

Beyond Basics: Giving Greetings Proper Status in the EFL Classroom¹

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Greetings are generally seen as universal and supposedly can be easily 'translated' from one culture to another. Consequently, often little attention is attached to teaching and practicing greetings in the EFL classroom. Such a position ignores the unique linguistic potential of greetings in achieving contextually successful social interaction within a given language. Furthermore, learning and understanding greetings can not be left solely to the EFL textbook and it will not be effectively taken care of just through student exposure to teacher classroom greetings.

Greetings represent both routine and, sometimes, unpredictable behavior. They hold an important communicative function because they confirm the current status of a relationship and they set the tone and pace for the rest of a conversation. In English language teaching, greetings are often quickly 'disposed' of at the basic level as language learners are given basic formulaic expressions that are designed to cover possible social and business encounters regardless of context, situation and the standing of personal relationships. At the same time, teacher classroom greetings often reflect interaction with a large group and may not help students' communicative skills when encountering one-to-one greeting situations.

Language use is about choice, having realistic communicative options and being able to exercise them. Learners need to look at the choices exercised by native-speaker users of the target language. What options are available when greeting somebody? What influences or determines possible choices? Can students be given realistic opportunities of practicing greetings in the ELT classroom when they are removed from everyday contextual choices? Language users need to be able to effectively react to both expected and uncertain situations. Language teaching is too often about learning rules and understanding grammatical patterns to be later applied for some future and undetermined use. The end result is that language learners do not become independent users but are limited to set formulae for supposedly highly predictable situations. Learners cannot respond to specific contexts, as language is not taught for an immediate here-and-now, on-line communicative need. Language learning, as opposed to language teaching, needs to give students present-day skills, combining both skills-getting with skills-use. Far from just being formulaic, greetings have a functional purpose.

This paper will examine the treatment of greetings in the EFL classroom and the key role played by the teacher. Informal research is undertaken into teacher attitudes and teacher practice with regard to the teaching of greetings. This research is used as

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the basis for developing a proposal for evolving an awareness-raising approach to teaching/learning greetings as proposed by Meier (1997:26). In an attempt to achieve this, the paper considers how students can be exposed to real-life greetings by examining sociolinguistic factors and the determinants of stylistic choices involved in greetings. Three proposals towards teaching and learning greetings are advanced to reflect language, contextual and cultural techniques.

Greetings in Everyday Life

Greetings (with the exception of introductions) represent the re-establishment of ongoing social relations or 'continuity of personal relation' (Halliday & Hasan 1985:63). For this reason, greetings are often formulaic and reflect politeness: 'routine behavior is polite behavior' (Laver 1981:290).

They are short-cuts to reviving a previous interaction. The participants are verifying whether their relationship continues on the same footing. It is important that all participants in greeting rituals pick up both the linguistic response (including style) and features of speech such as intonation and rhythm. Non-linguistic signaling, including body language, is also important. This is why it is important for language learners to pick up greeting signals as they can set the tone for the rest of the conversation. For instance, a formal greeting to a friend or a gruff 'morning' may signal that the relationship is not in optimum conditions and cannot be reestablished so easily. This is why the whole area of greetings cannot be conveniently left to a 'Hi-Nice-to-meet-you' routine.

Greetings are not empty and hollow phrases. Chaika (1994:86) argues that greetings serve specific functions: a) to initiate interaction; b) for phatic communion.

Initiate Interaction

To quickly start a verbal interaction, adjacency pairs (in this instance, greetings-greetings) are used between the participants. Greetings set the tone for the rest of a social interaction. Ignoring a greeting may mean that a social interaction gets off on the wrong footing and is seen as a direct threat to the face of the addresser. Greetings are important because they are the first step in a communicative sequence and 'inter-cultural interaction' that is open to mutual misunderstanding arising from different conceptions of politeness and different ways of attending to face wants and the creation of harmony. (White 1997:339)

For example, Spanish-language speakers often attach great importance to greetings before commencing a communicative 'act.' Therefore, for example, formal business letters in Mexico need to have a polite and courteous introduction rather than the direct 'I am writing to you because...' approach of English.

