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The Pragmatics of Greetings: Teaching Speech Acts in the EFL Classroom

When Taro's name was called, he stepped away from the tired and disoriented group of Japanese students who had just completed the long flight from Tokyo to Toronto and a bus ride to the University reception where they would meet their Canadian host families. His host mother walked right up to him and gave him a hug.

Taro stood with his arms at his sides looking uncomfortable, if not alarmed. He did not know how to react. Japanese do not touch during an initial greeting. When his host mother ended the hug, he gave a nervous laugh. She smiled to disguise the awkwardness of the moment.

Taro was not the only one in the group unprepared for their initial meeting with a host family. Although they had studied the English language before their trip, the group lacked an understanding of its pragmatics and, in this case, the speech act of greetings.

As a language teacher, I have long realized that knowing the words of a language is only part of speaking it. Knowing how to interpret a communicative act is equally important, and it needs to be taught explicitly. Therefore, I make this learning a regular part of the class experience. As the chaperone for the group of Japanese students in this anecdote, I was able to witness the benefits of pragmatics instruction when a host mother greeted another of the exchange students, a girl who had participated in my class the year before. She knew what to expect through watching videos and participating in class discussions on the speech act of greetings. When her host mother gave her a hug, she hugged back with a smile on her face. She also knew that the appropriate response to her host mother's greeting of "Nice to meet you" was a reply of "Nice to meet you, too."

Greetings are one of the few speech acts that children are taught explicitly in their native language (Kakiuchi 2005). Yet, the communicative function that greetings serve is usually understood as subordinate to other purposes in the ultimate goal of communication (DuFon 1999). In the language classroom, this subordinate position often means that teaching greetings is neglected; too little attention is paid to the roles that greetings play in various cultures and how these roles may affect the ultimate goal of communication. This article will provide background information on this important speech act and instructional strategies for use in the classroom to help teachers equip their students with a critical component to successful interactions. This article also describes four awareness-raising tasks that introduce the greeting speech act

as a cycle of explicit pragmatic instruction, including keeping a greeting journal, watching contemporary TV shows, using discourse completion tasks (DCTs), and participating in role plays and mingles.

THE PRAGMATICS OF GREETINGS

When most people think of a greeting, they consider it as the first words spoken in a turn-taking routine used to acknowledge the presence of another person or persons (Goffman 1971). A greeting can be as simple as a nod of the head or a wave of the hand. It also can be a statement that forms an *adjacency pair*, in that there is an initiation of contact followed by a response, both of which can be either verbal or nonverbal and may conclude with a warm embrace (Omar 1991). Greetings appear to be a universal construct in that all languages engage them in some form. Even animals have some kind of greeting, as found by primatologist Jane Goodall in her work with chimpanzees (Goodall 2007) and as evidenced by watching common pets greet other animals—including humans.

The form a greeting takes, as with all speech acts, depends mostly on the context of the encounter (Ellis 1994). Context considers the relationship of the people—are they friends, acquaintances, or perfect strangers? Is there a power difference, as with a boss and employee? What is the degree of imposition, which includes both temporal and spatial concerns: Are they in a hurry, or is the distance between the two people somehow constraining? Maybe the relationship has certain rules that make an overly friendly greeting seem inappropriate at the time. For English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, the ability to make an appropriate greeting is often the first opportunity to demonstrate communicative competence.

Although greetings may seem simple and formulaic in their wording, they are culturally saturated speech acts that can determine the course of an encounter well past the initial exchange (DuFon 1999). For example, both the Japanese boy and his host mother in the opening anecdote experienced discomfort that may have stilted the early days of an important relationship. The content and delivery of a greeting influences a first impression and can also create a lasting one.

TEACHING GREETING PRAGMATICS

According to Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor, "The chief goal of instruction in pragmatics is to raise learners' pragmatic awareness and give them choices about their interactions in the target language" (2003, 38). It may not seem obvious to language learners how native speakers navigate through these choices. Indeed, even though instructors cannot teach students how to act in every given context, they must provide students with a number of choices in a variety of contexts to enable them to develop a bank of potentially useful options. The typical second language (L2) classroom may provide too few examples of this extremely important phase of communication. As a remedy, instructors should assess the types of situations students encounter and give them a variety of examples within each situation. With some knowledge of the most useful greeting routines and the variety of greetings one might encounter, students can begin to make their own choices and create their own greeting routines, moving them closer toward communicative competence in the target language. The goal is to provide input and an environment for interpreting the communicative act (Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor 2003). Although providing more than one or two greeting options may seem like a lot of work, most students will encounter only

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a few contexts and will not need an unlimited greetings vocabulary.

