

PRAGMATICS

In preparing for a pragmatics dialog, acting techniques can help speakers speak from inside a character by providing context and motivation so they can communicate the non-verbal as well as the linguistic elements of a conversation.

Setting: This provides a mental landscape that helps speakers get into character.

Mood: This can inform the way the speaker uses tone of voice, intonation, gestures and other sounds. It can also include motivation.

Activities

- A. Students read the dialog silently and discuss whether they think the speakers are effective.
- B. Students identify useful words and phrases to execute speech acts.
- C. Students take roles and practice reading the dialog.
- D. Students discuss comfort level with the things they say. How would they do it differently?
- E. One student keeps the script and the other ad libs.

Eyes on the street

Pragmatics: Gathering information from a stranger

Setting: A street with houses and apartments. There is a wide sidewalk. Randi is raking some leaves in his/her front yard. Pat enters holding an invisible leash with a dog. Pat walks slowly, and then stops to wait for the dog to sniff. Randi stops raking, and they have a short conversation.

Mood: Pat is in a hurry to get the dog walked but puts manners over personal needs. Randi is interested in learning more about their neighborhood.

Pat: Hi

Randi: Good morning

Pat: Beautiful weather, isn't it?

Randi: It sure is. I hear it's really, really cold up north.

Pat: Um hm, freezing! (pause) So how do you like the house?

Randi: We love it. We just moved in a couple of weeks ago.

Pat: Yeah, I watched your house get built. They did a great job.

Randi: So I'm guessing you live around here.

Pat: Yep, just down the street. The little white house on the corner.

Randi: Then we're neighbors. My name is Randi.

Pat: Pat. It's nice to meet you...How do you like it so far?

Randi: It's great! We used to live way out in the suburbs. But it was such a long drive. Now I just hop on the freeway...

Pat: I know, right? Ten minutes, and boom. You're downtown.

Randi: Yeah, it's completely worth it. I save a couple of hours every day.

Pat: I can imagine...(pause) Well, I'd better let you go.

Randi: Okay, have a nice walk, Pat and ... What's your dog's name?

Pat: Mr. Whisper.

Randi: Mr. Whisker?

Pat: (shrugs) Actually, it's Whisper, but he'll answer to both (laughs).

Randi: Okay Mr. Whisper, we'll see you next time.

Pat: Bye!

Randi: Hey, by the way, do you know when the garbage is collected?

Pat: Uh.. yeah. Every Thursday. Recycling is every other week. I just look for the days when my neighbors put out the green bin.

Randi: Smart. I'll do that. I've got a lot of boxes and stuff to go.

Pat: uh huh... I bet... So it'll be great once you get all settled.

Randi: I can't wait.

Pat: Okay, well, nice to meet you.

Randi: You too. Bye!

Pat: Bye!

Common Ground

Pragmatics: Negotiating roles for a task

Setting: A community college classroom. Three students have pushed their desks together to create a semi-circle. There are papers and notebooks open in front of them.

Mood: The students are all motivated to do the task, but they are not quite sure how to negotiate leadership of the group, so they are making a point of being polite and inclusive.

Casey: Okay, so what are we supposed to do?

Sam: I don't know. The teacher said we have to make a restaurant proposal.

Casey: What's that?

Sam: We have to create a plan for a new restaurant. You know like we want to borrow money and open a restaurant.

Casey: Any kind of restaurant?

Renee: Uh huh...We make one that we think is going to be successful.

Casey: How about a Mexican restaurant?

Renee: Yes. It could be Mexican, American, Vietnamese...whatever.

Casey: I like Mexican...Do you want to do Mexican?

Sam: Ummm, maybe. What other types of restaurants are there?

Renee: What about Italian. Italian restaurants do well.

Casey: Yeah, That's a good idea, but I never eat Italian. I mean it's probably good, but I don't know anything about it.

Renee: Fair enough. We should all feel comfortable with whatever we decide. How about you Sam. Do you want Mexican, or what do you think?

Sam: I'm not against Mexican, but I have an idea.

Renee: yeah?

Sam: How about barbecue? It's kind of like Mexican, but it's super Texan. Do you guys like Barbecue?

Casey: Hmmm. Not Mexican?

Sam: I'm not saying no to Mexican, but it might be fun to try Barbecue.

Renee: I like the idea of Barbecue. It's a little different.

Casey: Well, I still like Mexican, but if you guys really want barbecue, I'll go with the majority.

Renee: How about this...We can do one of those places, you know, where you stand in line and order at the counter. Then they bring you the food.

Casey: You mean no waiters?

Renee: Right. Then we don't have to pay staff, and it's cheaper for the customers. What do you think?

Casey: Is that still a restaurant?

Renee: I think it is...and we can borrow less money in our proposal. What do you think Sam?

Sam: I like it when they bring the food. I don't mind ordering at the counter, but it's nice if I don't have to get up again.

Casey: Yeah, Sam's right. Once you sit down, you don't want to get up again.

