

PHONENWORK

James Little

Using the phone presents special problems for the second language learner. To begin with, words and expressions used in face-to-face contact are not always appropriate on the telephone. In fact, this specialized use of language can be referred to as "Phonenglish." A good source to consult in this regard is the Public Service Commission booklet, *Telephone Gambits* (Fox, Woods & Deeble, 1980).

Another problem with the telephone that can cause both native and non-native speakers to approach it with trepidation is its perceived "impersonality." The absence of paralinguistic cues such as gesture, eye contact and facial expression necessitates the reliance on linguistic cues to convey and get meaning. The reliance on cues is not, however, limited to words. As the authors of *Telephone Gambits* point out, there are a number of non-lexical sounds used to convey the meanings of agreement, disagreement, doubt, surprise, delight and disgust. Meaning can also be gleaned from voice qualities such as volume, pitch, speed of delivery and nasalization.

To help students gain confidence in using the phone, I have found it useful to integrate phonework activities into my ESL courses.

Activity One

To allay students' fears about using the telephone in a second language, they can be shown that much information can be gathered apart from the words used. My telephone activity worksheet "Describing the Speaker" (see Appendix A) can be used for this purpose. This activity is appropriate for intermediate and advanced level high school, college and adult learners.

For homework students are given a telephone number to call which plays a recorded message. The students do not know in advance who they are calling. When they hear the recorded message, they must find out the name of the place called and use the checklist to describe the speaker. This is purely a listening activity and requires no speaking. It is an authentic speech sample which the students can listen to once, or if they need to, they can call back and listen to it as many times as is necessary.

Instead of assigning this activity as homework, teachers may wish to pre-tape some recorded messages to use in class. Recording from the telephone is a relatively easy process. All that is needed is an inexpensive telephone pickup, available at most stereo and electronic supply stores, and a tape recorder.

Activity Two

Another task for use with recorded telephone messages, either pre-recorded by the teacher or dialed by the student, is copying down information such as addresses, phone numbers, names, etc., given as part of the message. This type of task is appropriate for beginners as well as other levels.

Teachers can readily find numbers with recorded messages. Good sources are classified ads (for dating agencies, religious messages, dial-almost-anything) and radio stations (for ski-lines and concert information numbers). Information about the weather, the correct time, repertory movie schedules, bus and train departures and arrivals, and recreation information is often given by means of recorded messages. The best source for these is the telephone book. Since these numbers often change, it is a good idea to keep an up-to-date list and to call before assigning a phone number to your class.

Activity Three

Another activity involves asking for and getting information by calling long-distance information. Here, students deal with a "live" speaker. First of all, a city is targeted. Teachers in areas where English is not the sole language of work should pick a city that is predominantly English-speaking. Students are then assigned different tasks such as finding the telephone number for City Hall, a government office, a hospital, etc. Students should be made familiar with the standard questions used by long-distance information operators: "What city, please?," "What number?" and appropriate means of phrasing answers and questions. After class, the students look up the area code and call 1+(area code)+555-1212 to get the information. This is a different kind of homework which most students find interesting and authentic. It doesn't take long to do, and there is no cost to call for this information.

Activity Four

A more challenging activity involves calling toll-free numbers and asking for more information than just a telephone number. Depending on what type of organization is called, different questions can be asked. For example, students can phone an airline to ask for the flight schedule and fares. With hotel and motel chains, students can ask if there is a hotel near the airport or bus terminal in a given city and what the cost is. Many manufacturers have "hot lines" to answer questions about the location of the nearest dealer. Students can brainstorm in class beforehand to come up with and prepare questions.

There are many sources of toll-free numbers. Large corporations, hotel and motel chains and government tourist bureaus often have toll-free numbers. Teachers can check the yellow pages and/or magazine ads to find these "800" numbers.

Conclusion

These activities can provide realistic and authentic situations in which to practice the listening and speaking skills required when using the telephone. Other suggestions for teaching telephone English can be found in *Telephone Gambits*.

REFERENCES

Fox, J., Woods, H.B. & Deeble, C. (1980). *Telephone gambits*. Hull: Supply and Services Canada.

THE AUTHOR

James Little teaches ESL at the Canadian Forces Language School in St-Jean, Quebec, where he has taught both beginning and advanced level students as well as developed curriculum. He has also taught at private language schools in Ottawa and Montreal. Jim holds a B.A. from Carleton University (Ottawa) and a Diploma in Education in TESL from McGill (Montreal), where he is presently working towards an M.Ed in TESL. Jim's publishing credits include an article for a Canadian government publication and one for *TESL Talk* (Fall 1983).

APPENDIX A

**TELEPHONE ACTIVITY WORKSHEET
DESCRIBING THE SPEAKER**

Fill in the blanks and put a check () beside the word or words that best describe the person.

- A. TELEPHONE NUMBER _____
DATE OF CALL _____
TIME OF CALL _____
NAME OF PLACE CALLED _____

- B. SPEAKER: SEX: () Male
() Female
AGE: () Under 20 () 20-30 () 30-40
() 40-50 () 50-60 () Over 60
SPEED: () Fast
() Normal
() Slow
ACCENT: () None
() French Canadian
() American
() British
() Other _____

**SPEECH
PROBLEMS:**

- () None
() Lisp
() Stutter
() Slurred speech

EMOTIONAL

- STATE: () Happy/cheerful () Bored
() Angry () Nervous
() Sad () Calm
() Excited () Tired
() Other _____