

MATERIALS SPOT

Framing polite refusals

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Understanding culturally acceptable ways to decline an invitation is an important speech act for language learners to know. According to Archer (2010), declining an invitation can be a ‘highly face-threatening act’ (p. 181) that has potential pitfalls for even native speakers. Polite ways of refusing an invitation are highly culturally informed and very context dependent.

The context behind the creation of these materials comes from the author’s position as an EIL (English as an international language) teacher at a small university campus in the state of Hawaii. At the time these materials were created, the author was teaching a CEFR equivalent B1.1 listening/speaking class with an internationally diverse population of students, primarily from Polynesian and East Asian countries. In general, the students already had a good command of interpersonal listening/speaking skills in English, but before fully matriculating to their various undergraduate degree programs, freshmen students are tested upon admittance and enrolled in EIL classes to fortify their academic language and to be more prepared for the academic standards and cultural expectations of their host institution. As part of orienting students to cross-cultural differences in communication, materials that increase awareness of pragmatic speech acts are considered appropriate to the aims of the course objectives.

With the overall aim of helping students recognize that within their host culture, they have the autonomous right to say no to any invitation that is undesirable for any reason, the specific aims of these materials are threefold: to discover if students can clearly communicate an invitation refusal, to help them to analyze the smaller speech acts that constitute a refusal, and to compare authentic examples of refusals for the purpose of analyzing cultural appropriateness.

A guiding principle in the design of these materials, and indeed behind the history of pragmatic instruction, is how to help students negotiate a potentially face-threatening speech act while maintaining politeness and fostering positive rapport with others. Although the students in this learning context are on a campus where English is the lingua franca, as LoCastro (2012) points

out, mere exposure to L2 input alone is not sufficient for developing pragmatic competence, explicit teaching is also required. Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003) add that one of the challenges of learning how to politely decline an invitation is that this speech act is normally reserved for one-on-one conversations, which typically escape the notice of L2 learners and thus deprive them of the opportunity to develop pragmatic competence through observation (as cited in Archer, 2010). In light of these challenges, opportunities for interaction with native L1 speakers outside of class is an important component of these materials.

Teaching materials

Readiness activity

Students are shown several illustrations that depict people being invited to do something that is clearly undesirable for someone of their particular disposition (see Appendix A for complete illustrations and a downloadable PPT). For example, one illustration depicts a vegetarian being invited to eat meat (see *Figure 1*).



Image created by Tom Court using a licensed copy of Doodly software.

Figure 1. Sample illustration depicting an undesirable invitation.

Students are asked what they think the person’s response will be given the nature of the invitation and the information available in the picture. This can also lead to brainstorming other reasons why

someone might refuse an invitation to eat meat, such as for religious reasons. Students are then invited to share what their own personal response would be in the given scenario. The teacher asks students whether they have ever received an invitation that they did not want to accept. As students share their experiences, the teacher prompts them to share what they said to decline the invitation.

Multimedia presentation and listening/ speaking practice

Using video animation software, the author created a short, cartoon style video to model both culturally appropriate and inappropriate ways, at least within a North American context, of declining invitations (Link: https://youtu.be/pMk_7ofNVpc). Although the video offers cartoon style illustrations and is designed to be mildly humorous, the types of invitations offered represent a range of different contexts, including school, work, and leisure. The inappropriate sample responses could mostly be classified as simply being incomplete and possibly too abrupt in the US context, where no apology nor excuse is given, but the more culturally appropriate sample responses follow a more formulaic routine of acknowledging the invitation with gratitude, apologizing, and then offering an excuse or a counter invitation.



Scene from video created by Tom Court using licensed copies of Toonly and Camtasia software.

Figure 2. Sample invitation illustration and script:
*“Some of us are studying in the library.
 Do you want to come?”*

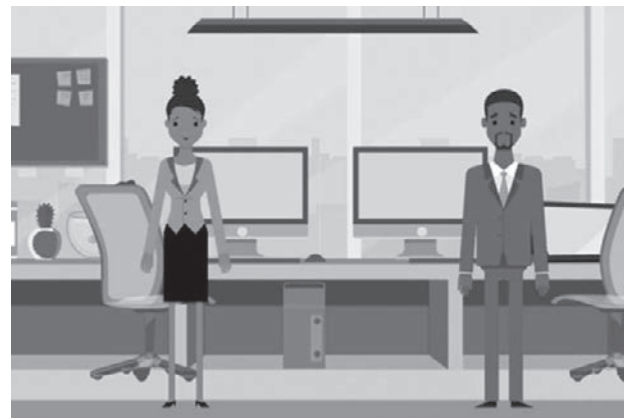
Instead of playing the video continuously, the teacher pauses intermittently between each conversation to check for comprehension and to invite discussion about what students think should be said in response to these specific invitations. Students are prompted by the teacher to first anticipate what characters will say, offer their own refusal to the invitation, and then evaluate the effectiveness of the different refusals after the characters have declined the invitations.