Renee: Good point. So it's sort of half and half then. They order and pay; then a waiter brings the food to the table.

Sam: Right. Sometimes customers just want to eat. They don't care about socializing or fancy service and stuff like that.

Casey: Yeah, ... when I go to those places, they're always crowded.

Sam: We'll make a million dollars! Ha ha. And I think we could still have tacos and stuff too, Casey.

Renee: Sure, why not? Then everybody's happy, right? Barbecue, tacos and they usually have baked potatoes. Is that what we want then?

Sam: Sounds good to me.

Casey: Yeah, let's do it. Write that down.

Gathering Support

Pragmatics: Getting encouragement from a familiar stranger

Setting: A seating area in the gym. Sydney is sitting and waiting for her spouse. An older woman, Harper, comes and sits heavily in the seat next to her. These two have seen each other several times and sometimes said hello, but they haven't had a conversation.

Mood: Sydney is happy to sit quietly, but Harper likes to reach out to people.

Harper: Lord have mercy! I don't know if it's harder to sit down or get up!

Sydney: (sympathetically but distractedly) Knees?

Harper: Knees, hips, they're all going down hill!

Sydney: (not sure she wants to engage in a conversation) Ohhh

Harper: Runs in the family. My mama had it, my grandma had it...

Sydney: arthritis?

Harper: Yep, doctor says I need to lose some weight.

Sydney: They always say that!

Harper: Yeah, he says I've got to get off the Blue Bell. But lord, I love me some Blue Bell.

(pause) I'm doing good though. I used to eat a half gallon every week, but now I can make a half gallon last for two weeks.

Sydney: (now engaged) That's awesome! (She holds up her hand for a high five. Harper responds to the gesture.) You should be really proud of yourself. Ice cream is a hard habit to break.

Harper: I know. I know. But I can track it, see. I live alone, and in my kitchen there's just a half fridge, you know, it's counter high, so the freezer is small. I can't fit a whole gallon, so I divide the ice cream in two bowls. One bowl a week. I just eat out of the bowl.

Sydney: Wow! You're doing great! That takes a lot of discipline. You've got to create a new habit, right? I've read that you have to do it for 30 days, and then it's easy.

Harper: Ain't nothing easy about this!

Sydney: Well you have to wait 30 days.

Harper: It's the devil's work, that blue bell.

Sydney: You sound good though... like you are making progress. And look at you. I see you here at the gym all the time. That's one of the best things you can do for your health. I think you're doing great!

Harper: I don't know.

Sydney: You just have to be patient with yourself you know. Even if you backslide, you don't get mad, you just start from there, right?

Harper: I try, but dam that Blue Bell is good.

Back and Forth

Pragmatics: Asking someone to make an exception

Setting: A teacher's office. The teacher is marking papers when a student comes in.

Mood: It's around mid term. The student has missed a few classes but has done most of the work. The teacher doesn't expect students to come so is slightly surprised to see the student. The student is a little tentative about interrupting but determined to achieve a specific goal.

Student: Hello, teacher.

Professor: Oh, hi. Come on in. What's going on?

Student: Well, I need to talk to you about something.

Professor: Oh, sure. What is it? Here, have a seat.

Student: Thanks. So....I'm having some family problems right now. Um....My cousin got kidnapped.

Professor: Oh, God. I'm so sorry to hear that. Are you doing OK?

Student: Yeah, I guess so. But now I gotta go back there and be there to help my family.

Professor: Oh.

Student: And so....I'm gonna have to miss class.

Professor: OK, I see. Well, how long do you think it'll take?

Student: I really don't know. It might be awhile. A couple weeks, maybe three weeks. I just don't know yet. But I really want to stay in this class, you know.

Professor: Sure, I understand. Family comes first, I get that, but you really have to learn this material before you can pass to the next level. I'm a little worried you might lose too much to be able to get everything you need from the class.

Student: Well, what if I do the assignments and send them to you?

Professor: You mean, email them to me?

Student: Yeah. Can I do that?

Professor: Umm... I'd really like to help. I'm just not sure if working that way would be the best for you. It's not just the assignments, but we do so much in class that you'd miss. Maybe it would be best for you, in this case, to just repeat the class?

Student: Oh, I don't really want to do that. I need this class. I can talk to Marisa. She can let me know what I miss during the class and give me the notes. We're really close.

Professor: She could, but I'm still not sure if you would get enough out of it. You really need to be ready for the next level, and I don't want to pass you on if you're not ready. It's not in your best interest.

Student: But I know I can get it all done. I know I'm ready for the next level.

Professor: Look, let's do this. I need to think about it and talk to a few people first before I can make this kind of exception. So...I can give you a call tomorrow and we'll go from there, OK? Sound good?

Student: OK, thanks, teacher.

Professor: Ok, thanks for coming to see me.

No Worries

Pragmatics: Giving and accepting an apology from a spouse

Setting: A couple are sitting in the front seat of the car on their way to trivia night at a bar. The husband is driving, and the wife is giving directions. They've just left the house. The bar is a local joint that they have both heard of and maybe passed by but have never been to.

