Relationship between Speakers and Task Type: Increasing Awareness of Factors Involved in Speech Act Production

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Level: Intermediate, but adaptable to other proficiency levels and student audiences

Time: 90 minutes

Resources

Teacher-created dialogues, tape-recorded with native speakers; visual organizers/grids; teacher created practice tasks in dialogue format

Goal

To increase awareness of the factors that affect the linguistic realization of speech acts in American English.

Description of the Activity

This activity can be adapted to any speech act. It requires the teacher to collect and record or transcribe short authentic dialogues – performed by native speakers – for the presentation phase of the lesson. These dialogues are representative of potential situations in which the learners may find themselves and have to accomplish a communicative purpose by using the target speech act. Further, these dialogues should be based on authentic language data and introduce students to two essential parameters that guide appropriate linguistic choice: (1) the relationship between interlocutors (either one of informality/non-distance, or one of formality/distance), and (2) the task type (for each speech act, at least two task levels can usually be identified; for example: requests can be easy or difficult to comply with; invitations can be to a casual or a more formal event; apologies can follow a minor or a major offense). Thus, dialogues need to be presented for four constellations so that students can discover both parameters, as well as the

respective linguistic realization, for each given dialogue. For example, for requests, the dialogue situations will present learners with the following: informal/non-distant + request that is easy to comply with; informal/non-distant + request that is difficult to comply with; formal/distant + request that is easy to comply with; and formal/distant + request that is difficult to comply with.

As students move through the presentation phase of the lesson, during which they listen to as well as read the sample dialogues, the teacher leads them to inductively discover the parameters relevant for the given speech act. A visual organizer/grid is used to transfer the different linguistic realizations of the speech act from the dialogues into the appropriate cells of the grid (see Teacher Resource). Thus, the visual organizer raises students' awareness of the factors that affect linguistic choice in an explicit, lucid, and well-structured way. This grid then functions as the students' reference point for selection of the appropriate speech act form in subsequent activities in the lesson. The practice phase of the lesson gives students the opportunity to use the target speech act in communicative pair or small group situations set up by the teacher. While this does require the teacher's creativity and awareness of communicative situations in which his/her students are likely to engage, dialogic practice tasks allow students to build confidence in using the speech act in the safe confines of the classroom. Activities need to be carefully sequenced from controlled tasks to more communicative tasks in order to build fluency and automaticity in accessing the appropriate speech act form. If students are given sufficient time, they will gradually need to refer back to the grid less and less to make an appropriate linguistic choice.

Procedure

1. Language presentation

    a. Target speech act is presented in 4 short dialogues

    b. Each dialogue shows a different speaker relationship (informal/non-distant and formal/distant) and different task type (for requests, for example, easy to do and hard to do; for invitations, for example, casual event and formal event; for apologies, for example, minor offense and major offense)

    c. Students listen to each taped dialogue and are asked to infer what the speakers are talking about

    d. Teacher has students practice the dialogues and draws attention to target speech acts by eliciting their realization in the dialogues

    e. Teacher elicits relationship between the speakers and type of task from students

2. Highlighting of speech act

    a. Teacher has prepared a grid, which is provided to students – but not yet filled out -- and shown on OHP (see Teacher Resource)

    b. Focused elicitation: teacher leads students to identify for each dialogue (1) the relationship between the speakers and (2) the type of task (e.g. How well do you think the speakers know each other? Is what person A is asking person B to do easy or difficult to do for B? or: what kind of an event is A inviting be to – is this something more casual or is it a more formal event? or: Is A apologizing to B for something that's little or for something that's more serious?

c. Students, with teacher's help, complete the grid by adding the appropriate linguistic realizations in the relevant quadrants; teacher shows completed grid on OHP

d. Students can easily see how the linguistic forms that realize the target speech act differ depending on the two main variables

e. Teacher and students discuss what other relationships between people are considered informal/non-distant and formal/distant

f. Similarly, teacher and students discuss if task types are considered similarly in their cultures (i.e. what is considered an easy/hard request, casual/formal event, minor/major offense in American culture may be considered differently in other cultures)

3. Practice activities: from controlled to less controlled communicative activities

a. Controlled: Students can also infer the relationship of speakers or task type from various speech act realizations the teacher provides.