I use the following four awareness-raising tasks in my first-year speaking courses with college-aged students at a low-intermediate level of English. The students have had very limited experience communicating with native speakers.

TASK 1: KEEPING A GREETING JOURNAL

Journaling is an effective method for self-reflection in language acquisition (DuFon 1999). Asking the students to keep a journal of the greetings they experience in both their own and the target language brings awareness to the function. I begin my classroom instruction on greetings with awareness-raising questions that draw attention to the key points of the greeting speech act by allowing students to reflect on their own experience and knowledge. I ask them to answer three primary questions in a greeting journal:

1. Who are some of the people you greet on a typical day?
2. What expressions do you use when you greet these people?
3. Why do you greet some people differently from others?

These questions prompt students to discuss the kinds of greetings they have experienced with native English speakers and with speakers of their own language. I ask students to (1) observe the many differences in the way one greets in an authentic exchange and (2) compare them with the phrases and routines they have learned from their English textbooks while considering how to apply this comparison to experiences a college-level student might encounter. Thinking of situations in which they would use greetings helps students gain awareness of available patterns and routines and of what is communicated by their use.

In the instructions for this activity, students are asked to observe and address the following three items (based on suggestions made by Brown and Levinson 1987) on a daily basis for one week:

1. The "role" of two speakers who greet each other. Is one in a position of power, or is each of equal status? (Students may need examples of power versus equality status in order to imagine their roles concretely.)
2. The relationship of the two participants. Are they close friends or merely acquaintances?
3. The imposition of the act. Where does it occur? Are there any temporal limits or spatial constraints (e.g., busy hallway, open sidewalk, subway) on the exchange?

Students record this information along with the words that are said and the observed accompanying facial expressions or body language. Over the period of one week, students share one of their observations during each class session. This exercise is language in use, and through this work, the pragmatics of language is laid out for comment and discussion. Two or three examples per student over the week are sufficient for this task. An example of a journal entry might be the following:

> [date]
>
> Two teachers meet in the hallway. Equal roles.

They seem to be friends but not close.

They are waiting for the elevator. The area in front of the elevator is small.

Hey Jim, how's it going?

Good. How was your weekend?

Great. Did you read that email from the Dean?

Yes. I will come to your office later to talk about it.

OK. See you later.

A key part of this task is the accompanying class discussion, in which I ask students questions such as, "How could the greeting be done differently?" or "What might create awkwardness or cause problems with this type of greeting?"

TASK 2: OBSERVING AND DOCUMENTING GREETINGS ON TV SHOWS

TV shows present a variety of greeting situations. One series that works well for my students is the American high school drama *The O.C.*, which aired on network television from 2003 to 2007 and follows the life of an economically disadvantaged boy who is taken in by a family living in the affluent Southern California suburb of Orange County (or OC, for short). I use this series to discuss the following types of conversations: intimate greetings within families (such as one might have during a homestay experience), conversations with peers (such as one might have with another student or when making a new friend), and serious interactions (such as one might have with a person of authority, as in a job interview).

As an in-class activity, I show parts of an episode, stopping at key points to discuss the interaction. For example, in Episode 3 from Season 1 of *The O.C.* (called "The Gamble"), the main character, the high school boy, meets for the first time the mother of a girl he likes. The mother greets him with her full name and "I've heard so much about you." He responds with, "Nice to meet you, too." I pose a series of questions to my students about the exchange: What are some other possible responses? What effects might a different response have on the boy and girl's relationship? What does the boy's response of "Nice to meet you, too" communicate to the mother? We end the discussion of this scene by examining the boy's response of "Nice to meet you, too" that implies the mother said, "Nice to meet you," which she did not. It is clear in the context of the scene that his response of "Nice to meet you, too" was conciliatory. We discuss why he would want to be as nice as possible.

Addressing what is inferred from the way something is said versus just translating the words and grammar of the sentences makes this type of analysis more pragmatic. Studies have shown that EFL students without the chance to experience the culture firsthand tend to focus on the grammar and vocabulary and are not aware of the way language is used (Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei 1998). Observing and documenting a speech act in a TV show brings culturally relevant experience into the classroom.

