of the Idea Man: A clickable icon on each page that provides specific politeness strategies in each of the situations that the students encounter.


The protagonist in the pragmatics action maze is an international undergraduate in his first year of studies. Students are told that the protagonist's father is coming to the US on an unexpected business trip. Unfortunately, the visit coincides with a paper that is due the following Monday, and the protagonist must ask his economics professor for an

extension on the paper. Students work in groups to choose both the timing and wording of the request. As illustrated in Figure 1, students may opt-out of the request initially.

Figure 1. Opting-out of a request



A Paper for Dr. Smith



Hey! Click me, The Idea Man, for some help...

Your professor is at her desk reading through her notes. Class starts in a minute or two.

Now


After class

Talk to your professor now Talk to your professor after class

Start Over

In this particular screen, the Idea Man (the online help) provides minimal guidance, as illustrated in Figure 2.

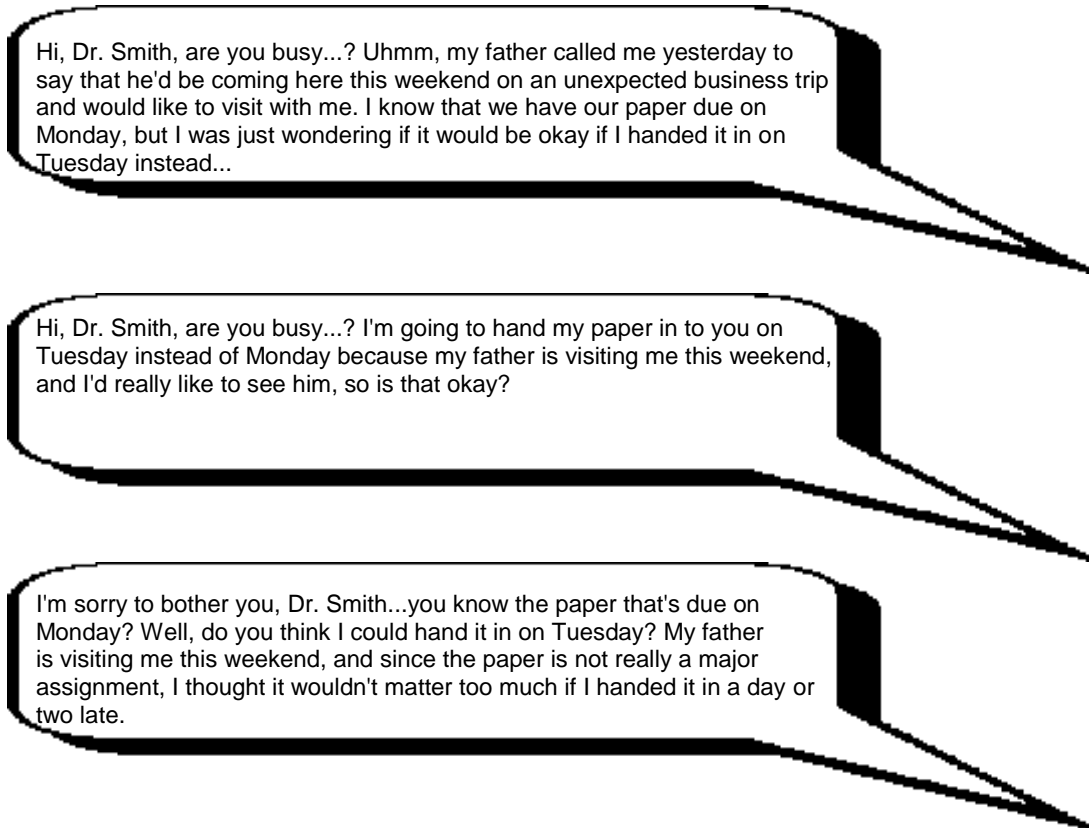
Figure 2. The Idea Man: Opting-out of a request.



It's really up to you what you want to do. Most professors don't mind whether you talk to them before class or after class. She may not want to be bothered right now, but on the other hand, she may be busy with other students after class...

If students opt-out of the request (wait until after class), they discover that in fact the professor is busy with other students and that the request must be made either during the professor's office hour or by e-mail. After deciding the medium of the request, students choose the most appropriate wording for the request from a choice of three. Figure 3 illustrates the three choices that the students are presented if they go to the professor's office. The screen also presents the clickable icon for the Idea Man.

Figure 3. Making the request.



The Idea Man in this screen provides more explicit advice in choosing the right wording for the request, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. The Idea Man: Choosing the right words for a request.



It's usually a good idea to give a reason or excuse before you ask permission for something. Also, be careful you don't sound as though you expect your teacher to give you the extension.