Often we are not conscious of our own greeting routines and their effect on participants in a greeting situation. A get-down-to-business approach at the beginning of a class by foreign teachers in Mexico (or by Mexican teachers enacting English-language greeting routines) may be seen as discourteous or even rude by some students. This means that teachers need to examine their own classroom practice:

Sometimes routines are so unconscious that others have to draw your attention to the ones you yourself employ, because you are not aware of how systematic certain bits of your behavior have become. We quickly become familiar with the habits.

idiosyncrasies, and routines of others; our own tend to remain hidden from similar recognition (Wardhaugh 1985:74).

Phatic Communion

Often greetings reflect fixed social formulae and often we do not even listen for the answer: 'How are you?' is often followed by a quick, automatic, 'Fine, thanks'. Greetings are not normally about conveying factual information: '... in greetings and some other social routines, it is inappropriate to state one's real feelings in words' (Chaika 1994:85).

The routine conversational answer to 'How are you today?' is normally a positive response such as 'fine'. This question is not usually seen within the greeting sequence as a real communicative opportunity to express how you really feel. That opportunity normally comes later in the interaction.

As part of phatic communion (language such as greetings used to ease social relationships), we often do not use formulaic expressions, especially when we are certain about the state of play in ongoing relations. For instance, do we regularly say good-morning to our spouses, partners or to our children? In intimate social gatherings, are greetings formulae the normal way to resume social relationships? Do we sometimes rather choose a relevant topic to start a conversation? Quoting a study conducted by Wesler at the University of Pennsylvania, Wolfson (1989:105) says that 'in interactions among status equals who were well acquainted, conversations were typically initiated not by a formulaic greeting but by a comment or question related to information shared by the participants'.

Comments rather than greeting routines may include expressions such as 'I've been meaning to give you a call...' or, at a party, 'I didn't think you were coming...'. Furthermore, Wolfson states that 'social distance and shared knowledge about one another's lives have a strong influence on the frequency with which non-formulaic greetings are used' (Wolfson 1989:105).

Language Change

Greetings represent an ongoing example of language change in society. Greetings may change from generation to generation. For instance, the standard response to 'How are you?' is perhaps 'Fine' but the response 'Good' is currently heard more and more, especially in American English.

Ferguson notes writing twenty years ago, 'In the past forty years it has been possible to observe the weakening from How are you to Hi! in American English' (1976:31-32). Language users must be aware of appropriate choices and how greetings are constantly undergoing change. They also need to be able to respond appropriately.

Research

Informal research, using an open-ended questionnaire, was conducted among 41 language teachers (36 non-native and 5 native) in Guadalajara, Mexico, (including 29 teachers from three university language centres) to examine the use and teaching of greetings with their students. The questionnaire asked teachers seven questions:

- 1) How do you normally greet your students? What are the exact words you normally use?

- 2) Do you teach different forms of greetings in the classroom? If so, what are they and what influences your choice?
- 3) Do you teach greetings only at the basic level? If the answer is no, state at which levels & teaching activities you use.
- 4) Does student language level influence what you say when greeting students?
- 5) What choices do you think students need to take into consideration when greeting people?
- 6) How do you provide students with choices in using greetings?
- 7) Do you ever examine with your students the language or cultural differences between L1 and L2 of greetings?

The interviewees consisted of 24 female and 17 male teachers of which 20 have a BA or MA in Teaching English As a Foreign Language (TEFL), 11 are currently undertaking their BA in TEFL and the remaining 10 teachers have had formal teacher training (e.g. University of Cambridge COTE). The teachers teach in a variety of programs with students studying from secondary to BA levels. Obviously these preliminary findings on the use of greetings in the EFL classroom may only apply to Mexico and further structured research is required. Furthermore, actual classroom observations were not carried out to support the teachers own perceptions of their own classroom behavior. However, questionnaire results offer the following insights:

