

Phatic Language for Building Relationships

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人間関係に役立つ言葉

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Abstract: Observation of various English communication lessons in Japan as well as observations of real time social interactions between American host families and Japanese high school students led to a recognition of a large discrepancy between what is being taught and how the language is used in real life settings. The scope of this article is to generally raise awareness of the importance of phatic language instruction in communicative classrooms and through that enhance learners interlanguage development for various exchange programs abroad. Most of the information in this paper was gathered through observations, informal interviews with students, as well as students' written work pre and post school trip abroad. My conclusions favor the instruction of phatic phrases in English communication classes through the use of various conversation simulations, not only to develop language skills, but also to develop and maintain important international social relationships with communities abroad.

Key words : Phatic language, English communication, conversation simulations, social relationships

1. Introduction

It is hard to think of casual social interactions between English first language speakers that do not contain phatic language elements. Quintessential casual conversation consists of an exchange of meanings between multiple participants, and the key elements in it are the *participants* and the *interpersonal involvement*. When relating the above to English communication education in Japan, most noticeable are the linguistic features that are not targeting social relationships. The features are taught through lengthy passages that offer little relevance to the learners. Moreover, English communication education resorts to textbook-learner dyad, and the missing critical elements are the participants and the interpersonal involvement. Witnessing how host families use their modified language to interact with Japanese high school students, one can't help but notice that phatic language is the foundation of how the social interactions occur. In classroom settings, providing simulations of casual interactions between interlocutors can offer a paramount field where various linguistic forms can be introduced and practiced. Communicative language teaching and learning can be enhanced by having more relevance to the learners. I develop my opinion based on my context of work by stating the current classroom issues, phatic language as a supplementary material, a description of interactions, opinions on phatic language, and lastly, various issues surrounding this theme.

2. Communication Classroom Issues

It is said that teachers' own language learning experiences, whether successful or not, are what shapes their own way of thinking on how a second language should be taught. In most cases, Japanese English language teachers teach based on, out of the context, language features from textbooks. The time constrains don't allow the learners to 'sink in' the knowledge and there is little chance for the learners to test own casual conversation ability. Although interesting to read, long excerpts in textbooks lack relevance by having little to do with how the speakers engage in conversations. This issue is represented by lesson 6 of a currently used textbook in the first year of high school. The textbook is titled, *New One World Communication 1*. A passage in lesson 6 deals with a disaster that occurred in Haiti.

“On January 12th, 2010, a huge earthquake hit Haiti. Many houses were destroyed and a lot of people were buried alive. It was a disaster which killed a large number of people. When this horrible news traveled all over the world, people wondered what they could do for the earthquake victims” (New One World Communication 1, 2018; 66).

The Haiti story is followed on the next page by various comprehension problems. They consist of T/F questions, two read and answer questions, and a grammar feature of SUBJECT+VERB+OBJECT with an example sentence. The grammar focus is on the clause which is in bold words. “People wondered **what they could do for the earthquake victims**” (New One World Communication 1, 2018; 66). Linking the clause to real time communication between native English speakers, it is really hard to imagine the actual use of this linguistic feature. An overwhelming load of reading content sets the stage for learners to process linguistic forms that end up being forgotten as soon as the consequent load of linguistic forms is introduced. The lack of interpersonal function renders these items unusable for a causal social interaction. In the later pages of the chapter, there are some traces of phatic items in the dialog-type readings, but they are not the focus of instruction. The linguistic features in the textbook are mostly used to process various problems and to enhance declarative knowledge for testing purposes and are not ideal for casual conversation betterment. Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada (2006) present us with a list of learning conditions for language development. The list includes the following:

- Freedom to speak – active or passive
- Time availability – learners practice time, a time with proficient speakers
- Corrective feedback – provision of correct grammar and pronunciation
- Corrective feedback – clarification of students' meaning and word choice
- Modified input – provision of easy to understand meaning

