

Softening Short Requests

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Level: Advanced

Time: Around 60-90 minutes, depending on level of exploitation

Resources: Authentic requests collected in the target language and speech community. The request examples were collected in Australia. However, teachers should collect their own samples focusing on features appropriate to the language and speech community in which their students will be interacting.

Goal: To introduce students to a range of different ways in which native speakers soften their requests and to develop their awareness of how these are used by different speakers and in different situations within the speech community

Description of the activity

In this activity students reflect on the way requests are used in the target community, become acquainted with some of the devices used to soften them, and explore their own attitudes to the use of these devices. The request examples below (see part 1 in Teacher Resource) can be used for a matching activity that highlights different ways of making requests and how requests vary across speakers in different situations. The activity is conducted in pairs to allow private discussion. It is followed by a more general session in which the teacher guides feedback and encourages class discussion of devices used to soften the sample requests and how students feel about the use of these devices.

Procedure

1. In pairs/groups learners try to match up the request examples (a. to g.) with the different settings (1. to 8.). The items can be shown on a transparency, board. or hand out. The students should not be given details about the speakers at this stage. Since the number of settings and requests is not the same, learners are unable to guess them all simply by a process of elimination.

2. As they work, learners should be asked to explain:

- why they matched each request to the setting
- what they think the various speakers' gender, age, or occupation might be
- what they think the role-relationship between the speaker and addressee might be
- what the speaker wants to addressee to do in each case
- how each speaker softens his or her requests and why each chooses to do it that way

The teacher brings the class together for the feedback stage, taking suggestions

from the class as to the 'correct' solutions. Of course, there are no simple 'correct' answers, but because the requests were collected from the speech community, there can be discussion of where they were found, and whether the solutions suggested by the class are likely or not.

3. After the requests have been matched with the settings in which they occurred, the teacher should elicit from the learners their views on who said what to whom and the likely characteristics of the speakers. These views should be used as a basis for discussion of differences in softening strategies across settings and with different speakers, and the importance of such factors as gender, power, and likelihood of compliance (see analysis in Teacher Resource section). The analysis of how speakers might vary and the different types of softening, or "mitigating," devices (see sections 3 and 4 of Teacher Resource) provides a useful basis for this discussion. For example, some learners might suggest that request b. was said by a male to another male, which could lead to a discussion of masculine versus feminine ways of speaking. However, the point should also be made that there is considerable individual variation in mitigating style and no clear gender preference for one style over another. Thus, language of a particular type cannot be regarded as rules?rather, interpersonal pragmatics is a matter of tendency and preference.

4. During the discussion, the teacher can explore learners' attitudes about giving and receiving requests. For example, students may believe that English speakers mitigate too much when making a request or that it is inappropriate for a teacher to mitigate a request to a student. Such discussion allows useful comparison between patterns of mitigation in different cultures.

Rationale

Students must learn how to be polite in ways appropriate to the communities in which they wish to interact. In unfamiliar situations, they are apt to rely on transfer from their first language and culture, causing those in the target culture to wrongly view such errors as rude or resulting from the speaker's bad character. The appropriate use of politeness is also crucial if learners are to correctly interpret the force of utterances they hear. Unfortunately, instruction in the area of politeness has tended to be restricted to a few salient and well-known features commonly associated with politeness and formality, such as "please," "thank you," and "could you...." The problem is that in some communities and situations, reliance on these rather formal and formulaic devices may actually signal an aloofness that the learner does not intend and which may inhibit further interaction.

This activity is designed to introduce learners to a range of devices used to soften requests, including both those associated with more formal politeness and those that signal social closeness and inclusion. An important aim is to deepen learners' awareness of the pragmatic impact, and therefore the appropriateness, of certain devices in various social contexts. Ultimately, the choice of whether or

how to soften requests in the target language must rest with the learner.

Alternatives and extensions

The procedure outlined above only covers the analysis and discussion phase of the lesson. This should be followed by more practice activities. Some possibilities are suggested below:

1. The teacher should spend time helping students understand and practice the appropriate pronunciation, stress and intonation to be used with the mitigating devices highlighted in the activity. For example, "just" should be unstressed so that it does not sound aggressive, and interrogative requests should have a rising intonation if they are intended to be tentative and a falling intonation if the speaker is more confident of the likelihood of compliance.
2. The students should be given a wide range of requests on which to practice identifying and applying softening devices. These could be in the form of a series of mini-dialogues, a single dialogue, or an excerpt from a film or screenplay.
3. Homework can be either receptive or productive:
 - a) Receptive: students collect at least one example of their own of a request device discussed in the lesson
 - b) Productive: students should be assigned to use before the next class a device they may not have used before, such as, I was wondering if I could....
4. The softening of other speech acts can be discussed, such as the mitigation of assertions or criticisms.

