Practicing negative dialogues
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Quick Guide

Key words: Speech acts, politeness, status, listening, role-play
Learner English level: Lower-intermediate to advanced
Learner maturity level: Junior college, university, adult
Preparation time: 30-45 minutes
Activity time: Activity 1- 25 minutes; Activity 2- 30 minutes

Materials: Activity 1- taped conversation, cassette player; Activity 2- roleplay cards

Introduction

In a second language it is easy to complain too forcefully, disagree too curtly, refuse too abruptly or, for that matter, apologise too profusely. The inability to use negative speech acts appropriately can cause an embarrassing communicative failure, particularly in conversations with higher status people. This article presents two inductive
tasks that assist students in learning and rehearsing these speech acts in the classroom. The first activity involves receptive skills, and prepares students for the second activity, which is more productive.

1. Listening and analysing conversations

This task helps students to identify how language reflects a speaker’s status. They listen to a status-unequal dialogue and decipher the politeness strategies used, without having to produce the language themselves.

Preparation

Step 1: Choose a short segment of two-way dialogue taken from a textbook listening tape or something similar. This should be a dialogue between two power-unequal speakers who are having a negative exchange, as with the teacher and student in the following example:

(A) Isobel, can you think what it means?
(B) Does it mean there’s been an accident further along the road?
(A) No.
(B) Does it mean double bend ahead?
(A) No. Look at the car.

Make sure the English level and the length of the segment are appropriate for the students’ ability.

Step 2: Prepare a tape player, preferably with a counter so that you can rewind and play the segment repeatedly.

Procedure

Step 1: Tell students that they will hear a short dialogue between two people. Tell them the two speakers are higher and lower in power, and they have to guess which speaker is in each role by listening and making notes about each speaker’s language.

Step 2: Play the dialogue several times, with short breaks to allow them to take notes and process the language.

Step 3: Ask students to work in pairs to discuss the language they heard and the information that it revealed about each speaker’s status.

Step 4: Finish with a whole-class discussion, eliciting and writing down some of the relevant language. Discuss what the language reveals about each speaker’s status.

2. Roleplay

Roleplays, in which two people take on pre-determined roles and improvise a conversation around a situational context, can easily be adapted to reflect status difference between speakers.

Preparation

Step 1: Prepare two roleplay cards describing two unequal speakers. One card may describe a teacher, office manager, or police officer, while the other may describe a student, employee, or citizen (see the Appendix for an example).

Step 2: Make copies for your class. Half the students will have card A and the other half will have card B.

Procedure

Step 1: Put students in pairs. Give card A to one and card B to the other. Make sure they don’t read one another’s card.

Step 2: Before the actual roleplay have students get together briefly with others playing the same role to discuss the things they might say, the language they might use and so on.

Step 3: Put students back in their original pairs.

Step 4: Ask two able students to perform their roleplay while the others observe them. This will provide a model for the rest of the students.

Step 5: The other pairs act out their roleplays. Stress that the speakers should aim to use politeness strategies that are appropriate for their partner’s status. For example, A might use an indirect requesting style Would it be possible to borrow some money?, while B would be able to speak more directly You haven’t paid me back from the last time yet! (see Appendix).

Step 6: Ask the students to switch roles, allowing them to practice using another linguistic form.

Step 7: Elicit some of the language which A and B used in their roleplay. Write some phrases on the board and discuss some of the differences between the language of A and that of B.

Note. The same process may also be repeated as a group roleplay (see Appendix).

Conclusion

These two tasks help students: a) determine what kind of language is appropriate in power-unequal negative talk; and b) use this language accurately.
in simulated power-unequal exchanges. They can then begin to comprehend how to use negative language in context and with appropriate force—neither too direct nor too oblique—before having to use it in more genuine situations.

Appendix
The appendices can be viewed at <jalt-publications.org/ltl/myshare/resources/0704.pdf>