Mood: The husband is pretty confident about directions but is more laidback. The wife doesn't like to get to places late and usually navigates when they go out.

Wife: Do you know how to get there?

Husband: I think so.

Wife: So, I don't need to use GPS?

Husband: You can if you want. But I think I know where it is.

Wife: So, it says to take a right on Washington, which is right here.

Husband: Really? I thought it was west.

Wife: That's what it says.

Husband: OK. (turns right) This really doesn't feel right. Are you sure it's this way?

Wife: Oh, no.

Husband: What?

Wife: I think I put in the wrong name. You were right. It is west.

Husband: Ok, I'll just turn here.

Wife: I'm sorry. I got the wrong place.

Husband: Oh.....

Wife: Really, I don't know how I did that. I'm really sorry.

Husband: Don't worry about it. We're not far. And it's not like we're late.

Wife: Well, I'm sorry.

Husband: It's fine.

Wife: I hate being late to things.

Husband: I know. You're always super early, like picking the kids up from school.

Wife: (laughs) I can't help it. I like getting a good parking spot, you know?

Husband: But don't you get bored?

Wife: Nah. I can listen to music. I read my book. Check email. It goes fast.

Husband: See, I can't do that. I feel like I'm wasting my time.

Wife: We're just different that way, I guess.

Husband: Yeah. Well, we're here. And it's not quite 7 yet. We might not get the best parking spot, you know.

Wife: (laughs) Yeah, oh well. Next time I'll put in the right place.

Husband: No worries.

Bonding Bubble

Pragmatics: Showing agreement with in-laws

Setting: Family members sitting around the coffee table in the living room. They are having a discussion about problems that public schools and public school teachers face. Rick started the discussion by saying that education should be a bigger priority for the government. Rick is a college professor. Rick's sister, Addison, is also a college professor. Rick's wife, Kelly, is former high school teacher who left the profession because of all the demands.

Mood: Rick, Addison, and Kelly are friendly to each other but not afraid to share their true opinions. They all become animated when discussing education because they have a stake in it.

Addison: So, yes, all of our kids who go to school should be able to eat. Right? Every single student should be able to start the day without being hungry.

Rick: Agreed. Teachers should get paid more so they stay in the profession.

Addison: Absolutely they should get paid more.

Rick: So they don't leave after two years.

Addison: Absolutely. Two to five, right? That's the average.

Rick: It's horrible.

Addison: I know it's horrible.

Rick: We also need discipline back in the schools.

Addison: The biggest reason teachers leave is not because of the pay.

Rick: Yeah.

Addison: It's because of the crap they have to put up with.

Rick: And it's the lack of discipline in the children. And the fact that the parents are right and the teacher's always wrong.

Kelly: Yeah, there's so much that goes into it, I mean....

Addison: It is so much. It is not just paying them more.

Kelly: And you're told constantly that, yeah, their success or failure is all you.

Addison: Right! And that's totally wrong. It's totally wrong!

Kelly: And if you don't have the money, you've gotta be creative in the way that you come up with lessons. And it's all you, all you, all you.

Addison: Right, right, it's totally unfair.

Kelly: And if your kids are not learning, it's not anyone else's fault. It's yours. And that's what you hear all the time.

Addison: Right.

At the Last Minute

Pragmatics: Negotiating support

Setting: It's 10:00 on a Sunday night. A teenager is sitting on an armchair in the living room. She is doing her homework. The parent is working on a laptop on a chair or the couch. There are two cats on the couch and one sleeping under the coffee table.

Mood: The teenager will go back to school tomorrow after a two-week winter break and feels guilty about not getting all her homework done in time. The parent feels bad for her and wants to help her but is also a little concerned about the situation because it's not usual for her to be last-minute.

Teen: Done!

Parent: With homework?

Teen: With that assignment. I still have two left.

Parent: Really? 'Cause it's getting kind of late. Are they due tomorrow?

Teen: I'm not sure. I think they are.

Parent: So, what are you going to do? Can you text someone? Your friend Jill, maybe?

Teen: I can check online.

Parent: Do you need any help?

Teen: No, I'm good.

Parent: You sure?

Teen: Uh-huh.

Parent: OK. You know that bedtime's in like an hour, right?

Teen: Yeah, I know.

Parents: You're gonna get it all done?

Teen: Yeah.

Parent: OK.....just saying, maybe you should've started a little earlier...

Teen: But I was on vacation! I just wanted some time off.

Parent: I know what you mean. I mean, I was ready for a break too. But now you're stressing to get things done and it's kind of last-minute.

Teen: Dad, I'll get it done.

Parent: OK. Just know that you're gonna be tired tomorrow.

Teen: I'm always tired.

Parent: (laughs) OK, well, you're gonna have to explain that to Mom. She doesn't like you up late on a school night.

Teen: OK.

Parent: Anyway... I'm gonna make some tea. Want some?

Teen: Umm, OK, sure.