- 1) A wide variety of greetings are used by teachers when entering the classroom ranging from Good morning and Hello class through to Good to see you and Hiya. However, teachers generally did not differentiate between how they greet the whole class and individual students.
- 2) 39% of teachers think greetings should only be taught at the basic level.
- 3) 51% of the teachers claim that student language level influenced their choice of greeting students. This finding would indicate that if greetings are related to language level, there may be a case for teaching greetings beyond the basic level.
- 4) 43% of teachers say that they examine language and cultural differences between greetings in L1 and L2. Teacher examples of cultural comparisons include contrasting the use of good evening and good night with buenas noches (which can be both a greeting and a way to say good-bye) and differences in body language e.g. handshakes and bows. (However, in total, only 27 per cent of teachers said that they made cross-cultural comparisons with aspects such as physical contact, gestures and facial expressions.)
- 5) Only one teacher made mention of the need to practice greetings in such contextual situations as telephone etiquette.
- 6) Teachers' answers generally placed the teaching of greetings in relation to the spoken mode and largely ignored written modes such as informal writing, business letters and faxes and e-mail.

Stylistic Choices Involved in Greetings

Given the analysis of the questionnaires, teacher need to be made aware that, although they may use a wide variety of greetings, they also need to help students with the appropriate use of greetings beyond the classroom or academic sphere e.g. using the telephone or using e-mail. Language learners need to be aware of cross-cultural comparisons e.g. aspects such as physical contact, gestures and facial expressions. It is important to try to identify the choices involved in greetings:

These can be characterized through different factors within stylistics such as dialect, register and speech function (Turner 1973).

- 1) Dialect focuses on individual choice. Individual choice can be influenced by geographical, social and time factors. Geographical differences can be seen through the differences between American English & British English in formulating greetings e.g. 'Hello' Vs 'Hi!' Social differences can be seen through middle-class and working class greetings e.g. 'Hello' Vs 'Wotcher'. Laver also raises the issue of different greetings forms between men and women (Laver 1981:300). For instance, Laver notes that 'Cheers' and 'Wotcher' seem to be used more by male than by female speakers.
- 2) Register focuses on the situation rather than on the speaker. The situation often determines the uses of greetings. Three factors that come into play are: the role of the speaker or writer, the number and status of the other participants in the interaction and the communicative circumstances. Greetings at a business meeting will differ from greetings sent by e-mail (even between the same people) due to level of formality, purpose and mode (spoken Vs written).
- 3) Speech Function focuses on the purpose of the greeting. Are greetings just to reinforce phatic communion and to initiate interaction? Can they also convey messages in themselves? A 'good afternoon' said to a student entering class thirty minutes late is a greeting which carries a sarcastic message.

At the same time, utterances cannot always be limited to just one speech function: 'Among speakers of middle-class American English, a compliment, for example, may well serve as a greeting....' (Wolfson 1989:57). Examples of greetings working as compliments include 'Look at you..!' or 'I can't believe it. You looking so...!'

Sociolinguistic Factors Involved in Greetings

An examination of everyday greetings and stylistic choices needs to be considered within a sociolinguistic context in order to develop a principled approach to classroom teaching and learning. Sociolinguistic factors cover: a) formality and informality; b) status and role of participants; c) solidarity and distance; d) positive and negative politeness; e) communicative function and verbal and non-verbal behaviour.

Formality & Informality

Levels of formality required by the situation and context may be expressed through formal greetings such as: 'good morning', 'good afternoon' or 'good evening'. Informal greetings may be reduced versions of the full form: 'morning' or 'evening'. Formality may not call for a specifically formulated reply while an informal greeting, such as 'How are things?' or 'How are you doing?,' may open up a subsequent conversation.

Status & Role

Status and role-play an important part in the choice of greetings formulae. Status can be defined as 'the position a person holds in the social structure of a community' (Crystal 1987:41). Meanwhile, role can be seen as 'the conventional modes of behavior that society expects a person to adopt when holding a particular status' (Crystal 1987:41). Both status and role are key factors for determining level of formality and forms of address. To demonstrate politeness, we will often use the most formulaic

expressions in order to recognize this status and role and avoid imposing on the addressee.

