

Telephone Conversation Openings

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Level: College or adult students, high intermediate – advanced ESL learners

Time: 2-3 lessons (45-60 minutes per lesson)

Resources: 1) Telephone 2) device for recording telephone conversations purchasable at electronics stores (also, many answering machines are capable of recording telephone conversations 3) ESL textbook telephone dialogues

Goal

To develop awareness and understanding of the nature of telephone conversation openings from a social, interactional perspective.

Description of the Activity

In this series of lessons, students will develop an awareness and understanding of the nature of *real* American English telephone openings. Students will serve as discourse analysts, recording and transcribing real telephone conversation openings between native and nonnative speakers of English (NS-NNS). They will juxtapose the findings of their telephone data with a discussion provided by the teacher on the nature of telephone openings in native speaker American English. To prepare for this discussion, the teacher consults the literature on telephone openings in conversation analysis (see rationale section below) and prepares a handout for students that illustrates sequence types typically found in American English telephone conversations, namely, summons-answer, identification/recognition, greeting, and ‘how are you.’ (See Teacher Resource). It is important that the teacher underscore the interactional and collaborative nature of these opening sequences, and the coordinated character of social actions on a turn-by-turn basis. Importantly, the opening of a telephone conversation is not to be viewed as

something which just happens or as merely the segment of the talk which is preliminary to an interaction because what and how the first topic of a telephone conversation is *arrived at* is built on earlier sequences that occur in the opening segment. In short, the teacher should stress that if there is one overall job that openings “do” in telephone interaction, it is to build up to the introduction of the first topic, the place in which substantive talk officially begins.

Procedure

1. Warm-up activity: Discussion of difficulties, problems, or concerns ESL students face in making telephone calls in English.
2. Have students record and transcribe the opening segment of 2-3 real telephone conversations between native speaker and nonnative speaker (NS-NNS) dyads. The teacher may need to explain how to do transcription or provide a sample of a transcribed telephone conversation. (It is better if the student data collector is not a participant of the conversation being collected and transcribed.) The data collector will need to secure permission of the person whose phone call is being recorded; ask students to record conversations of (close) friends for whom the granting of permission will not pose a problem. But students are not to divulge the reason for the data collection (to examine telephone openings) to the participants in the phone call until *after* the data are collected as this may affect the sort of talk that gets produced.
3. The teacher discusses with students the four sequence types in American English telephone conversation, namely, summons-answer, identification/recognition, greeting, and how-are-you (See Teacher Resource.) Particular attention should be

- paid to how the interactional job of identification and recognition is accomplished in telephone conversation openings as there are nine basic types of caller's first turns (Schegloff, 1979, see Teacher Resource), but ESL learners often rely on one type of caller's first turn, namely, "May I speak to _____?"
4. The teacher should point out that in American English telephone openings, callers typically position themselves to be the asker of the first 'how are you' sequence in order to assume the position of being the answerer of the second 'how are you' sequence because it is from the position of being the answerer of the second 'how are you' that callers typically move toward the first topic or reason for the call. In addition, with reference to 'how are you' sequences the teacher may briefly address those responses to 'how are you' which may lead to further talk ("great," "depressed," "super") and those responses which may end the sequence ("fine," "okay," "good"). ESL textbook dialogues often only include 'how are you' sequences typically end the opening sequence. (See Sacks, 1975).
 5. The teacher collects the students' transcriptions and makes copies for all members of the class, assembling a collection of native-nonnative speaker telephone openings which all students may analyze.
 6. Students examine the compilation of telephone openings, comparing and contrasting them with the structural organization of real native speaker English telephone conversation. The teacher asks the students: Are the sequence types characteristic of real telephone conversation found in NS-NNS telephone interaction? If not, what occurs instead? How are the interactional tasks of summoning of the parties, identification and recognition of the parties, greeting,

- and ‘how are you’ accomplished in the NS-NNS conversational openings? Are there practices of telephone conversation openings in NS-NNS telephone interaction that diverge from those typically found in native speaker English conversation? Are the differences found, if any, due to language problems or cultural variation?
7. Summarizing activity: The teacher returns to the discussion of problems, difficulties, or concerns in telephone interaction (item 1 above), asking students to reconsider how the telephone activities performed clarify or contribute to their understanding and awareness of telephone conversations in native speaker American English.

Rationale

Telephone interaction is perhaps not taught enough in ESL classrooms, moreover, textbook treatment of telephone ‘conversation’ is by and large inadequate from an interactional perspective (Wong 2000). This may pose a serious problem for ESL learners, given how much we rely on the telephone for conducting business and engaging in social matters in our everyday lives. Telephone talk appears to be one genre about which learners of a target language are particularly sensitive. ESL students frequently state that it is difficult to talk on the telephone, and they avoid such interactions or keep them to a minimum.

The idea that textbook writers utilize authentic spoken language data for the development of language teaching materials is one that is gaining increasing prominence. However, despite the fact that a ‘communicative approach’ to language teaching has been touted for a number of years, not much progress has been made in terms of pedagogic

materials. Hence the teacher will need to develop her/his own materials and gain insight into this important area of language learning and teaching. This series of lessons offers some suggestions on how to teach about telephone interaction. Classroom teachers may wish to use insights about language based on discourse analytic studies in curriculum development and lesson planning particularly in situations in which emphasis is on teaching communication or ‘conversation.’ The proposed activities attempt to guide the teacher in how to connect discourse analysis and language education, and how to view language as social process (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000; McCarthy and Carter 1994).