The list was compared to the classroom conditions in this paper's context. When talking about freedom to speak the conditions vary from teacher to teacher. The classes are limited in how much learners can freely output the linguistic forms from the text. Time availability is also limited and blended in between teacher lectures and written exercises. As for the exposure to proficient speakers, it really depends on the teacher's L2 language skills. There is an ample amount of grammar corrective feedback when written. However, not much is spent on the clarification of meaning since free creation of language is almost nonexistent. Modified input is very minimal since the majority of the lessons are carried out in the first language and English is mostly left for in-classroom administration, i.e., 'open your books', 'everybody stand up'. Overall, the classroom conditions resemble structure based instructional setting that aims at accuracy, not fluency.

3. Phatic Language and classrooms settings

Some language researchers think that the reason early humans developed speaking was to survive and to gossip about others. Dunbar (1996) claims that the early humans evolved conversation as a tool for 'vocal grooming' to bond in groups. In essence, a causal conversation is a social activity of sharing inner thoughts and feelings about others through speaking and listening. This is what humans universally do. Thornbury and Slade (2006) reiterate “what is at stake in casual conversation is the social wellbeing of the participants, the aim being essentially phatic, to signal friendship and to strengthen the bonds within social group.” With this, we see that English language transcends classroom instruction, grammar, its practice and all the issues that entail. It assumes a role of a tool for diplomacy between unrelated counterparts from different linguistic groups while bridging international communities. Phatic language is a fundamental element of language across different culture groups. It is an imperative and often overlooked component for interlanguage development. It offers an array of simple structures to operate in before the complex ones are introduced. It boosts skills for initiation of conversations when there is nothing to be discussed and assures to never run out of topics. We could go as far and say, it is a tool for repairing and building the moments where casual conversation goes wrong.

Phatic language cannot be discussed without mentioning the name of Bronislaw Malinowski (1926) who coined the term *phatic communion*. He states that it is a free, aimless, social intercourse deprived of any context of situation. Malinowski's stand-alone view is conversely argued by Bakhtin (1986) who contends that context is an essential part that enables a speaker to choose an appropriate phatic device. In support of the latter view, I have categorized phatic phrases according to context, or the scenes of communication that

actually occur during the school trips abroad. Worth mentioning here is the fact that in my context, the school trip itineraries follow a repetitive pattern from year to year. This makes them a reliable and predictable source from which phatic language curriculum can be rendered. A range of 'must know' language can be narrowed down lightening the overwhelming load of L2 prescription in classroom. Here, the relevance can be increased and the gap of studied language and its functionality can be narrowed down. 'How was _____?' is an example of phatic language which is an open end phrase from which a fairly large amount of patterns can be generated over and over. For a scene of talking to host family members in the evening after work or after school, the patterns can be: *How was _____?*, *How did you feel about _____?*, *Are you tired?*, *Nice to see you again.*, *Would you like to do something?*. In the delivery of such items, the instruction about temporal boundaries of the items might have a lower priority than the semantic choices. For example, at the end of a school day or some activity, 'How was your day, today?' is an appropriate semantic choice to express an emotional involvement.

High school students have shown evidence of successful transfer of some phatic language from L1 to L2. It is encountered in written and oral role plays and free conversations. Below is an example of a written role play. The underlined phatic language that has not been instructed in classroom. The scene is about sightseeing a famous landmark while abroad.

A: What is your second memory?

B: The second memory is the church.

A: Oh, that is wonderful.

B: Yes, the church is very big!!

A: Yes, I think so. Could you go inside?

B: Yes, stained glass is very beautiful.

A: I want to see it.

B: I want you to see it too.

A central to phatic phrases is the presence of a personal pronoun *you*. Above, it appears physically as words, but it can also be implied as in *How was the weekend?*.