Solidarity & Distance

There are different types of distance between communicators. There is both physical and emotional distance. Greetings can be used to reinforce social distance or express solidarity. For example, one's superior may maintain authority merely by consistently choosing formal greetings. The underling who must always respond to 'How are you today. Mr./Mrs/Ms...?' with 'Fine, thank you' is kept at a distance. Each time the greeting is given, the social distance is reinforced (Chaika 1994:86).

The widespread use of solidarity greetings, such as 'hi', 'hello', 'hi there', or 'hello everybody', reflects a growing informality of society but this does not justify an indiscriminate blanket use of such formulae.

Expressions of solidarity and distance may vary according to the level of privacy/public focus of an interaction. For instance, communication with a superior in public may require formality and distance while communication through e-mail with the same person may reflect a high degree of closeness and informality.

Positive & Negative Politeness

Communication is potentially face-threatening. Face is 'the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself' (Brown & Levinson 1987:61). When we enter into a communicative interaction we want other participants to accept our image and give us due 'recognition'. In order to promote this 'recognition', we are willing to recognize and protect the face of participants:

Face is something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained or enhanced and must be constantly attended to in interaction. (Brown & Levinson 1987:61)

Appropriate greetings can help to lessen the risk of threatening the other person's face. In order to minimize this risk, speakers can choose between positive politeness strategies and negative politeness strategies.

Positive politeness strategies are oriented towards 'advancing' the face of the addressee (Brown & Levinson 1987:70) as the speaker wants to be considered as belonging to the same social circle as the addressee. Meanwhile, negative politeness aims to satisfy the addressee's 'claims of territory and self-determination' (Brown & Levinson 1987:70). The speaker/writer avoids imposing on the addressee and tries to provide 'freedom of action'.

Communicative Function

As previously mentioned, greetings have a communicative function which is related to specific contexts. Therefore, attempts to neatly fit greetings into speech act categories should be treated with caution. Greetings formulae have a variety of functions such as:

- Surprise (e.g. 'Hello, what's this?' and 'Well, this is a surprise!')
- Comment on a present event: (e.g. 'Nice to see you!')
- Sarcasm (e.g. 'good afternoon' in the middle of the morning)
- Criticism for lack of attention (e.g. 'H-e-l-l-o' to somebody already present).

Functional use of greetings also depends on other factors such as the length of time between encounters or the number of individuals in a group.

Verbal & Non-Verbal Behavior.

The above mentioned survey of Mexican EFL teachers placed non-verbal greeting behavior at a low level while research indicates that the choice between verbal and non-verbal behavior plays an important part in greetings. For instance, quoting a study by Krivonos and Knapp of college-age men, Wolfson (1989:104) reports that 'verbal greetings were more common among acquaintances than among strangers' and that 'more smiling occurred when participants were acquainted.'

Taking into consideration the questionnaire findings and the necessity to take into account stylistic choices and sociolinguistic factors, an attempt now needs to be made to relate them to the classroom situation, to ELT textbooks and to different techniques in the teaching of greetings.

Greetings & Classrooms

The classroom is the real-life experience of language learning and language use for many students. While EFL textbooks focus quite rightly on authentic out-of-class communicative situations, it must not be forgotten that the classroom is also an authentic communicative situation.

Therefore, teachers need to also exploit the classroom as a communicative context (Cullen 1998:186). Given this real-life experience of the classroom, scrutiny needs to be given to: What context is provided by teachers? What do teachers say when they enter a classroom? Do teachers offer students linguistic and cultural choices in the classroom to reflect possible real-life contextual and cultural circumstances? How do teachers greet students on an individual basis both inside and outside the classroom? Different activities can be used for focusing on the use of greetings in the classroom ranging from recognition exercises to productive and experimental activities. Recognition activities will include examining written and spoken texts, making cultural comparisons and analyzing critical incidents (Meier 1997:26). Meanwhile, 'productive' activities may involve the development of dialogues, discussion of possible alternative greetings, cultural comparisons and experimenting with different greeting patterns by both students and the teacher.

ELT Textbooks

Options involved in using greetings cannot be left to the EFL textbook. The 'Hi-Nice-to-meet-you' routine of many textbooks may be appropriate for 'level one' beginners trying to come to grips with the second language but it does not provide students with the linguistic tools to negotiate more complex social contexts and deal with unpredictable situations.