My school library bought multiple copies of the first season of *The O.C.* so that students could watch nearly 12 hours of English spoken by native speakers. Originally, the series served as a representation of American teenage life through clothing, music, slang, and age-specific concerns. What once made it contemporary now dates it. But the basis of the situations for language instruction purposes still holds.

Comedies often provide examples of people using language awkwardly. One of my favorite comedies to demonstrate such awkwardness is *The Big Bang Theory*, which follows a group

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of four male scientists at a Southern California university. The characters are "geeks" and often make inappropriate comments in social situations. In Season 2, Episode 9 (called "The White Asparagus Triangulation"), the main characters meet a beautiful, blond female character. Because of their inexperience speaking to women and general discomfort in new social situations, the greeting speech act appears unnatural; native English speakers tend to find it quite funny. In this episode, the only greeting word that is used is "Hello," but it is said with many different intonations that cause the woman to be noticeably uncomfortable and to leave abruptly, an outcome that was not the intention of the characters. In this example, students witness how greetings do not always go well even for native speakers and that the inappropriateness is expressed with facial expression and tone, not just word choice. Looking at aspects such as intonation, stress, and facial expressions in communication is new to many students but essential for language competence.

Another topic that works well for classroom lessons is the physical touching involved in greetings. In many American TV shows, one finds examples of hugging, kissing, and handshaking. Students see how physical touching in greetings changes based on relationships and situations; one character may be greeted with a hug and another may receive a handshake. Variety TV, such as talk shows or shows where the host interviews a guest, is a great source for demonstrating variations in the physical nature of greetings. The host might hug some guests and shake hands with others. For this topic, the discussion can focus on the levels of intimacy of the physical action and what this says about a relationship. We also discuss whether a handshake rather than a hug could be a practical decision; for example, the person being greeted might be rather tall and a hug around the neck would be difficult. I find it particularly insightful when students volunteer what was wrong or different from what was expected.

American television programs like *The O.C.* and *The Big Bang Theory* are generally available for purchase and download on Amazon, iTunes, Vudu, and YouTube (for example, see www.youtube.com/show/theoc and www.youtube.com/show/bigbangtheory).

TASK 3: USING DISCOURSE COMPLETION TASKS (DCTs)

A DCT is a form-focused task that gives students an opportunity to record language reviewed in a contextual format. It can be used for more than merely focusing attention on a given speech act or event. A typical DCT will name actors and a situation that a student considers in order to fill in or select language that is appropriate for the interaction. One exercise I use has two parts. First, I provide students DCTs with five greeting contexts and ask them to work in groups to decide what would be the most appropriate language to use in each given context. I then choose one scenario and ask them to respond as quickly as possible with a written answer. Here are five scenarios I have used successfully with my students:

1. You are a student of XYZ University. You are back in your hometown during winter vacation. In the supermarket, by chance you see a teacher of yours from high school. Provide an appropriate greeting.

2. Your good friend has been studying abroad in the United States. You decide to meet her at the airport when she returns home. You have not seen her for a year. She comes out of the gate. Provide an appropriate greeting.

3. You and a friend are walking down the hallway at your school. Your English teacher enters the hallway and says hello. Provide an appropriate greeting.

4. You are working in an office. One day, an important person comes to your office to have a meeting with your boss. The person makes eye contact with you. Provide an appropriate greeting.

5. You are walking downtown on your way to meet a friend at a coffee shop. You are late. As you turn a corner, you come face-to-face with an older woman who is your neighbor. She has lived in your neighborhood for many years and is friends with your mother. Provide an appropriate greeting.

I have found that making this lesson a competition works well to engage my students and reinforce the purpose of the activity. The first group to finish is given the highest score regardless of the content. This teaching strategy rewards quick response and choice rather than contemplation, given the need for relative speed in actual language use. In any speech act, making a choice is half the battle. When each group is finished, a representative writes the group's answers on the board. Once we establish a few appropriate and polite greeting patterns, the students perform role plays using the target language.

TASK 4: PARTICIPATING IN ROLE PLAYS AND MINGLES

Role plays

Once students have an understanding of the greeting as a speech act, I focus instruction on role-playing activities that challenge them to consider how they would respond in situations

ROLE PLAY 1

1A. Your good friend has been studying abroad in the United States. You decide to meet her at the airport when she returns home. You haven't seen her for a year. She comes out of the gate.