A drawback of the EFL instruction is the environment that does not provide enough background for the students to hear the culturally approved ways to interact. So creating *abroad-like* situations during communication classes creates an opportunity where various casual conversation items can be practiced. Swain (1985) presents us with an output hypothesis in which she states that when students produce language, that is when they begin to see the limitations of their interlanguage and that is when learning takes place. If teachers provide pragmatic phrases for different situations actually encountered during visits abroad as an input, the students can create their own simulated conversations. Teachers can further provide scaffolding by creating awareness of the differences between the American and Japanese speech acts; what is said (locution), what is meant (illocution), and what are the effects on the interlocutor (perlocution), (Austin, 1962). The input, processing and conversation simulations in whichever way carried out can make a sequence of *meaning to form to meaning progression*. "If learners focus on meaning when studying then they will acquire second language in a similar way to their first" (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). These authors also claim that form focused instruction is more effective when language feature practiced has a major impact on accuracy of their message. A list of phatic language provides a conglomerate of items learners can chose from to plug in to their own original conversations to load the content with mutuality.

4. Interaction Description

Having participated as a chaperon on nearly a decade worth of school trips in the US, through observations, a fairly consistent pattern of interaction appeared between the host families and students. The school trips to the US are a week long homestay programs in which host families volunteer their time and resources to host. The program is not for profit, hence there is a strong emphasis on maintaining good standings with the host families for the next generations of students to be hosted. The host families have

various reasons for hosting. Some of them have connections to Japan, some through previous experiences hosting Japanese students, travels, work, education, friendships, nationality or cultural interests. Interaction consist of a weekend and evenings spent together at home or doing various activities outside of home, ex. shopping, watching and participating in sports, dining out. Linguistic aspects of interactions are summarized in my personal notes:

- Most of the interactions are fairly shallow in meaning and short in length.
- Conversations are made up of series of contingent pairs (Van Lier, 1996).
- The emphasis of the conversations involve explorations of the differences and the common ground with purpose of becoming close.
- The use of phatic language is prevalent.
- The use of nonverbal communication, face expressions, gestures also occur.
- Long stints of silence are very common-abandonment of any communication.
- Native English speakers use modified language, and in almost all cases control the conversations.
- Giving and demanding information occur between both.
- Greetings, requests, invitations, comments are very common.
- Conversations are related to meals together, playing sports, watching TV or movies, house work, playing video games and board games, shopping.

Almost all host families state that they really enjoy having the students at their homes. No major happenings occur besides communication problems when it comes to making and understanding complex meanings.

5. Students' Thoughts on Phatic Language

When it comes to the preferences of materials used in English communication classes, being textbooks (tasks) or colloquial English-phatic language (simulated conversations), with pre-trip students a very common answer is colloquial English. Moreover, the most popular themes of simulated conversations are sports and hobbies. Some of the other themes are helping with house work, talking about Japanese and American culture, dinner table conversations. Students often state, since they will have to face host families while abroad, they need to know what to say in more direct manner. The instruction through the textbook doesn't offer that. Some students say that facing a person from a different country is too scary. The need to communicate with host family decreases motivation to participate in the school trip abroad. These testimonies attest to the gaps in EFL communication classes. Conversely, introverted students find performing role plays or free conversations in pairs challenging. They prefer working with textbooks.

In post-trip informal interviews, students often say, that phatic language in communication classes is the most useful resource for interacting with host families.

Also worth mentioning is the fact that during every day social intercourse with host families, the items taught in classes take on their own shape of interlanguage. Students often test their own hypothesis to create meaning. The forms are sometimes different from the forms taught in class, yet they attain the same semantic goals. This shows that students are monitoring their own utterances and try their own hypothesis in real time interaction.

Finally, other opinions come from students who return after long stints of 6 months to a full year abroad, when asked to talk about their language experience, they unanimously state that it is really important to be able to relate to the host family and friends in culturally approved way and for that, phatic phrases are indispensable.