Teacher modeling

The teacher displays the text of the invitations and responses from the video using visuals that are formatted identically to the sample displayed in *Table 1* (see *Appendix E* for more examples as well as a downloadable PPT).

Setting and relationship: A female employee of a company invites a male co-worker to dinner. He considers her a good friend, but feels a little uncomfortable with the invitation.

Invitation: *Would you like to come over for dinner this weekend?*



Inappropriate response: *I don't think so.*

Appropriate response: *That's so kind of you! I hate to say no, but I have another engagement. Perhaps we could do lunch sometime?*

Analysis:

That's so kind of you! - acknowledgement and expression of gratitude.

I hate to say no, ... - initial apology
but I have another engagement. - offer excuse / explain circumstance

Perhaps we could do lunch sometime? - offer counter invitation

Table 1. Sample analysis of culturally inappropriate and appropriate responses

Through these tables, the teacher shows the context behind each conversation so that students can more fully understand the setting and relationship between the interlocutors. The tables also include the complete script for both the inappropriate and appropriate sample responses. The examples of inappropriate responses are an important component as they allow the students the opportunity to identify and confirm why such refusals may be considered inappropriate. The inappropriate responses also provide an opportunity for discussion about how paralinguistic channel cues, such as tone and vocal inflection, are equally important when it comes to making a polite refusal. Once the more appropriate

responses are identified and confirmed, the teacher models a breakdown of the simpler speech acts that are needed to create the more complex and culturally accepted invitation refusal. Instead of presenting a completely teacher-centered analysis, this modeling segment of the lesson can be made more interactive by withholding the teacher's analysis of the simpler speech acts and inviting students to analyze the functions with their speaking partners or conversation groups before the purpose of the speech acts are confirmed by the teacher in the PPT (*Appendix E*).

The tables that analyze the separate functions (*Appendix E*) draw attention to what Carroll (2011) refers to as a 'dispreferred turn shape' (p. 112). A dispreferred turn shape refers to the adjacency pairs (words/phrases that are often expected to accompany each other) employed in a sequential pattern that communicate refusal of an invitation, such as delayed response, acknowledgement, expression of thanks, and counter invitation. According to Bardovi-Harling and Hartford (1991), the most employed speech acts that are paired to decline an invitation are offering an explanation and proposing an alternative, but can also include functions such as 'expression of regret or apology, postponement, hedging, request for clarification or additional information, partial repeats and indefinite responses' (as cited in Félix-Brasdefer & Bardovi-Harling, 2010, pp. 164-165).

In-class speaking practice

After analyzing seven different invitation refusals, students should be able to identify that at least three common components of a culturally appropriate declination are: 1) an expression of gratitude in acknowledgement of the invitation, 2) explanation of personal circumstances that make the invitation untimely and 3) deferring the timing and circumventing (or complementing) the aim of the original invitation with a counter invitation. To gain practice with this pattern of refusal, students will be assigned to work with a speaking partner or in small conversation groups to role play the skill of declining an invitation in response to new invitations that are offered by their classmates. To assist students with brainstorming possible invitations, the sample invitations and requests in *Appendix B* can also be used as prompts. As students practise responding to the invitations, the teacher can circulate and prompt students to include an expression of gratitude, explanation of circumstances and counter invitation as part of their complete oral response.

Out-of-class interviews

After practising invitation refusals with their L2 classmates, students are assigned to interview two L1 speaking friends in order to find out how they would offer a refusal to one invitation and one request listed in *Appendix B*. An important part of this assignment is

the requirement to report on the responses they receive from their interlocutors in the next class, and so the teacher can assign them to write down the L1 refusal utterance verbatim using the worksheet in *Appendix C*.

In-Class review and L1 speaker response analysis

During the next class period, in pairs or small groups, students will compare the responses they received from their out-of-class interviews. Afterwards, the teacher invites students to share one of the sample refusals they wrote down in response to a specific request. As a class, the response will be analyzed to see if the refusal speech act can be broken down into smaller speech acts. For example, did the speaker acknowledge the invitation? Did they express gratitude? Did they apologize? Did they offer an explanation? Did they propose an alternative? Following Taguchi and Roever's (2017) recommendation that pragmatic speech acts can be effectively taught using 'routine formulae' that can 'be memorized as chunks' (p. 225), the in-class analysis worksheet (*Appendix D*) allows the teacher and students to identify smaller speech acts within the overall speech act of declining an invitation or request. This worksheet also allows students to make note of any additional speech acts that may have been part of the L1 speaker's refusal. In response to the final question on this worksheet, students can share their own opinion about whether the L1 speaker's refusal would be regarded as being very polite within their own cultural context.

