

Discourse markers *Well* and *Oh*

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Level: Lower to upper-intermediate ESL/EFL, such as at an intensive English program

Time: 30-35 minutes

Resources: Sample sentences and situations for role play

Goal: Using the discourse markers *well* and *oh* for smoother discourse flow.

Description of the Activity

The teacher begins with a mini-role play with some students by asking each student to request a favor from the teacher (“Could I borrow your car”, “Can I borrow a dollar”, “Could you take me to the airport next weekend”). The teacher answers quickly without pauses or discourse markers, thus sounding abrupt, such as “No, I think I need it tonight” or “I’m afraid I don’t have any money”, “I’m going to be out of town next weekend”). The teacher repeats the situation with another student but provides smoother responses, with delays and realizations marked by *well* and *oh* (“Well, I think I need them to study tonight”, “Oh/Well... I’m afraid I don’t have any money”, “Well... oh, I’m going to be out of town next weekend”). The process can be repeated with other situations, such as making difficult requests (“Uh, could I borrow your car?”), deflecting compliments, and pauses (such as those as elicited by difficult or face-threatening questions like “How old are you?”).

The teacher solicits the students’ impressions of the second set of answers compared with the first. The students should recognize the second set as more polite and “smoother.” The teacher queries the students as to why they sound better, and the purposes and functions of the words *well* (unexpected response) and *oh* (realization). The students may not ascertain these

abstract discourse functions other than filling pauses and delays, but the teacher can use students' guesses to build up to an explanation of their discourse functions described above – *well* indicating negative or unexpected responses, and *oh* indicating sudden realization necessitating a shift to another topic or to an unexpected response. With sample dialogues, the teacher can illustrate other related functions of *well* (turn-taking, topic shift or resumption) and *oh* (repair, clarification), elicits students' impressions as above, and elucidates their functions. (See Teacher Resource.) Then students can be provided with similar situations for them to practice with each other in small groups or pairs. Situations may require functions such as issuing and declining requests and compliments, making difficult requests, turn-taking, competitive turn-taking, answering difficult questions requiring repair and pauses for planning, topic shift, apologies, responses involving “realizations”, topic shift, topic resumption, repair, and clarification.

Procedure

1. Teacher-student mini-role play [10 minutes]
 - a. The teacher asks several students to request a favor from the teacher.
 - b. The teacher refuses with slightly abrupt answers lacking discourse markers or other delays.
 - c. Next the teacher does so with refusals marked by delays and discourse markers.
 - d. The process is repeated with a few other linguistic functions: difficult requests, deflecting compliments, and apologies.
2. Discussion. [5-10 minutes]
 - a. The teacher solicits students' impressions of the two sets of answers, including: why the second version sounds better, and the purposes and functions of *well* (delay, and unexpected response) and *oh* (realization).

- b. Drawing from students' responses and the role-play situations, the teacher elucidates the functions of the discourse markers.
3. Student role play [10-15 minutes]
 - a. Students are given more complex situations to role play conversations in groups of 2-3.
 - b. The teacher can circulate to help or coach students in their conversational role-plays.
 - c. Optionally, the teacher may select a few groups to present their role-plays before the whole class.

Rationale

Some ESL/EFL learners may unintentionally come across as abrupt or brusque in social interactions in English, especially due to a lack of expertise with linguistic devices such as discourse markers. This may be especially so in exchanges involving potentially face-threatening acts such as requests, refusals, or compliments. Such acts are sociopragmatically dispreferred due to the possible impedance they present to interlocutors' preferences and goals, and thus require special responses to mitigate against their face-threatening nature. Such responses often include delay strategies and other devices (see Brown & Levinson 1987, Levinson 1983). However, a delay marked by pure silence would be socially and linguistically awkward, so it is often filled in with a discourse marker such as *well*, *uh*, *oh*. Because these markers refer to and anticipate the following utterance (Schiffrin 1987), these markers also have a transitional function. They can also mitigate against other potentially face-threatening acts, such as topic shifts (*well*, *oh*), which would be dispreferred to the flow of the discourse; realizations requiring dispreferred responses or topic shifts (*oh*); and situations when interlocutors compete in turn-taking (*well*) (see Schiffrin 1987). *Oh* can also be described as a mental change-of-state marker

(Heritage 1984), indicating a change in the speaker's thinking that necessitates a shift in the discourse.

In explaining discourse markers to students, instructors can explain that such words are helpful or necessary whenever speaker A says something different from speaker B's preferences or expectations. Thus, functions such as making a request, refusing a request, deflecting a complement, expressing a sudden realization, competition between speakers (e.g., competing for the floor, conversations of one-up-manship), clarification, pauses, repairs, shifting topics, and resuming previous topics are common conversational ploys that tend to go against a listener's expectations or preferences. Such strategies are optimized by the use of discourse markers, in that they not only mitigate against unexpected or dispreferred acts, but also improve discourse coherence and flow by virtue of their transitional function as well.

Alternatives and Caveats

The instructor could also begin by asking how students would respond to outlandish requests such as "Can I borrow your car? I need to drive to Alaska for a conference next week", as responses to such items require linguistic markers to maintain politeness. In EFL contexts, or if the teacher is a non-native speaker, audio or video clips with conversations illustrating these discourse markers would be helpful, and could even substitute for the role-play if a NNS teacher is less than fully comfortable with these devices. For lower level students or for EFL contexts, it may be sufficient to make students aware of these linguistic devices via explanation and role-play. For pauses, the instructor should point out other pause-filler markers (*hmm*, *uh*, and *er*). A slight juncture and pause often intervene between the discourse marker and the following items, which are thus represented by commas in written English. Such discourse markers are less

common in formal writing, but are more common in spoken English and in informal written English.

Teacher Resource

Conversation excerpts with “like” and “oh”

A: How much education do you think a person needs to get a good job?

B: Oh, definitely a bachelor’s degree.

A: Well, I think even more than that. At least a master’s degree.

A: She can listen and tell you not only the composer but the name of the piece.

B: Well, that’s no big deal.

A: Who wants to know?

B: Well, I want to know.

A: Can I borrow your car?

B: Well...my wife needs to use it tonight.

A: ...Well, like I was saying, I think the only difference between our neighborhoods might be the better trash collection in our neighborhood.

A: I think that law was passed in 1976. Oh, maybe it was 1978, I don’t remember for sure.

A: How can I get a grant for that?

B: Oh, I didn’t realize they gave grants. I’m not the one to ask about that.

References

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Levinson, S. C. (1983). *Pragmatics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

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