'Get to the point, will you please?' Requesting the Main Point in the Classroom

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Level: Intermediate

Time: 30 - 45 minutes

Goal

To learn to request the main point. (Students should be able to request the main point appropriately and interpret the functions of different linguistic forms correctly after this activity.)

Description of the Activity

This activity has been used at the National University of Singapore with pre-university students from the People's Republic of China. The students have typically gone through a six-month intensive English programme in Singapore and are at the beginning of a 6-month bridging course designed to further strengthen their English as well as mathematics, physics, and chemistry before they enter a university in Singapore. We use the third edition of *Mosaic II* as our English textbook.

The first chapter of the *Listening and Speaking* book of *Mosaic II* has a section on 'Requesting the Main Point'. We may need to request the main point when a speaker or interlocutor rambles without getting to the point, intentionally or unintentionally. It is a form of the speech act of request and therefore, requires considerations of the face of, politeness towards, and imposition on the hearer from the requester. The activity described here is designed to supplement or replace the section in the *Listening and Speaking* book.

First of all, the teacher needs to find out

1.	whether students are aware of the need for linguistic variations in requesting the main point in different situations;

2.	how they request the main point in their first language;

3.	the various linguistic forms in English they know that they can use to request the main point; and

4.	the factors they know that may trigger these linguistic variations.

In order to find out answers to 1 and 2, the teacher may ask students questions such as "What would you say in your native language if you want your teacher or professor/best friend/your little brother to repeat or summarise what he or she has just said?" If they vary their linguistic forms depending on whom they are talking to and when, it means that they know the need exists. If they do not show any variation, the teacher may provide examples from authentic language, movies, or conversational exchanges in novels to show them that language varies. The teacher may then give them extra prompts to elicit more responses.

The next step is to let students brainstorm in order to create a list of the different linguistic forms in English that they think they can use to request the main point. Write their input on the blackboard, and then ask them the different meanings and functions of the different forms and when each form is used. Next, add the missing request formulas to the list and continue the discussion. (See the list below.) students can discuss when they would say *Get to the point, will you please?* and when to say *I didn't quite understand what you were saying. Could you please go over it again?*. A written list of possible request forms can be given out to students. To supplement the initial student-generated discussion, a distinction can be made between explicit request forms and implicit request forms and the teacher can discuss when to use each. The following are some examples of explicit request forms:

1. Get to the point, will you please?

2. I don't get it. What are you talking about?

3. What are you trying to say?

4. What's your point?

5. Excuse me, but I didn't quite catch the point. Can you go over it again?

6. I'm sorry, I didn't understand the point you were making. Could you possibly say it again, please?

It is clear that like other forms of request, requesting the main point in an explicit way necessarily consists of what Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984: 200) call the 'Head act' and optionally 'Adjunct(s) to Head act'. In example (5) above, for instance, the 'Head act' is "Can you go over it again?" while the 'Adjuncts to Head act' include both the Attention Getter "Excuse me" and the Grounder "but I didn't quite catch the point" (terms taken from Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). The teacher may want to point out this structure to the students so as to raise their awareness of the different parts that make up requests.

It is also possible to request the main point in an indirect way, with 'Adjuncts to the Head act' alone while the illocutionary force of the request is only implied or hinted at. Examples of implicit request forms include:

7. I don't quite understand what you are trying to get at.

8. I'm sorry I didn't catch what you were saying. The line is not clear. (over the phone)

9. Sorry I dozed off just now and missed your point.

10. Pardon me, but this is such a new field to me that I don't think I can sort out the central idea of the lecture by myself.

Students can discuss the meanings and functions of the different requesting forms in small groups. This will naturally lead to further discussions on question 4 as to the various factors that may influence speakers' choice of linguistic forms. Some possible factors include the age, gender and social status differentials between the interactants, the presence of third parties and their social status, as well as the setting where the interaction takes place.

If time permits, students can do role-plays in pairs. Have a few situations pre-written on cards and let each pair choose one. Students can prepare the role play for two minutes before they try it in front of the class. They can comment on each other's performances and give suggestions as to how to improve them. Some possible situations are listed below for your reference. Because of the nature of the requests, teachers should allow students the opportunity to opt out, and not perform the request. In that case, students should explain why they wouldn't do it.

