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Yes and No Authentic Response Roundabouts.

Maree Sugai

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Abstract

This paper looks at why we need to prepare students with alternatives to yes and no for study abroad and home-stay abroad programs. It discusses how yes and no can be inappropriate and lead to socio-pragmatic failure. It seeks to explain what an authentic response actually is and discusses ways to introduce these yes and no alternatives in to the L2 classroom.

Introduction

In this paper I shall describe and discuss the problem Japanese students home-staying in English speaking countries have with providing natural sounding responses and how, empowered with alternatives to `yes` and `no` students can be taught to contribute more actively to a conversation and communicate their needs and feelings in a deeper, culturally and more socially appropriate manner.

Yes and no roundabouts are not limited to acceptance and denial speech acts but also to justification, apology, evasion, and more (Searle: `69). They are useful tools for every learner who wishes to integrate and harmonise their L2 social discourse.

The home-stay and study abroad setting is a social setting and there are social norms in language regarding response that are important to know. While frozen pair parts are relatively easy to taxonimize and teach, free pair parts (Hoey: `91) are unpredictable units; responses are unexpected and individually unique. People do however conform to certain subconscious rules of discourse and these can be brought to the students` attention to encourage a more *authentic response* than yes or no.

What is an `*authentic response*`?

In linguistic terms, *authentic* speech is usually used as a term to mean that the speech act approximates that of a native speaker. There will be various interpretations within this definition. Some native speakers have a dialect, some speak slow or with particular phonetic traits; but these are audio concerns and my focus here is on content and contextually appropriate response from a sociolinguistic perspective. In other words, a response that is socio-pragmatically successful.

Japanese students often have difficulty choosing between yes or no, when answering tag questions (for example: "You do like coffee, don`t you?"). By teaching avoidance strategies or alternative phrases to direct yes and no, students have more natural sounding options that extend conversation limits. For example, a natural answer to the above question in parenthesis would probably not be yes or no anyway but instead a comment such as; "Well, I usually drink coffee in the morning but I am not a coffee addict, I drink tea too."

This circumlocutory response style is also observed in the TOEIC test question/ response sections where a typical question such as "Will Jim be attending the conference on Sunday?" is paired correctly with a response choice that avoids keywords and more often than not also omits a direct yes or no, for example; "Perhaps not. I think Jim goes to help his mother on weekends these days."

Consider for a moment the following free pair part examples taken from two real life situations where responses are elicited that could be answered with a yes or no but are not. Both examples illustrate authentic, appropriate response in the situational context of a home-stay.

Example 1   (yes)

Home-stay sister: You are not feeling homesick are you Aya?

Aya : I`m not sure. Many things are different here. Have you ever lived in another country?

In this example, Aya, armed with the useful time buyer "I`m not sure", follows up with a quick reason/justification and ends with a neat and friendly turnabout question or *reversal of solicitation* (Hoey: op cit) avoiding a direct yes or no.

Aya`s response here manages to be successful linguistically and pragmatically by being both evasive and re-assuring. As a foreign language speaker Aya`s response indicates a level of mastery on a socio-pragmatic scale. If she had replied immediately with a simple yes, while maybe true, it would not be conducive to establishing good social relations. The home-stay sister is clearly worried and a simple yes might be both upsetting and also cut short the conversation where an extended answer is a more socially sensitive circumlocution. Halliday (Halliday: Hassan `76), and Brown (Brown & Yule `83) discuss such examples of circumlocutive speech acts at length.

Example 2   (no)

Stranger : "Want some chewing gum?"

Aya: "I won`t have one thanks." (Adapted from Ajimer: 1996:74)

To this offer, instead of yes please or no thank you, this response is far less likely to present closure of the conversation. After all, natural conversation is seldom a two pair part speech act and natural English conversation is the goal. Aya`s response here is appropriate because it emulates the register and tone of the question and at the same time responds to the indirect speech act of starting up a conversation. A true authentic response will adjust itself to resemble (perceptions of) the speech partner's intentions. Ellis (op cit.) names this speech accommodation *convergence*. This can be done through a variety of sociolinguistic devices available to the speaker in his/her own language; **volume, pronunciation, speed, vocabulary, prosody, topic and length of turn.**

In socially interactive situations, as experienced by students in a home-stay situation daily, these are skills we can prepare students with by teaching alternatives to yes and no. Armed with ready access (via practice) to these phrases, students are able to make the transition from awkward stranger to welcome guest, and from passive conversational partner to participating one.

