

Comment-Response Mingle

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Level: Can be adapted to suit most levels. Illustrated below for Intermediate to advanced

Time: 10 minutes – 30 minutes depending on level of exploitation

Resources

Cut-up comment-response strips similar to those shown below. The exact response will vary according to the target variety of English and the community in which it is to be used. Those provided below may be suitable for adult students using British English. Since responses to situations of this kind vary enormously in different speech communities (e.g. different English-speaking countries, different age groups), the cards below are intended as a guide only.

I'm sorry I couldn't make it to your place last night, my grandmother died at the weekend	Oh, I'm sorry to hear that!
I just passed my driving test.	Congratulations!
I've just bought a new car.	Great! What make is it?
I've just failed my driving test.	Oh hard luck!
I'm going on holiday to Spain next week.	I hope you have a great time!
I've got my English exam this afternoon.	Good luck!
Thanks a lot for your help.	That's ok. Don't mention it!
I'm sorry I can't stop.	Sure. I'll catch up with you later.
I'm sorry. I don't think I'll be able to come out this afternoon. I've got too much work to do.	Not to worry. Perhaps next time.

Goal

To help students become more aware of and have practice in using appropriate formulaic responses to common situations. This activity can also be exploited to explore culturally appropriate responses to situations in more depth, as indicated in the section on 'extension activities'.

Description of the Activity

In this mingling activity students are given a card on which is written one part of a two-part adjacency pair which they must memorise and then leave behind on their desks. They must then mingle with the other students in order to find the student who has memorised the appropriate comment or response that completes their comment-response sequence. They can only say the comment or response that was on their card. When everyone thinks that they have found the person with the appropriate first- or second- pair part, each pair of students says their comment and response in front of the class. The other students and the teacher listen and comment on whether they are appropriately matched. This is a good opportunity for students to practise delivery with appropriate stress, intonation and body language etc, as well as to explore other cultural phenomena surrounding similar events in their own cultures and in the target culture.

Procedure

- 1) Teacher distributes cards, each with a comment or response written on it, taking care that these are well shuffled, and that students only get to see the card they are given. Shorter, simpler utterances could be given to students who are less confident or have severe pronunciation problems, for example.
- 2) Teacher explains that students have on their card either a comment or a response to a comment. Without saying anything to anyone, they should try to decide whether they have a comment or a response, and then memorise what is written on their card so that they can say it without the card. They should do this silently.
- 3) Students then leave the card behind on their desk (or teacher collects them again) and mingle with each other. They must say what was on their card, and only what was on their card, to the different students that they meet until they think that they have found their first or second pair part, i.e. if they have a comment that they have found the appropriate response, or if they have a response that they have found the comment to which it is an appropriate response.

- 4) When they have found a likely first or second pair part to complement their own, student pairs should ensure that they both agree. Some negotiation may therefore take place at this point.
- 5) This should continue until all 'pairs' have found each other or until there is some sort of deadlock because some students are left without appropriate pairs.
- 6) At this point the teacher gets the students to say their respective comments and responses in turn in front of the class.
- 7) As each pair says their comment and response, the teacher should ask what the situation is, and let the class comment on whether the two parts are compatible. She/he should use this opportunity to ensure that students understand the force of each of the utterances, and that they are exposed to good models of appropriate pronunciation. Aspects of the delivery, such as prosody, facial expression and body language appropriate to the situation should also be highlighted and practised.
- 8) All pairs can then practise each comment-response, not only the one they were originally given, as they become the focus of the class.
- 9) As an extension, students can be asked to discuss what would happen or be said in a similar situation in their own culture and to compare this with what happens in English. Variations in comments and responses could also be practised with more advanced classes, and groups could (see section on extension activities below).

Rationale

Students who interact with native speakers in a target culture often find themselves in situations which are familiar, but to which they find they do not have a suitable response in English. They need to be able to respond to these situations quickly and appropriately, or they will find that the moment for making a suitable contribution has passed, and they run the risk of being interpreted as rude or uncaring. Since the responses are often formulaic, students who have studied English in formal settings which concentrate on grammar and literacy may have had little opportunity to come in to contact with them. Moreover, such formulae need to be accurate in detail, since a formula

which is incorrectly used may have an entirely different message or be misunderstood. Crucial to the success of such social exchanges is appropriate delivery. For this reason it is essential that the appropriate stress, intonation and body language be practised at the same time.

This activity practices short, common routines and thus may be used as a quick 'warmer' at the start of a class. These routines, however, often reflect cultural attitudes to events or the role of language in situations, and so the activity may also be exploited more fully to allow deeper investigation and practise of appropriate behaviour in the target culture and how this compares to behaviour in similar circumstances in students' own culture. From this exploration useful discussion on values, customs and attitudes to these can emerge.

In addition, students may be given the opportunity to suggest other situations in which they uncertain how to react or feel uncomfortable, or other modes of communication (e.g. in writing, on email, or over the phone). In this case, the activity can be conceived of as part of a longer lesson or series of lessons, and can be supplemented using some of the extension activities suggested below.

Alternatives and Caveats

This activity can be extended or built into a longer class on the topic of culturally appropriate behaviour in a number of ways. Some of these are suggested below.

- 1) After the completion of the activity as suggested in the 'procedure' section, the teacher can facilitate a class discussion on the nature of the situation, who the speakers are, what their relationship might be and so on. Pairs can be asked to construct the dialogue of which these adjacency pairs would be a part. They could work on these and then perform them in front of the class, with the teacher offering appropriate support on matters of formality / informality, naturalness and so on.
- 2) This activity could lead onto a closer examination of what expressions, gestures and attitudes are appropriate in each of the situations explored in students' first culture and in the target culture. For example, what happens when a grandmother dies? Is it appropriate to offer flowers?

Is there a mourning period? Do customs differ according to the status of the deceased in the family? How is death viewed in each culture?

- 3) The activity focuses on spoken language, but appropriate responses to similar situations could also be explored in different kinds of writing (e.g. letters, cards, email).
- 4) Students can identify situations in which they been unsure of the appropriate responses, and these can be discussed and then practised in a similar way. A follow-up mingle could be done as a revision of these and the original adjacency pairs in a later class.
- 5) In settings where ‘mingling’ in class difficult (e.g. with large numbers of students, fixed desks, limited classroom space etc.), the activity may be conducted as a matching exercise. Students could be put in pairs and given one complete set of shuffled cards, and instructed to form matched pairs of appropriate comment-response adjacency pairs. In the feedback stage of the activity, one student from one side of the room could start with what s/he considers to be a first-pair part, and nominate a student from the other side of the class to supply the appropriate second-pair part. These could then be commented upon and practised as described in the ‘procedure section’ but students would not need to leave their seats.