Teacher Resource

This section contains request examples and possible setting (1), the situations in which they were heard (2), analysis of the speakers (3), and analysis of the features of the requests (4). The requests were collected in Australia from naturally occurring interactions between native speakers. Some were recorded on tape as part of a large project and identified in the transcripts (Yates, 2000), and some were requests that the author wrote down as she heard them in her daily life.

1) Request Examples

- a. It'd be cool if you could move up one.
- b. Get us a pie, mate.
- c. If you could just grab a copy of that for a moment.
- d. I was wondering if I could have, um, 3 weeks annual leave?
- e. Would it be OK if I handed my assignment in next Monday?

f. Could you just pop that up there for me?

g. Do you wanna move over?

Settings

1. in a secondary school class

2. in a lecturer's office

3. at university

4. in a plane, before take-off

5. in the audience of a school concert

6. in a car park

7. in an office

8. on a footpath

2) Situations and speakers: the actual social context in which the request was found

a) the audience of a school concert / female teenager to another female teenager

b) a car park / one fisherman to another fisherman

c) a secondary school class / male teacher to mixed gender class

d) an office / female employee to female boss

e) a lecturer's office, at university / female adult student to female lecturer

f) a plane, before take-off/ female flight attendant to female passenger

g) a secondary school class / male teacher to mixed gender class

3) Analysis of the characteristics of the speakers and the context that may influence the use of mitigation

i) Females may be less direct and use more mitigation than males (e.g., a. compared with f.).

ii) Males in an informal, sporting context are often direct and signal solidarity through the use of colloquialisms and special terms of address (e.g., b.).

iii) In formal situations, mitigating devices associated with formal politeness may be used more often (e.g., f. compared with b.).

iv) Some less formal contexts may express relationships in a less hierarchical way in the target culture than in the learner's own culture (e.g., in the secondary classroom and in university c. and g., and e.).

v) In addition to devices usually associated with mitigation, such as "if you could" (a. and c.), or "would it be..." (e.), speakers use devices that signal solidarity and in-group membership as a way of softening a directive (e.g., "cool" in a., "us" and "mate" in b., and "grab" in c.).

vi) Even speakers in high power positions relative to the addressee use indirectness and high levels of mitigation (e.g., c. and g.).

4) Analysis of the mitigating devices that can be identified in each request

a) It'd be cool if you could move up one.

"It would be ___ if you could...." is a useful formula for polite requests and "cool" as a popular word between teenagers indicates solidarity, thereby reducing the social distance assumed between speaker and addressee.

b) Get us a pie, mate.

"Us" and "mate" are two vernacular English address forms indicating solidarity and social closeness and used to soften the force of the request.

c) If you could just grab a copy of that for a moment.

"If you could...." is a polite request form often used by high-power speakers when the likelihood of compliance is high.

"Just" is a very common term used to tone down a request.

"Grab" is an informal, vague word used in preference to a more formal word to signal solidarity and social closeness and thereby soften the force of the request. "For a moment" is a phrase that understates what is to be done, similar to other common understaters such as "for a while" and "for a little."

d) I was wondering if I could have, um, 3 weeks annual leave.

"I was wondering if..." is a common formula used in polite requests; note use of progressive wondering to further soften the request.

With "could", the use of the past tense form in English signals greater distance from the requested act.

"Um" is a hesitator used to make the speaker sound more tentative and thus reduce the force of the request.

e) Would it be OK if I handed my assignment in next Monday?

"Would it be..." makes use of a question to enquire as to the willingness of the

interlocutor to comply. Also, note use of the impersonal construction to give the interlocutor a way out of taking full responsibility for any refusal, that is, the person can imply that it is the "system" rather than his/herself that cannot allow the requested extension.

With OK, the formality of the formulaic request strategy would it be is offset by the use of the informality of OK. Note that this has the effect of minimising the seriousness of what is being asked for and signaling some kind of social closeness between the speaker and interlocutor.

f) Could you just pop that up there for me?

Could you.... is a common polite request formula.

Just is a very common downtoner.

Pop is a phrase that understates what is to be done; note other common understaters, such as for a while and for a little....

For me is a personal phrase that softens the force by emphasizing the interpersonal link between the interlocutors.

g) Do you wanna move over?

Do you wanna is a less formal version of the request strategy used in e. in which the interlocutor is asked if she is willing to comply, rather than being asked to do something. Note that this may be considered patronizing in some communities, but perfectly acceptable in others. The use of the informal wanna rather than want to softens the request by signaling social closeness.

Reference

Yates, L. (2000). "Ciao, Guys!": Mitigation addressing positive and negative face concerns in the directives of native-speaker and Chinese background speakers of Australian English. Unpublished doctoral thesis, LaTrobe University, Bundoora, Victoria, Australia.