Situation 1: A friend of yours has to leave home for a few days but she does not have anyone to look after her dog while she is away. She wants you to do her a favour but she knows it is a big imposition on you, so she just keeps on telling you about the place she is visiting and why she can not take her dog with her. You interrupt her and ask her what she is trying to say.

Situation 2: One of your star employees is doing his annual report at a group meeting. He summarises what he has achieved over the past year in a number of points but you missed a few. You ask him to go over those points again.

Situation 3: Your history professor has just given a lecture on the French Revolution but you didn't understand the first part of it. You want to ask him to recapitulate the main point for you.

The four conversations provided in the *Mosaic* textbook (pp. 10-11) can also be used with the situations the teacher has prepared.

Procedure

The activity can be carried out by following the procedure below.

1. Introduce to students the need of requesting the main point. Situation 3 in the previous section can serve as an example.

2. Ask students to reflect on their native language: What would they say in their native language if they want their teacher or professor /best friend/little brother to repeat what he/she has just said? The result should be a set of different expressions in one or more languages other than English. If the teacher does not speak the language of the learner, the learner may translate the forms in his native language into English. The teacher can then make note of any linguistic variations in one or more languages and draw students' attention to them. This activity is meaningful regardless of whether students are of a homogeneous group or not. Asking students to reflect on their native language can usually arouse students' interest in the activity, thus enabling them to see the point more clearly.

3. In small groups, students list all the English forms they know that they think can be used to request the main point. Each group then reports to the class while the teacher writes the forms on the blackboard.

4. Discuss the different meanings and functions of the forms on the blackboard and when to use which form with whom. The teacher can also prepare a list of some possible request forms (see examples given in the previous section) for this purpose so that students can differentiate explicit from implicit request forms and note down important points next to the forms. It is also appropriate

for the teacher to highlight the fact here that intonation plays a very important role in communicating one's intended meaning. For example, a polite request form such as (5) above can sound much less polite when said in a falling intonation. The teacher can ask students to demonstrate this point by going through the list of request forms using different intonations.

5.   In groups of 3 or 4, discuss the possible factors that may cause the differences in the use of the different forms, then each group reports to the class.

6.   Divide students into pairs. Each pair role-plays a hypothetical situation (typed or written on cards) that requires one member of each pair to request the main point from the other member.

7.   The activity can end with the teacher summarising why this activity is important. This is the time when the teacher can highlight the fact that knowing English grammar alone is not enough. It is the appropriate use of the language that matters more. For example, if a student says to his professor, 'Get to the point, will you please?', he has violated certain pragmatic rules even though there is nothing wrong with his utterance grammatically.

Rationale

The purpose of the activity described here is twofold: (1) To raise and reinforce students' pragmatic awareness and (2) to provide them an opportunity to practise the language. Because pragmatic developmemnt has been shown to lag behind grammatical development, and because pragmatics has been shown to be teachable (at least speeding up the process of pragmatic acquisition by second language learners, Bouton, 1993), it becomes all the more important that language teachers and curriculum designers incorporate pragmatics into textbooks and classroom activities.

The need to request the main point may occur in both casual conversations and academic settings. The teaching of this language function will equip EFL as well as ESL learners with necessary skills to communicate with other English speakers more appropriately and effectively. The linguistic forms students learn through this activity and the social connotations that go with those linguistic forms can be easily applied to other requesting situations so that students actually acquire something more than just one speech act.

Alternatives and Caveats

Instead of starting with requesting the main point and expand the scope to general requests, which is a bottom-up technique, the teacher can also use a top-down technique by starting with general requests before narrowing down to requesting the main point. This top-down technique would be especially appropriate if the teaching of pragmatics in the classroom is arranged by speech acts, such as Apologies, Requests, Compliments, and so on. The bottom-up technique suits us better for this particular activity since Requesting the Main Point, not Request, is the title and focus of the section in Chapter One of the *Listening and Speaking* book.

This activity has been tried out in the ESL setting of Singapore. When used in an EFL situation, however, more time can be allocated to compare the similarities and differences between students' native language and English since the student population is more likely to be homogeneous in such a setting. Students usually participate more enthusiastically when their native language and culture are brought into play (Bardovi-Harlig et al, 1991).

References

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