Authentic responses have been systematically recorded in various online corpuses; *The Birmingham Corpus (BIR), Collins COBUILD and the London-Lund Corpus* are well known and contain authentic spoken language from which some syllabus makers have drawn material. The incidence of solo yes/no responses in real life is in fact extremely limited and in their place we find an abundance of vague language like;

Right….right, I will….sure…of course….is that so…possibly…I`m afraid not…I`m sorry I cant……well, not really….not quite…are you sure...I don't think I can manage it….etc. (*Taken from Brown & Yule `83:29*)

Yes and no are most commonly found at the beginning of explanations as prefixes and are often used as *stallers* where a speaker may be formulating a comment that follows.

Examples:

"Yes, it is expensive, but it`s worth it." (Agreement followed by justification)
"No, the last class ends at 6pm. I checked online this morning." (Disagreement followed by justification)

Yes and no are not redundant lexical items but they are not used as frequently as EFL students produce them, or as often and as isolated as the Japanese "*hai.*" As *Richards and Schmidt* write (op cit.) answering questions with yes and no only means;
" Non-native speakers fall into the trap of consistently providing only second pair parts and leaving all first pair parts to a native speaker interlocutor…this leads to a conversation consisting of Q-A-Q-A-Q-A" which the writers go on to say only really

happens in doctor/patient or courtroom dialogue.

But what else is going on that makes responding naturally so difficult in a second language? There are a number of factors that impede. The top down listening process employed in the L1 is impaired severely in a home-stay situation because the context is totally new, and the bottom-up (phonetic) processing is also difficult because dialects, tone contour, prosodic patterning will all vary from those heard and learned in the classroom. Students are also relying on cultural and real-world schemata that may be completely inaccurate in the new setting.

A lack of background knowledge

This impairs speed and comfort of conversation. Students struggle with unfamiliar concepts and lexis; "Are you braving the cold or did you forget your sweater?"
An unfamiliar idiomatic phrase or concept in a question can confuse and delay reply.

Cultural differences

"Did you wipe your feet?" Basic differences in lifestyle are evident in question content. Japanese students may not know that because shoes are worn inside in some homes, it is polite to wipe them carefully on the designated mat before entering the house.

The use of ellipsis, substitution, and vague language.

The omission of subject with thinking verbs; "Hope so", or with verb-less clauses; "another time" and questions that are not full sentences, for example "instead of me?" challenge the student to stretch their response strategies.

Discourse signals.

Sometimes, for example, questions are rhetorical. Should we respond or not? If these speech acts go unrecognised the student may be thrown into confusion.

Prefaces and tails.

"Um..sounds nice but on the other hand …."Incomplete clauses, unfamiliar grammar forms, speech acts that contain mixed messages are not taught in text books or in artificial written discourse that is used in much classroom CD audio material.

Repetition as a cohesive device.

How much is too much and how much is natural?

With all this, and much more to consider, it is no wonder that natural interactional response appears daunting to the learner and teacher alike. However, the good news is that while written English and written Japanese grammar are so different, "Japanese and English, so linguistically divergent in the standardized plane converge significantly in spoken forms" (Guest: `98:21) making implications for the teaching of authentic response that much easier.

Communicative response strategies employed by native speakers in the L1.

Ellis (`95) names three types of strategies: "production, communication and learning". These seem to overlap and as Tarone (in ibid: 530) notes, they are dependent on the learner`s intentions which are not often clear or easy to establish." Also, within these distinctions, linguistics are apt to use different terminology which adds to the confusion (Tarone: `77: Faerch, C & Kasper, G: `83: Poulisse, N: `87).