Evaluation

The most important outcome of these materials is to help students recognize and execute a culturally appropriate refusal to an invitation. Ishihara (2010) offers four kinds of assessment that can be used to evaluate learners' pragmatic ability. These include 'holistic' (evaluating basic evidence of sociopragmatic awareness), 'analytic' (measuring student performance based on specified criteria), 'focused' (judging performance of isolated speech acts), and 'peer and self' (providing opportunities for self-assessment and reflection). These materials contain opportunities for holistic evaluation through formative assessments that can occur initially when the teacher invites students to anticipate culturally appropriate responses and throughout the lesson when the teacher solicits individual responses and observes peer interactions. Analytic evaluations can be performed when students offer 'retrospective verbal reports' that are useful 'to obtain information that the learners attended to during the planning and execution of a refusal' (Félix-Brasdefer, 2008, p. 201). These reports can be obtained throughout each stage of the lesson and especially during the L1 speaker responses analysis afterwards. Focused evaluations are conducted when the teacher assesses the students' abilities to identify

and perform specific functions such as acknowledging the invitation, expressing thanks, and offering a counter invitation. Peer and self-assessment are also required as students interact with their classmates and outside of class as they solicit and document L1 speakers' refusals.

An important aspect of evaluation is that teachers cannot assess students' pragmatic competence purely on what the individual teacher considers to be a culturally, or even individually, appropriate refusal. Even if students are fully aware of what L1 speakers consider to be the most tactful way of declining an invitation, Ishihara (2010) points out that 'second language speakers are found to sometimes intentionally diverge from native-like pragmatic language use for assertion of their identity and maintenance of an optimal distance for the target community' (p. 209). This awareness of intentional student divergence should be taken into account when a teacher evaluates pragmatic competence, especially when judging sociopragmatic awareness through a holistic assessment.

Conclusion

In-class simulations and instructional videos and even on-campus interviews with L1 speakers are quite different from being offered an authentic invitation from someone whom a student genuinely respects and does not want to disappoint, even at the cost of accepting an invitation that is otherwise undesirable. It is possible that the greatest learning outcome from a lesson such as this is increased empowerment to decline invitations by empowering the L2 speaker's understanding and use of this pragmatic strategy. With opportunities for explicit instruction, focused skill development with L2 classmates and L1 speakers and retrospective verbal reports, students may justifiably be considered much more prepared to successfully negotiate the speech act of declining an invitation both effectively and politely within specific cultural contexts.

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Tom Court is originally from Canada and has taught English in Japan, California, Oregon and currently teaches EIL, TESOL and Linguistics courses at Brigham Young University-Hawaii. Tom is also a student at Anaheim University in the Ed.D. in TESOL program. Tom's career as an English language teacher was originally inspired by his mother's example teaching English to immigrants and refugees in Canada. Tom continues to be inspired by his wife, also a teacher, and credits most of what he's learned about teaching and material development to her example of tireless dedication to her students. Since the beginning of his own teaching career, Tom has especially enjoyed making materials that are created with his own English language learning students in mind.

Appendix A

Readiness activity illustrations



Do you want to hear me play guitar?



Wanna dance, grandma?



Images created by Tom Court using licensed copy of Doodly software.

Readiness activity illustrations can also be accessed with this downloadable PPT:

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/15aIrPblsCoApNVvpw4-_N5PkApDmA-X6/edit#slide=id.p1

Appendix B

In-class sample invitation and request role-play worksheet

Sample invitations

1. Do you want to study together for our next test?
2. Would you like to go to town this weekend?
3. Do you want to join us for a game of rugby?
4. Do you want to eat lunch in the cafeteria with me?
5. Would you like to hang out with some of us this weekend?
6. Do you want to work out at the gym?
7. Would you like to try some chocolate chip cookies I just baked?
8. Would you like to attend the concert with me?
9. This is one of my favorite songs. Would you like to listen?
10. Have you ever been surfing? Would you like to go this Saturday?

Sample requests

1. Could you read this and give me some feedback on my writing?
2. Can you help me carry a large package back from the post office?
3. Do you think I could borrow your car to make a trip into town?
4. I'm having some problems with my computer. Could you take a look at it?
5. We really need someone to babysit for us just for a couple hours. Are you available?
6. I saw you cutting someone's hair the other day. Would you mind cutting my hair, too?
7. Could I borrow \$20 dollars just until this weekend?
8. I've got a dorm inspection in just a few minutes. Could you help me with the vacuuming?
9. I misplaced my phone somewhere. Could you give me a call so maybe I'll hear it ring?
10. We're picking up trash on the beach this weekend. Would you like to join us?

Appendix C

Out-of-class interview worksheet

Instructions: Interview two native speakers of English and ask them how they would respond to one invitation and one request. What would they say if they really didn't want to accept, but still wanted to be polite? Write their responses as precisely as you can.

Interview 1:

Nationality of Interviewee: _____

Gender: _____ Invitation #: _____

Response: _____

Request #: _____

Response: _____

Interview 2:

Nationality of Interviewee: _____

Gender: _____ Invitation #: _____

Response: _____