Make sure to read all three options and discuss them with a partner before you click on an option. What's good or bad about your different choices?

In the second action maze, the protagonist is faced with the task of negotiating a request for a ride to the supermarket from a fellow student. Working in groups, students are presented with alternatives such as opting out of the request initially or getting to the point right away. The actual language involved in making the request involves prefaces such as, “Are you busy right now?” or “I was wondering if I could ask for a favor?” Since the fellow classmate is busy studying for a test the following day, students must carefully navigate the timing and wording of the request so as to manage a ride from the acquaintance.

Both action mazes are followed by summary activities and questions for homework and discussion. Students are asked to relate the situations presented in the action maze to their own experiences both in their home country and in the US. One homework activity asks students to interview other Americans on how they would make requests under similar circumstances and summarize their findings for the class.

Procedure

1. Poll students for situations in which they make requests. Identify those that have the greatest face-threat (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and design situations that illustrate

various ways in which the request could be handled (successfully and unsuccessfully). Include a way for students to opt out of the request. The teacher can provide guidance through some sort of online help. The design of the action maze can be as simple as presenting only text to incorporating meaningful graphics and sound into the program.

2. If several computers are available, either with portable computers or in a computer lab, divide students into groups of three and assign each group to a computer. The program can be loaded onto the computers before class. If only one computer is available, the activity can be done as a whole class.
3. Tell students to work together to read each situation, clarify any problems that a group member may have with the language, and come to a consensus on what course of action to take. Make it clear that one student only in each group is allowed to actually use the computer, and he or she should be explicitly told by the teacher to not advance to the next screen of the action maze until all the members of the group have agreed on a specific course of action.
4. Suggestions for follow-up activities could include role playing the scenario as it played out in a particular group, discussing what went wrong if the students did not successfully manage the action maze (were not granted the request), or reviewing the entire action maze as a class.

Rationale

A growing body of literature in the area of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) has addressed the notion of using the computer in the language classroom to enhance group activities and communication (Sivert & Egbert, 1995; Seedhouse, 1996).

In this activity, the computer acts as a platform from which the instructor can present stimulating situations for students to work on together, thus enhancing the discussion and collaboration typical of the communicative classroom.

The same activity could be prepared, without the use of the computer, using a numbered stack of cards. Students progress through the stack by advancing to a new numbered card (e.g. “If you say, ‘No, thank you,’ then go to card 33”). However, authoring software and HTML replace the stack of paper cards with a more comprehensive activity in a much more manageable format. Using the computer as a platform allows students to easily retrace a certain course of action or simply start over and interact with the maze a second or third time. Online help with pragmatic language in specific situations can be presented via clickable icons or other links, all of which can be programmed by the instructor.

The classroom should provide language learners with reasons why speakers of the target language select different request forms as well as information about the content or level of imposition of the request (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996, p. 8). However, not only do pedagogical textbooks often lack such information, but the need for careful face work, where students practice indirectness and modifications to their speech in making requests, is often absent in the communicative language classroom (Ellis, 1992). Students, who are often very familiar with each other, express requests related to routine events where the level of imposition is minimal.

An action maze presents opportunities for students to interact with the language and circumstances of high-imposition requests, giving immediate feedback on language use without negative consequences to the student—a luxury not normally found in

situations occurring in real time with real participants. In addition, through online help, such as the Idea Man programmed into this activity, students can receive information on why certain forms are preferable over others in a particular situation as well as suggestions on understanding what the level of imposition may be in a given situation (e.g. the complicating factor in the second action maze was that the acquaintance had a test the next day). In sum, the computer aids in the presentation of different contextualized request forms, indications of the level of imposition of the request, and immediate feedback on what happens if one linguistic form or course of action is chosen over another.

Caveats and reflections

I have been using this activity in my ESL and EFL classes for over four years, and I feel it works equally well in both teaching environments. As computer technology changes and access to computers in the classrooms or at institutions increases, I have found the activity easier to administer. Fortunately, the version of Toolbook that I programmed this activity in (Toolbook 4.0) functions easily in Windows 98 and Windows 2000.

Web-based action mazes are the best alternative to purchasing and working with authoring software. An action maze can easily be developed using HTML, and with so many options available for designing web pages, an instructor could design a very elaborate action maze incorporating sound and graphics. The interested reader should search for action mazes already in existence on the web.

Whereas the initial time and effort needed to develop an action maze on the computer may turn some people away from the idea, subsequent action mazes that an

instructor develops can utilize the same links and other aspects of the original design. In other words, one action mazes functions as a template for further development.

References

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