Example:

For each request [or other language function], circle the
appropriate relationship between the speakers.
Do you think you can help me *with the computer?*
employee to boss   co-worker to co-worker

b. Controlled: Students focus on either speaker relationship or task type in separate activities. Example:

Make informal or formal requests [or other language function] for
something that is easy to do.
student to student in the school cafeteria:
Can you hand me *my book bag?*

b. Controlled: Based on the target speech act, students are presented with additional short dialogue scenarios and have to identify (1) the relationship of the speakers and (2) the type of task; then they select the appropriate speech act realization for each situation.

Example:

You can't leave work to pick up your child. You are asking your neighbor.
(1) relationship: informal/non-distant or formal/distant?
(2) Type of request: easy to do or hard to do?
How would you ask your neighbor?

c. Semi-controlled: Students have some options as to the scenarios they choose. Example:

Make up requests [or other language function] for the following situations:
friend to friend – borrowing bicycle OR borrowing car

A:	Can I borrow you bike this weekend?	OR	Do you think I could borrow your car tomorrow?
B:	Sure, no problem.		I'm not sure yet. I'll let you know.
A:	Thanks.		Okay.

d. Communicative: Students design mini-role plays based on scenarios they choose; thus students determine the relationship of speakers as well as task type and create mini-dialogues practicing the target speech act; later, they exchange their scenarios with others and create dialogues based on others' scenarios

e. Various dialogues are acted out in front of the class; teacher and students confirm the speakers' relationship and task type in each, referring back to the speech act grid

Rationale

  The purpose of the lesson sequence described above is to ultimately enhance students' communicative competence by helping them make appropriate linguistic choices in the realization of communicative intentions. It is known that a predominant focus on grammatical competence, as is still standard procedure in most ESL and especially EFL learning environments, does not lead to communicative competence and often leads to serious pragmatic failure (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990; Bouton, 1996; Rintell & Mitchell, 1989). Students' speech act realizations often deviate significantly from native speaker norms and may be the result of negative transfer from the students' first language (Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2000). By the same token, there is evidence that pragmatic competence is acquired slowly unless it is explicitly taught (Bouton, 1994; Olshtain & Cohen, 1991). Students have few usable strategies at their disposal for effective and appropriate speech act production (Cohen & Olshtain, 1993).

  Available textbook materials do not adequately prepare students for appropriate participation in unrehearsed real-life communication (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Cohen; 1999; Myers-Scotton & Bernsten, 1988). Many textbooks I have examined for their presentation of speech acts either neglect completely the dimensions of speaker relationship and task type, or they present learners with a plethora of different linguistic realizations of a speech act along an imaginary politeness continuum, but without guiding learners in how to choose a linguistic strategy in order to express the speech act appropriately. In addition, many textbooks rely on metalanguage more difficult than the

language to be taught instead of providing a clear display that learners can understand. Furthermore, available practice materials are limited in the communicative scenarios they expose students to and clearly do not provide sufficient practice for linguistic realizations of speech acts to become automatized.

My response to these problems is to provide the following:

1. Language in contexts that targeted learners can identify with; for example, if learners are university students, the situations for speech acts should relate to those scenarios that these learners will find themselves in. Thus, this involves situations with professors, university personnel, other students, friends, possibly landlords, roommates, and service personnel.

2. A visual reference point for students that helps them understand that appropriate linguistic choices depend on crucial factors in the speech situation;

3. Carefully sequenced activities that move from controlled to less controlled communicative situations (Brown, 2000; Nunan, 1999) so that students are given ample practice time to gradually become aware of differences in the way the speech act is realized in American English as compared to their own language. Carefully sequenced activities will also allow students to gradually automatize the linguistic realization of a speech act within given situational parameters. The language classroom is the environment to provide students with structured, yet authentic input; the proposed lesson sequence can accomplish this goal. While one might argue that complex subtleties of human interaction are simplified in this model, the emphasis in this activity is clarity in language presentation and practice, which is facilitated through a visual organizer/grid assisting learners in making appropriate linguistic choices.

