# Spot the problem!

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**Level:** Intermediate and above

**Time:** 15 minutes

**Resources**: Role-cards written or collected by the teacher before class

**Goal:** To discuss and raise students' awareness of pragmatic violations (in the areas of openings, closings, and requests)

**Description of the activity**

In this section the activity will be described in action as I implemented it with an advanced group of Hungarian EFL learners. Before class, I selected some role-play activities from a language examination resource book, all of which involved two people in a formal or informal encounter. I designed some "problem cards" as well, each of which contained a pragmatic error.

In class the topic was introduced and two students were asked to volunteer to perform a role-play. They received role-cards and one or both of them were given problem cards, according to the situation. While they were reading their cards, I asked the rest of the class to observe the role-plays carefully, because there would be something wrong that they should spot.

Here are some examples for the role-cards:

*Person A:* You have just moved to England for a study trip. You don't know too much about the town, public transport, health facilities, etc. You meet the neighbor in front of your house. Ask him/her questions to find out where you can find the post office, how you can buy tickets for public transport and what kind of entertainment facilities there are in town.

*Person B:* You have lived in the same town for 10 years. You have found out that a foreign university student has just moved in next to you. You meet him/her on the street. Give information about public transport, entertainment facilities, etc.

The problem cards for the above mentioned and other situations were like the following:

- You live alone and have a lot of spare time, and you love speaking to people. Try to maintain the conversation as long as you can and ignore your partner's intentions to leave.
- Be very direct in your questions; when asking for information, avoid question forms (*Could you…?)* and use e.g. "*Please tell me where…"*
- You don't know that *How are you?* is a greeting. When your partner asks you this question, give a detailed account of how you *really* are.

After the dialogues were performed, students shared their observations with the class. The discussion involved issues such as preclosings, formal-informal forms, opening and closing the conversation politely. By seeing the actors' surprise, uneasiness or embarrassment when their communication partner committed a pragmatic error, not only were students amused, but they could also consider the seriousness of these errors.

**Procedure**

1. In preparation for the class, the teacher prepares role-cards in matching pairs, appropriate for the students' level. These can be from their regular coursebook, exam preparation resources or written by the teacher. In addition to this, (s)he prepares "problem cards," each containing a pragmatic mistake/violation.

2. The teacher asks two students to volunteer to perform a role-play dialogue. (S)he gives them the role-cards as well as the problem cards. Other students are asked to observe and spot mistakes.

3. Students perform the role-play, others jot down their observations.

4. A whole class discussion follows, in which the students share their observations with each other. The teacher elicits the forms/phrases that "caused the problems," and possible ways to overcome these. Differences between the students' mother tongue(s) and English can also be discussed concerning the problematic issues.

5. If time allows, more pairs can be asked to perform role-plays.

**Rationale**

Research has shown that EFL learners and their teachers tend to undervalue the seriousness of pragmatic violations, and consistently ranked grammatical errors as more serious than pragmatic errors, whereas ESL learners and teachers showed the opposite attitude (Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei, 1998). This tendency points out how important it is to draw EFL learners' attention to the seriousness of pragmatic violations.

Concerning openings and closings, Dörnyei and Thurrell (1992:37) give more than twenty phrases that are used by native speakers to bring a conversation to a close (e. g. *I'd better let you go, I (really) must go*). However, in their study of closings in ESL/EFL textbooks, Bardovi-Harlig et al. (1991) found that very few of the textbooks they examined showed complete conversation closings. Likewise, in their study of EFL coursebook series, Csizér and Edwards (in preparation) found that the conversational models in the EFL coursebooks examined contained few full openings and closings. What this means is that few dialogues contained shutting down the topic, a preclosing, or a "post-opening" (such as *How are you?*). Adjacency pairs in openings and closings were frequently incomplete as well. It is necessary, therefore, to complement the input of coursebooks in the EFL classroom and draw students' attention to the importance of pragmatic issues.

As for pragmatic errors concerning politeness, it has to be mentioned that in many European languages, for example, German, Russian, Spanish, French, and Hungarian, there are formal and informal forms marking the degree of politeness and the forms of address. There are relatively clear-cut sociocultural rules as to when to use which form, which may be hard to grasp for a native speaker of English. Similarly, for EFL students of these mother tongues, it can be problematic how to express politeness in English.

This activity was designed in order to provide a tool for this purpose. The fact that the students have to perform the dialogues and observe each other can help raise their awareness towards pragmatic violations. At the last stage of the class, different forms of greetings and the concept of preclosings can be discussed.

**Alternatives and Caveats**

1. The activity is designed as a whole-class activity. In the case of large classes it can be done as group work as well. In this case the teacher asks two people from each group to perform the role-play, which the group discusses and then a spokesperson reports their observations to the whole class.

2. The problem cards quoted contained "general examples" for pragmatic violations, but these can always be tailored to the students' needs and problems (considering their mother tongue or level, for example). Depending on the focus of the task and the situation, both people involved in the role-play can receive problem cards, or it can be only one of them and the other student only has to "react" to the violations.

**References**

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