You should:

a) Greet
b) Show concern
c) Ask follow-up questions

1B. You have been studying abroad in the United States and are returning home. At the airport, you will be meeting your good friend after not seeing him or her for a year.

You should:

a) Greet
b) Show concern
c) Ask follow-up questions

ROLE PLAY 2

2A. You are invited to your friend's birthday party. There are a few people there you don't know. Everyone who was invited to the party is about the same age as you. You want to make new friends.

You should:

a) Open a conversation
b) Exchange pleasantries
c) Introduce yourself

2B. You are a guest at a party. Someone approaches you.

You should:

a) Exchange pleasantries
b) Introduce yourself

Figure 1. Greeting role plays

with verbal interaction. This verbal activity complements and supports the written DCT. One role play that my students favor is the scenario described above for the DCT where the student unexpectedly sees a former teacher. This time, when students are told to provide an appropriate greeting, they are asked to do the following:

1. Greet ("Hello, Mr. Smith.")
2. Give context ("My name is [First Name and Last Name]. I am your student from XYZ High School.")
3. Share information ("I haven't seen you since graduation.")

As a result of this practice, students become aware of the difficulty if the teacher fails to recognize or remember the student, which creates a face-threatening act (Brown and Levinson 1987). A popular variation of this lesson is a turnabout scenario where the student plays the teacher who runs into a former student. In this case, the student who plays the teacher is asked to:

1. Greet ("Hello, [First Name or Mr./Ms. Last Name].")
2. Show concern ("How have you been?" / "Did you find a job?" / "Are you going to college?")
3. Ask questions ("What have you been doing since you graduated?")

I pair the students and give them a time limit to take notes and write up a simple script. The time limit varies depending on the level of the students and the stage of the lesson we are in. In the beginning stages, I allow more time for reflection and consideration of phrases and structure. But as we move through the practice over time, I encourage making decisions more quickly to reflect what it means to participate in the actual speech act. Figure 1 demonstrates two role-play activities that can be used for this purpose.

To make the activity self-reflective, I ask students to role-play the situation first in their native language and then in English; this provides perspective by revealing differences between the conversations in terms of both language and customary practices. We then discuss these differences to draw attention to phrases and actions that are important to the appropriate performance of the act. Depending on class size and time frame, I ask a few groups to act out their role plays for the class.

Mingles

Another awareness-raising task is an information exchange, sometimes called a *mingle* (Borzova 2014), which is a type of open role play. More specifically, this activity is a "form-focused" (Kasper and Rose 2001) mingle, or one that emphasizes particular language structures. I give students two strips of paper and ask them to write a sentence using simple past tense about what they did over the weekend. The papers are collected and redistributed. I then ask the students to read the sentence and refer to it by writing a question on the back of the paper using question words (e.g., *what, where, when, who, how long*). For example, a student might write, "I went shopping." The second student might write, "What did you buy?" or "Where did you go shopping?" The students fold the paper and put it into a hat. They again choose a paper and—using the opening, closing, and other dialogue in Figure 2 to help them participate appropriately—go around the room having conversations with the goal of finding the person who did the activity described on the paper. If students find a match, they ask the student the question on the back. Advanced students develop other follow-up questions. I move around the class, observing and helping the conversations along.

There are many other ways to choreograph this activity. One option is to have the students line up in two rows facing each other. The students have a conversation with the person across from them. Then, at a designated point, one row moves down to establish new pairs and the activity repeats.

Part 1: Opening Dialogue

(Hello) _____. How's it going?
(Great!) And you?
I'm (fine.)

Part 2: Social Function Dialogue

(By the way) My name is _____.
I'm _____.

(I don't think we've met. I am _____.)
(Nice to meet you.)
(Nice to meet you, too.)

(I'm sorry. What's your name again? I'm _____.)

(Good to see you again. Long time no see.)

Page 3: Transitions

(So, …) (By the way, …) (Well, …)

Page 4: Question–Response Dialogue

How was your weekend? (week?) / Do you have any plans for this weekend?
(It was good.) / I (will) _____ and _____.
That's great. (That's too bad.)
How about your weekend? / Do you have any plans?
(It was great.) / I (am going to) _____ and _____.
Oh yeah? (Question)
(Answer)

Page 5: Closing Dialogue

(Well, …) (So, …) / Hey, what time is it?
It is _____.
I'm sorry, but I have to go. It was nice talking to you. Talk to you later, OK?
Sure. Take it easy. Good-bye.
Good-bye.