Alternatives and Caveats

While the lesson plan outlined above is appropriate for adult learners at an intermediate level of proficiency, the same approach can be adapted for beginning as well as more advanced levels. For beginning learners, the two situational parameters of the target speech act should be presented and practiced independently. For example, instead of a four-cell visual organizer, the teacher can focus either on the interlocutor relationship or on the task type dimension only:

- easy requests with both formal/distant and informal/non-distant relationships, or
- difficult requests with both formal/distant and informal/non-distant relationships; or
- formal/distant relationship with both easy and difficult requests, or
- informal/non-distant relationship with both easy and difficult requests.

At an advanced proficiency level, the grid can expand in its depiction of interlocutor relationships. While a relationship may be characterized as informal/non-distant or formal/distant, the speakers in that situation may in fact not be equal, but hierarchically related. Thus, while many work environments as well as teaching environments in the United States are characterized by informality, the specific addressee direction may be either upward (an employee addressing his/her supervisor; a student addressing his/her dissertation mentor) or downward (the supervisor addressing the employee; the professor addressing the student). Thus, each formality level (informal/non-distant and formal/distant) would need to depict three possible realizations of a given speech act: hierarchically upward, hierarchically downward, and equal. It is clear that this will limit what the teacher should present in one lesson in order to restrict the cognitive load on the students and in order to guarantee that limited linguistic forms can be attended to and practiced.

Finally, this approach can target learners in very specific learning environments through highly focused speech act situations. For example, adults in an adult education program will benefit from communicative situations related to their work environment and situations dealing with their children's school, their landlord, or shopping. In contrast, pre-academic ESL students will benefit more from communicative situations involving their professors, peers, university staff and personnel, and TAs. Teenagers in high-school will benefit from still other situations that help them act appropriately with friends, teachers, neighbors, coaches. (Note that the sample grids in the Teacher Resource straddle a variety of situations).

To conclude, a word of caution is in order. This approach requires teachers' awareness of native speakers' realizations of speech acts. Following Wolfson (1986) this requires observation of authentic language, not only by nonnative English speaking teachers, but also by native English speaking teachers. If the goal is to help students achieve communicative competence (Nunan, 1999; Canale & Swain, 1980), then our lessons need to prepare students for language that is in fact used by native speakers. If teachers are aware of how speech acts are realized depending on speaker relationship and task type, they can also succeed in increasing their students' awareness and in improving their students' pragmatically appropriate language productions in a second language.

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Teacher Resource: Sample Grids

Speech Act: Requests		
Task type **Speaker relationship**	**Easy to do**	**Difficult to do**
Informal/non-distant	Colleagues at work: *Can you hand me that stapler over there?*	Two friends: *Do you think you can help me with my paper?*
Formal/distant	Student to professor: *Could you repeat the question?*	Student to last semester's professor: *I was wondering if you could write a letter of recommendation for me.*

Speech Act: Invitations		
Task type **Speaker relationship**	**Casual event**	**Formal event**
Informal/non-distant	Two students: *Do you want to go for a cup of coffee?*	Two friends: *I was wondering if you'd want to go to the Kennedy Center?*
Formal/distant	Student to professor: *Would you like to join us for some coffee after class?*	Student to professor: *I'd like to invite you to my graduation dinner.*

Speech Act: Apologies		
Task type **Speaker relationship**	**Minor offense**	**Major offense**
Informal/non-distant	Two friends: *(Oops), sorry!*	Two neighbors: *I am so sorry!*
Formal/distant	Strangers in the street: *I'm sorry.*	Student to professor: *I really apologize I forgot the due date.*