Communicative response strategies are ways available to the speaker to access, deliver and remember communication skills. In the L1, we are usually unaware of the mechanisms at work behind the simplest statement. Rules of discourse have been internalised to the extent that our speech manoeuvres usually occur subconsciously. To the second language learner this is not so. Strategies have to be exposed and understood, taken on board, and in time internalised. One way we can do this is by looking at and listening to real live radio or TV interviews and video extracts with our

students. Re-enacting real life corpus speech acts can also help. Questions after observing these kind of authentic interactive exchanges might be;

"Who are they?" "Where are they?" "Why does he say this?" "What kind of response is he *expecting* " (based on his tone and register). " Does he get the desired response?" "What would you say here?" (listening cloze test).

Bateson (in Scollon & Scollon: `95) writes about the "basic message" and the "meta message" in any speech act. The basic message is the yes and the meta message is the higher or second message of how we want the basic message to be taken. In other words the illocutionary and perlocutionary intent.

For example, "yes I can come but am not very happy about it" may be the meta message behind the basic message " I suppose so". Giving the correct meta message is an advanced skill even for many native speakers and would need a whole separate series of papers to explore fully. Suffice it to say that these conflicts or innuendos should be brought to the students` attention and learners` should be given practice in trying them out. When both illocutionary and perlocutionary act are simultaneously realised, we have, broadly speaking, a pragmatically successful response.

Discourse features adapt to context. In the L1, we adapt our speech to the situation as required in terms of tone, register and level of formality. A skilled speaker is continually adjusting speech to match conversational requirements, but not at the expense of his/her intent. Inference is developed in strategies of: *involvement*;
"I know what you mean", of *solidarity*; "Good for you!" and of course *independence*; giving the speech partner choice and room, "There`s no obligation….let me know what you decide" etc.

Learners also have other ways of negotiating their speech act turn. Other message adjustment and resource strategies include; changing speech intent, circumlocution, paralinguistic devices (body language, drawing) echoing, re-stating and questioning

back. Japanese students have a particularly well-developed "*interactive intelligence*" (Levinson: `90) "*the innate human capacity to draw references from ambiguous information*" due to the ambiguous nature of much spoken Japanese- and thus, respond and do well in communicative activities of this kind in the L2, given the chance.

Implications for the teaching of yes and no roundabouts in the L2 classroom.

While Japanese students have at their disposal strategies that are known to them in their L1, some students will be more adept at transferring them than others. Given that a home-stay situation is one where a large amount of free-range conversation is inevitable, we must introduce a wider variety of response options for learners to have at their disposal. Often, textbooks focus on *transactional* dialogue, and while these are necessary, time must be allocated for experiential, interactional dialogue that produces the most practice at free pair speech turns. A typical text dialogue might be `Buying a train ticket`. The conversation is predictable and involves a chronological sequence that can be memorised. In a learner centred syllabus we might focus on the pre-talk (before buying that train ticket). For example, a conversation that elicits individual responses to the questions "Where shall we go today?" "How do you want to get there?" "What do you want to see or do?" which will inevitably produce a much more varied and unpredictable sequence of speech acts conducive to (home-stay situation or study abroad situation) needs.

A deep end teaching and learning plan like this, where the students fill in the language gaps helps highlight individual language needs and probably provides maximum learning opportunity based on the established SLA theory that "learning occurs at the point where error is recognised and connected" (Tonkyn: Sturtidge: F19).

Communicative activities should be chosen to stimulate those interactional conversations that will be experienced in the home-stay situation with plenty of opportunity for the practice of the avoidance of yes and no. Indeed, students can be told not to use yes and no and explore and experiment with alternatives. It is important that the teacher listens and guides the student as alternative responses are tricky and must

be matching which takes practice, feedback and time to review.

Conclusion.

Since conversation is a continuous exchange involving participants desires, opinions and feelings, students who resort too often to yes and no as replies, are denying themselves and their conversation partner the experience, social benefits and pragmatic development practice inherent in a more active, participative role. Moreover, continually compromising speech intention can lead to frustration and de-motivation of language learning. In order to promote development of authentic response in conversation, students must be allowed and given time and help in class to practice the multiple variations of yes and no; and to be taught to apply these communicative strategies available to them in a contextually appropriate, socio-pragmatic way.

Maree Sugai. October 18th 2012.

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