Figure 2. Dialogue for short form-focused role plays

Another format is to have the students form concentric circles. Using a structured rotating pairs sequence encourages the mingling aspect of this activity.

The examples in Figure 2 are appropriate for initial class sessions with students who meet only once a week; however, as the students develop relationships within the classroom, they need to create more appropriate exchanges. To help students practice switching from casual to more formal greetings, I conduct simple activities, such as distributing a VIP badge to random students within a group and instructing them to wear the badge, as it signifies a change in social status for the

role play. This exercise effectively generates more varied conversations.

INTERACTIONAL ACTS

When students do these four awareness-raising tasks, questions concerning interactional acts emerge: turn-taking rules, negotiation, and the fact that a greeting accompanies an opening and often includes a closing. When teaching greetings, I especially like to bring awareness to the initial interaction of opening a conversation. Since a handshake often functions as an opening (and a closing as well), one of the first activities I use is to teach students how to shake hands like a Westerner. Students stand up, face each other, and practice shaking hands. It is easy to teach an appropriate handshake with timing and grip as key factors. Proper timing and a confident grip are important when performing a handshake, just as timing and position are to a hug.

Pragmatic norms related to greetings also include nonverbal behavior (e.g., eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, and physical contact), spatial association, and relational responsibility. Greeting contexts often are found near elevators, in hallways, and in places where people are moving. As such, proper etiquette is harder to define because time constraints play a major role in greeting acts. What constitutes a successful greeting act depends largely on contextual information and on the interlocutors themselves. Some greetings might be accomplished very quickly, while others might need more extensive verbal exchanges.

ASSESSMENT

Although evaluating an understanding of language functions can be challenging for any teacher, assessment is an important part of teaching the greeting speech act. Because the purpose of explicit pragmatic instruction is to prepare students for the variability of discourse, I pair the assessment tool with the objective of the awareness-raising tasks. No one type of assessment meets all the needs.

For assessing performance, as is required when evaluating conversations in pairs or groups of three or more, oral or written feedback works well. The feedback can include comments on key phrase use as well as tonal quality and awareness of hesitations and nonverbal cues.

Discourse completion tests can aid in assessing L2 pragmatics. In this article, for example, I have discussed DCTs where the "T" represents "task." The "T" can just as easily be used to represent "test." This change of focus simply involves re-tasking the examples used into a testing environment with timed responses.

A scaled assessment also can be used to evaluate students' awareness of an answer's appropriateness in a written example of a greeting exchange. For instance, one might use a scale from "most appropriate" to "least appropriate" below a written greeting; the students are asked to rate the example on that scale and their responses are assessed (Ross and Kasper 2013).

Finally, a rubric is a helpful tool for both the students and teachers to break down functions involved in greetings. My rubric for role plays and mingles focuses on four key functions:

1. The speed with which the speaker can produce the target structures.
2. The target structure accuracy of grammar and vocabulary.
3. The *prosody*, or stress, intonation, and tone of the exchange.

What constitutes a successful greeting act depends largely on contextual information and on the interlocutors themselves.

4. The listener's understanding of the purpose of the exchange.

The final item on the rubric is a commenting space where the teacher can offer general reflections on the speech act's success.

CONCLUSION

The Japanese exchange students whom I chaperoned in Canada may have appeared awkward or even rude by their responses to their host families' welcomes; however, what appeared to be inappropriate behavior actually was response illiteracy. Giving EFL students the skills they need to understand language cues from the moment they meet someone in another culture can help them create a lasting relationship, as well as avert difficult situations with potentially negative results.

Success in delivering greetings can be taught and assessed in a classroom setting, but the real test comes from future unscripted interactions with the students and their performance of greetings as they pass me in the hallway and how they interact in unexpected situations in the real world. Teaching and assessing greetings and other speech acts is unique because the only way to know whether a student "gets it" is to see him or her use it in an unplanned, unprepared context.

When it comes to greetings, a practical way to prepare students for what happens outside the classroom environment is through explicit pragmatic instruction. Such instruction should become a regular part of language study classes regardless of the native and target languages. Quite simply, the stakes are high when greetings may result in lasting impressions. Students who receive explicit instructions through the awareness-raising tasks described in this article develop an enhanced ability to participate appropriately and increase their chances of communication success.

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