This paper has argued that greetings are largely relegated to the basic levels of language programs as students are given a set of formulae while the importance of greetings in setting the tone of a conversation is largely ignored. Students need to have at their disposal language options, recognize contextual choices and bring into play cultural knowledge in order to understand the impact of greetings. Therefore, students need to analyze and develop textbook dialogues especially with regard to stylistic choices and sociolinguistic factors. Students need to critically analyze the use of formal

and informal greetings in textbook dialogues taking into consideration aspects such as distance and solidarity and status and role.

Teaching Greetings

The teaching of greetings cannot be just be a matter of practicing a formulaic set of greetings (Meier 1997:24). Real-life greetings often vary from textbook patterns. Textbook greeting patterns provide a solid basis but they must be developed taking into account different speech community practices. Quoting from the Wesler research at the University of Pennsylvania, Wolfson says:

The investigation of the ways in which members of American speech communities go about the social act of greeting one another is of particular interest to TESOL, since many of the forms actually in use differ considerably from community norms regarding this form of speech behavior and are therefore not likely to be represented in descriptions of greeting routines normally taught to language learners (1989:105).

There can be no one way to teach greetings and furthermore students learning styles should allow for just that. Here are three different possible ways to examine the teaching of greetings.

Language Approach: Collocations & Semi-Fixed Phrases

Greetings tend to be formulaic and are often expressed through formulaic phrases. Given the arbitrariness of language, detailed analysis is not always needed and often is not even useful. Students need to see greetings in chunks and become accustomed to stock phrases along with strong and weak collocations (Lewis 1997).

Such a language-based approach also focuses on;

- a) Everyday echo responses (e.g. 'morning' - 'morning')
- b) Adjacency pairs (e.g. 'How are you?' - 'Fine')
- c) Stylistic variation (e.g. 'Hello', 'Hi', 'Hiya')
- d) Dialectic variation (i.e. social, geographical and age factors).

Contextual Awareness

As the classroom is a real-life context for students, language learners need to examine possible classroom scenarios related to greetings e.g. greeting a stranger, a parent or a school director entering the classroom. Students must also examine likely real-life contexts e.g. How would you greet somebody taking into consideration the following variations. Setting: At home in the morning, at home at night, on the telephone, in the street or in a restaurant etc.

-Formality: Very polite, very friendly, polite or unfriendly.

-Status: As a friend, as somebody who is very important, as an equal, or as somebody who is less important.

-Mood: Does boredom, anxiety, depression, excitement etc. affect the way we greet people? If so, how do we express ourselves differently?

Cultural Awareness

Greeting sequences are not simple translations of L1 formulae into L2 formulae: 'Greeting formulas universally serve an affective function of establishing non-threatening contact and rapport, but their precise content is clearly culture specific' (Holmes 1992: 308). Students need to understand differing cultural perceptions of

greetings. As an example of cultural possible differences, Spanish-speaking students may want to consider the following aspects of greetings:

Ways of greeting: Sample topics: -- What is the appropriate greeting for the different times of day? How do you translate *buenas noches*? (As 'good evening' or 'good night'?)

Importance of body language: For instance, should you shake hands when greeting on a regular basis? Is physical distance an important factor when greeting?

Cultural restrictions on greeting: What are the cultural risks of not responding to a greeting? Should you interrupt busy people in order to greet them? When a superior greets you, how do you know if you say too much or too little in reply? (Wardhaugh 1985: 68).

Conclusion

Greetings are important for establishing communication. They cannot be taken for granted as being basic-level language learning. They do not consist solely of well used linguistic formulae. They have both verbal and nonverbal dimensions. They need to be examined within both a functional and cultural context. Different techniques to understanding greetings need to be examined so as to give students real choices that reflect EFL classroom reality or mirror outside communicative needs.

Greetings should not be positioned within an over-simplified taxonomy of functions, perhaps under the category of 'salutation.' The diversification of functions behind greetings needs to be reflected and acted out using practical everyday situations taking into consideration such variables as levels of politeness, formality, cooperation and solidarity with reference to status and roles.

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