

15 Seconds to Politeness!: Examples, Instructions, & References

For example, if the instructor says “Amy broke the coffee pot,” a student could respond with “The coffee pot is broken” or “We need a new coffee pot; our’s is unusable.” A student could rephrase the offensive remark “Your food smells!” as “Mind if I ask you what it is you are heating/eating?” The latter would demonstrate curiosity, not distaste and, as such, would likely build cross-cultural consensus/understanding. More examples follow:

I **hate** my statistics class! → My statistics class could be more engaging/meaningful (negative word “hate” deleted)

Stop talking! → Could I have your attention please/Let’s direct our attention to these slides, and then we’ll each have a chance to respond (directive coinverted to a request or a collaborative statement)

An example of indirect (A) versus direct discourse (B) follows. Unlike (A), (B) is buffered and more polite.

A. Dear Susan Baker:

I am writing to officially resign from my position as account specialist, effective Dec. 15, 2015.

B. Dear Susan Baker:

Thank you for the opportunity to serve as account specialist for Verizon. As you will recall, I’ve been working on my bachelor’s in accounting on a part-time basis, and have decided to concentrate on completing my degree as a full-time student. Therefore, I will be resigning my position effective Dec. 15, 2015. . . .

To give students ample practice with positive language, the negative statements you share should ideally include a mix of negative sounds, words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and what language specialists or linguists term “discourse;” that is, language that is longer than a sentence.

For a 50-minute class period, up to 25-35 examples of negative language might be employed, so the more examples you gather ahead of time, the better. These could be hand-written or typed up and, to make the game more exciting, the sheets of paper on which the negative language is written should be folded up and placed in a basket or container, so that you can randomly yet readily pick out examples and read each aloud in the course of the game.

The primary objective is to teach students to use language **strategically**. This game is designed to help students identify impolite (versus polite) language chunks, to get them in the habit of promptly rephrasing negative to positive or neutral language, and to prompt them to consistently employ positive language—to ensure professionalism.

The reason it is recommended that you impose a time limit (e.g., 15 seconds) is to get your students accustomed to rapidly rephrasing negative language into positive, goodwill-oriented language. When you start out, in the first few rounds or when you employ longer chunks of negative language, you could give students more time to respond (e.g., 20-25 seconds). To accommodate students for whom English is a “second” or “foreign” language, you might consider assigning more time to this

content processing-and-language rephrasing activity (i.e., allowing for longer reaction times), so they can comfortably rephrase what they are expected to restate. This game requires:

- multiple examples of negative language that either you provide or that you elicit from students a day or two before you play this game,
- one or more timekeepers. The timekeeper will ring a bell or use a gavel to notify participants once their time is up.

The time limit would also give students a feel for the high-pressure environments in which they are likely to find themselves—situations in which they might inadvertently say the wrong thing or where the language they employ might be misconstrued and where damage control requires prompt language finesse (i.e., linguistic faux pas would need to be rephrased or rectified right away to communicate goodwill).

It's a good idea to first share with students basic language building blocks (Pandey, 2012); that is, to acquaint them with how language is composed of units of variable sizes (see Fig. 1). Figure 1 is a visual depiction of the pyramid of language. It shows the smallest language building blocks at the top, namely, sounds, and the largest (i.e., discourse) at the bottom. Examples of discourse include a paragraph or a picture. Like a ruler or cline, the left side of the pyramid lists examples of negative language across the gamut—from sounds through words and sentences to discourse units. The mid-section of the pyramid contains examples of more polite equivalents of each unit of language to the left of it, while the right side of the pyramid showcases examples of more positive language. This way, students understand that the source of negativity or positivity could be a sound, part of a word (i.e., a morpheme), such as a prefix or a suffix, a single word, a phrase, a clause, a sentence, a sentence sequence, or a combination. The leftmost sound "Shush" at the top of the pyramid, for example, is arguably less polite than "sh," which in turn is relatively more impolite than "Listen up" or a nonverbal signal that requests the audience's full and undivided attention. At the lexical level, "cannot" is less polite than "unavailable" or "indisposed," neither of which implies volition. At the clause level, conditional clauses are more threatening than independent clauses, as they (literally) leave you hanging. Sentence-wise, passive sentences are less blame-assigning than active voice and, in general, directives and questions are more assertive and intimidating than statements. Beyond sentences, at the paragraph and essay level, organizing negative news indirectly both prepares the reader for it and delays the negative. While the resultant correspondence will very likely be longer, it will also be more polite. In other words, when one has to choose between brevity and goodwill, it's advisable to pick the latter.

References (which I would also recommend including in B&PCQ)

Pandey, A. (2012). *Language Building Blocks: Essential Linguistics for Early Childhood Practitioners*. New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University.

_____. (2010). *The Child Language Teacher: Intergenerational Language and Literary Enhancement*. Manasagangothri, Mysore: Central Institute of Indian Languages.