6. Discussion

As language teachers, our first and foremost responsibility is to design the most effective and efficient syllabi, carry out the most effective and efficient lessons, and support learners in any way we can to improve their language ability. Whether offering phatic language in classrooms can produce better speakers is hard to say. The phrases are examples of fragments in conversations, they are just fillers, just short moments of talk in the lengthier exchanges of meanings. The rigorous form based instruction definitely has its place in the development of interlanguage, but in my opinion, it needs to be administered in smaller units for easier processability. It also needs to be supplemented by an ample amount of conversation

simulations that can give learners a chance to solidify the forms. With little room for deviation from the textbook content, teaching English communication in Japan through both grammar translation and audiolingual approaches will continue to fail to produce fluency and accuracy, according to Lightbown and Spada (2006). Heterodox views on English communicative teaching are required to change the current situations in classrooms. The idea of learner's ability to learn a great deal of language by themselves needs to be brought forward. Between different teaching styles and between different teachers and different themes of English classes, the linguistic forms end up being repeatedly overlapped in instruction. Language teachers need to admit that learners can figure it out on their own. Lightbown and Spada (2006) claim that learners can use their own internal mechanism to discover many complex rules and relationships. By decreasing the amount of language prescription in classrooms, students can have a freer chance to figure out how L2 works. They can find their own way to become close with host families. The cultural meaning, or illocutionary component, a thing that is not provided in dictionaries should be made aware. That is where the teachers have the most authority. Focus on linguistic items needs to be supported by teachers' focus on students' free output.

In classroom, everything taught must be testable. That is a major disadvantage in teaching a second language in a school environment. The goal for the learners is to possess declarative knowledge disregarding the actual value it has in real-time communication. Let's go back for a moment to the textbook passage about the disaster in Haiti. The use of linguistic feature seen earlier, is highly unlikely. Perhaps in a very narrowed down discussions on natural disasters, there could be some potential, but that is also in question. The passage was presented to a social studies teacher who did not respond favorably about the content. He stated that it is too simple to be used as a source of teaching material in social studies classes. To be valuable as a class material, the topic about disaster would have to be more based on the effects of the disaster on the communities, infrastructure and economy, rather than just basic facts about what occurred. In his opinion, the passage is inadequate for social studies instruction.

Now looking at the opposite end of the student's spectrum, phatic language instruction might mean less for the learners who neither have the option of going abroad, nor a chance to interact with native English speakers in Japan. Some of the rural areas might not allow the exposure to foreign visitors that the bigger cities provide. Regardless of the immediate need, phatic language might be just another set of forms, just like grammar, to be tested on. This might affect motivation negatively. And another drawback is the dynamic relationship between two Japanese social mores, *Honne* 本音 and *Tatemae* 建前. Where *honne* is a word describing person's true feelings and desires and *tatemae* is a word describing behavior and opinions expressed in public, in other words *true self* vs *false self*. Teachers need to be careful when teaching predetermined views which align the students into an idealized world that might not be approved intrinsically. *Tatemae* and phatic language are somewhat related in a sense that pragmatic transfer from L1 to L2 might be quite easy and direct. Using phatic language might be similar to putting words in students' mouths and it can lead to a lack of sincerity and an identity compromise. Not everyone is satisfied with being in position of negotiating community relations. Authentic self or *Honne* might not offer the mechanism to build community relations.

Conclusion

The target of this paper was to create awareness and general understanding about the interactions between Japanese high school students and host families. Also to draw out a potential source for language instruction. Teaching English in EFL context is not for communication purpose, it is for testing. However in recent years, the popularity of exchange programs and various international activities that schools offer provide an arena in which other linguistic targets and different type of language instruction is necessary. Not through the exclusive focus on form, but, through meaning based instruction, students have the ability to takeover and control what needs to be said to become close to the people that matter. To enhance English communication classes, phatic language instruction might just be the missing element to blend declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge. It can also impact the development of interlanguage skills for the scenes where students have to perform, develop and maintain social ties.

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