

Introduction

Over the years, I've traveled domestically (around the United States) and internationally. My international travel, for business and pleasure, has taken me both to places where I knew a little bit of the language and to places where I didn't speak the language at all. In both situations, I've been in a variety of contexts and settings—social, academic, and professional—with a variety of people of different ages, genders, and statuses at different times and locations. I noticed that three factors seemed to impact the interaction: word choice, voice, and non-verbal communication. In terms of word choice, there are certain words or phrases to use to serve particular words or functions. For example, *To me . . .* is often a phrase used to let someone know an opinion will follow. In thinking about the influence of voice, a speaker needs to consider tone (emotion), intonation, stress (syllable and word), volume, and speed (how fast or slowly something is said). To give an example, someone who says, *I'm not angry at YOU*, is still angry but is emphasizing that they are not angry with me (as opposed to someone else). Last, non-verbal language—such as body language, facial expression, gestures, posture, or eye contact—can also play a role, possibly enhancing, detracting from, or replacing word choice or voice cues.

For each possible combination of context, I noticed how interaction shifts. For example, I might talk to a person of the opposite sex differently at work than I would at a social dinner. Or, I might be talking to the exact same person, say my colleague, but we would talk about different things depending on where we were or what time of day it was. Think about a phrase such as *How are you?* Said woman to woman, it can be a simple inquiry. Said man to woman, it can take on a whole new meaning, especially when combined with non-verbal language and tone or when spoken in class versus spoken at a party. I realized my students needed to be aware of factors such as gender, time, location, status, relationship, and content.

Despite all the differences and contexts, there were many patterns that began to emerge as I studied the language. As someone who was very shy and reserved, I began to notice these patterns and found they could help me “survive” any interaction. To illustrate, I noticed that when someone greets someone in English with *How are you?* the answer is almost always positive (*I’m good*); when someone might answer with a negative response is usually based on the relationship—someone who knows the other person very well might answer more truthfully with *Not so good*. Knowing that there are common responses and patterns to various greetings and closings can help students fear interaction less. There are tips that help them “predict” to some degree what might happen.

Also, when I traveled to a place where I knew a little of the language, I noticed how quickly I was overwhelmed. The language I heard “in real life” didn’t sound anything like it sounded in my classroom or in the textbooks from which I had studied. When I began teaching, I noticed this was also true for my students who had studied English for many years but who, after arriving in the United States, quickly realized that what they had learned as English was not what they heard now. The English taught in textbooks is sometimes very prescriptive. It is what we are supposed to say; however, it rarely is what we really do say. To give an example, students often learn this dialogue:

Hello. How are you?

I am well. Thank you. And you?

I can’t think of the last time I said *And you?* First, most Americans* don’t speak grammatically. Rather than saying *I am well*, they say *I’m good*. International students need to be prepared for that contracted, ungrammatical response. And then they need to be ready for the question that will not be *And you?* Rather, it’ll be *You? How ‘bout you?* or *How’re you?* Therefore, it was important for me to provide a book that teaches the language prescriptively as well as descriptively (letting

*We use the term *Americans* in this book to refer to people in North America and primarily those in the United States (although we know people from Central and South America are also Americans).

students review that foundational language and then add the more realistic English they will hear). Then students need to move beyond the book and actually use the language.

This text was written for students who want to live, study, and/or work in an English-speaking setting or are already doing so. It consists of 10 units meant to help students survive interactional English in a variety of social, academic, and professional settings. The text provides language to use for a variety of functions: greetings, closings, introductions, opinions, agreement, disagreement, phone use, assistance, advice, excuses, invitations, compliments, complaints, congratulations, condolences, and small talk. The content encourages students to think beyond just using the “right” words. It encourages them to think about pronunciation, intonation, and tone—how things sound. It’s not what a person says, but how they said it. Just because someone uses exactly the right words to apologize or greet someone, if the tone or intonation is “off,” then the interaction can be disastrous. Students need to be able to recognize tone and then use it. They also need to consider non-verbal language that can accompany the words and tone.

These materials have been developed from 10 years of teaching a class called *Interacting in English* at Stanford University that is designed to help students be able to talk and work with Americans while they are living, studying, and working in the United States. Content is drawn from observations, corpus collections, and data collection my students and I have collected from homework assignments in class.

The text can be used as the main text or a supplemental text in speaking or culture courses or as part of integrated listening/speaking classes. The units can easily be used sequentially, but it need not be. One unit does not need to be finished before another, so teachers can pick and choose based on student needs. However, beginning with Unit 1 is recommended since greetings typically begin most English interactions.

Each unit consists of discussion starters, language lessons, practice activities, contact exercises, and analysis activities.

- **Discussion Starter:** These questions are designed to get students thinking about the material covered in the unit. The questions might ask about their personal experiences or observations, ask them to consider

their native languages or cultures, or ask them to guess what they might see or hear “in real life.” The idea is to focus them on the function as well as the culture and other factors that might affect an interaction.

- **Language Lesson:** The language lessons will include foundational information such as common expressions students might hear (corpus-informed or compiled from data collection), formal versus informal phrasing, a comparison of what they probably learned and what is more likely, strategies to use, common responses, and important things to notice. Some Language Lessons include information about pronunciation to guide students on some key ways that these phrases may sound. The Appendix can be used as a quick reference. No attempt is made here to address the teaching of pronunciation, just to make students aware of how the way something is said can affect meaning.

- **Practice Activity:** Each unit has several practice activities that help students apply what they have learned. Activities include situational analyses, situational simulations, role-plays, and those that improve pronunciation or phrasing. Many practice activities are designed for pair or small group work, but instructors can vary this or even ask students to work individually before comparing answers.

- **Get Acquainted:** Each unit has at least one contact activity so students have to use the language they have learned and hear the way that native speakers use the language. Contact activities include data collection, surveys, interviews, and observations.

- **Analysis Activities:** Each Get Acquainted activity gives students the chance to compare their “data” with others to learn what English is being used and determine patterns to the responses. The activities help them to begin to notice factors such as gender—that women might answer differently than men—or status—that someone might use different language based on their position. By completing these activities, students can fear English less and grow their confidence so that they use the language and become active participants on and off campus.