Alternatives and Caveats

If having students record real NS-NNS telephone conversation proves to be difficult, for example, as might be the case in an EFL environment, the above lesson plans may be executed with the omission of item 2, and in which case item 6 would not involve a comparison of NS-NNS telephone openings and that found in ESL textbook telephone dialogues. Alternatively, the teacher could do the data collection and bring in a collection of real, recorded NS-NNS telephone conversations from which the students may perform the activities stated above.

Another warm-up activity (item 1) is to ask ESL students to jot down the opening segment of what they imagine to be a typical telephone conversation in American English. This forms the basis for comparison with the sequential organization of real telephone openings as well as with the NS-NNS telephone openings that the students later collect. Again, if data collection is difficult, the students’ contrived telephone openings may be compared with the structural organization of real telephone

conversation openings and ESL textbook telephone dialogue openings, based on a discussion provided by the teacher who has done some research of the background literature.

For an enrichment activity, the comparison of authentic telephone conversations (between NS and NNS) can be expanded to include ESL/EFL textbook. In this activity, students compare the four sequence types described as canonical of real American telephone conversation with those found in ESL textbook telephone dialogues (The teacher may need to supply samples of ESL textbook telephone dialogues for students to review). The teacher directs the students to consider these questions: How do ESL textbook telephone dialogues open? How do textbook telephone openings differ, if at all, from those discussed in the literature for American English conversation? How do ESL textbook telephone conversations differ from openings which native-nonnative speaker dyads produce in NS-NNS telephone interaction? What interactional issues are relevant in telephone openings? In ESL textbook telephone dialogues? (Editors' note: This is a particularly helpful activity for teacher education courses as well. See Bardovi-Harlig, 1992; Bardovi-Harlig, et. al, 1991).

Teacher Resource

Telephone Openings: Four Sequence Types

(1) [#247, Schegloff, 1986, p. 115]

[Note: R stands for the recipient/answerer and C stands for the caller.]

| | | | |
|----|---|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| | | ring | summons/answer sequence |
| 01 | R | Hallo | |
| 02 | C | Hello, Jim? | identification sequence |
| 03 | R | Yeah | |
| 04 | C | It's Bonnie. | |
| 05 | R | Hi, | greeting sequence |
| 06 | C | Hi, how are yuh | first how are you sequence |
| 07 | R | Fine, how're you, | second how are you sequence |

08 C Oh, okay I guess
 09 R Oh, okay,

(2) [Schegloff, 1986, #1, p. 114]

| | | | |
|----|--------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 01 | | ((ring)) | summons-answer sequence |
| 02 | Nancy: | H'llo:? | |
| 03 | Hyla: | <u>Hi</u> : | identification and greeting |
| 04 | Nancy: | [^] H ⁱ ::: | |
| 05 | Hyla: | Hwaryuhh= | first how are you |
| 06 | Nancy: | =Fi:ne how'r you, | second how are you |
| 07 | Hyla: | Oka: [y | |
| 08 | Nancy: | [<u>Go</u> :d, | |
| 09 | | (0.4) | |
| 10 | Hyla: | mkhhh [hhh | |
| 11 | Nancy: | What's doin, | |

Caller's First Turn: Nine Basic Types

(The 9 types of caller's first turn shown below are excerpted from Schegloff, 1979):

(1) Greeting Terms:

| | | |
|----|----|------------|
| 01 | A: | H'llo:? |
| | B: | hHi: |
| | | (TG, #1) |
| 02 | M: | Hello |
| | J: | Hello |
| | | (MDE, #91) |

(2) Answerer's, presumed answerer's, or intended answerer's name or address term (in varying combinations, of first name, title + last name, nick-name, etc.) in one of a range of interrogative or quasi-interrogative intonation contours.

| | | |
|----|----|----------------|
| 01 | C: | Hello:. |
| | M: | Miz Parsons? |
| | | (JG, #73a) |
| 02 | I: | Hello, |
| | N: | <u>I</u> rene? |
| | | (ID, #244) |

(3) Answerer's, presumed answerer's, or intended answerer's name or address term (in varying combinations of name components) in one of a range of assertive, exclamatory, or terminal intonation contours.

- 01 C: Hello?
M: Charlie.
(CF, #155)
- 02 T: Hello:.,
E: Uh Tiny.
(CDHQ, #306)
- (4) Question or noticing concerning answerer's state
- 01 P: Hello:.,
A: Are you awake?
(NB, #105)
- 02 F: Hello:.,
S: Hello. You're home.
(RK, #190)
- (5) "First topic" or "reason for the call"
- 01 F: Hello:
R: Whewillyoubedone.
(JG, #55)
- 02 L: H'llo:.,
C: Hi, 'r my kids there?
(LL, #8)
- (6) Request to speak to another ("switchboard" request)
- 01 A: Hello
B: Is Jessie there?
(NB, #118)
- 02 M: Hello:.,
C: May I speak to Bonnie,
(ID, #289)
- (7) Self-identification
- 01 B: H'llo?
D: Hi Bonnie. This is Dave.
(ID, #234a)

- 02 M: Hello? =
C: = Hello it's me.
(MDE, Supp.)
- (8) Question re identity of answerer
- 01 L: Hello;
M: H'llo, is this Kitty?
(LL, #27)
- 02 M: Yhello,
L: H'llo who's this,
(LL, #23)
- (9) A joke, or joke version of one of the above (e.g., mimicked intonation, intendedly incorrect identification, intendedly funny accent, etc.)
- 01 C: Hello?
G: Helloooooo,
(CF, #160)
- 02 M: Hello?
G: Hi = This is your daughter chewing on beets.
(MDE, #93)

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