
Why Saying “Hi” Can Be Complicated: Participation Frameworks in Real-World Encounters

Zainab Ali¹ (Research Scholar)

Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India

Prof. Asghar Ali Ansari²School of Language, Literature, and Society, Jaipur National University, Jaipur, India

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Abstract:

Greetings such as “Hello” or “Good morning” constitute foundational yet intricate interactional phenomena demanding precise interpersonal coordination. This paper analyses greeting exchanges through the theoretical lenses of Goffman’s footing and Brown & Levinson’s politeness framework, examining how these routine acts constitute sophisticated negotiations of social positioning. Through microanalysis of interactional dynamics, the paper reveals how prosodic contours, temporal synchrony, and bodily comportment intersect with participation frameworks to produce either seamless or strained encounters. Special consideration is given to second language contexts where communicative breakdowns frequently originate not from lexical gaps but from divergent sociopragmatic expectations. The analysis positions greeting behaviour as a crucial locus for examining the interplay between linguistic form and social meaning-making processes.

Keywords: greeting rituals, politeness theory, footing, participation framework, rules of communication, second language learners,

Introduction

We often take greetings and small talk for granted. A simple “hi,” a brief “how are you?,” or a passing smile seems almost automatic, like an opening move in the choreography of conversation. But beneath these seemingly effortless exchanges lie complex structures that guide how we participate, align ourselves with others, and manage interaction. What happens when these structures aren’t shared, understood, or followed? Why do some greetings land smoothly, while others falter or create confusion?

This article delves into the subtle but powerful frameworks that govern our ordinary moments of conversation, particularly greetings, small talk, and the art of taking turns. Using ideas like participation frameworks, footing, and face, we’ll explore how even a simple “hi” is packed with layers of negotiation, identity performance, and the subtle shaping of social

meaning. Instead of dismissing small talk as mere filler, we consider it as a fascinating area for analysis – a place where the invisible structures holding conversations together (or allowing them to fall apart) become clear.

Consider this: someone walks into a room, smiles, and says "hi" to a group already deep in conversation. They're met with a quick glance, a brief nod, and no real acknowledgment. On the surface, nothing explicitly went wrong. Yet, it's clear something didn't quite click. This common scenario perfectly illustrates how much more there is to a smooth greeting than just saying the words. The person followed what seemed like a polite script. Yet the interaction failed to open up. Why? Moments like these may appear trivial, but they reveal how delicate the coordination of conversation actually is—how easily alignment slips, footing shifts, and faces are unintentionally threatened.

Participation Frameworks in Practice

Participation Frameworks in Practice is a concept from communication studies, particularly rooted in sociolinguistics and interactional sociolinguistics. The term was introduced by Erving Goffman (1981), who analysed how people take on different roles in communication. A *participation framework* outlines the rights and responsibilities assigned to individuals in an interaction, shaping their roles in speaking or listening. Understanding participation frameworks helps to break down how people contribute to and shape interactions.

Every interaction involves more than just a speaker and a listener; it involves a shifting network of roles and alignments. Goffman's concept of participation frameworks helps us see how even simple greetings depend on an implicit understanding of who is speaking, who is listening, and who is allowed to respond. In a group setting, for instance, the person saying "hi" may see themselves as initiating inclusion, but the others might not recognize them as a ratified participant yet. They may be over hearers, side-line observers, or focused elsewhere. These subtle distinctions shape how the greeting is received. A lack of acknowledgment doesn't always reflect rudeness; it may reflect an unshared frame of participation. In this way, participation is not guaranteed—it is something negotiated moment to moment.

Footing and Small Talk

Footing, a concept also introduced by Erving Goffman, denotes the alignment or position a speaker adopts in an engagement and the manner in which that position alters throughout the discourse. A greeting's never just a word. 'Hey!' drags you in. 'Good morning' keeps you at bay. Even the simplest hello bends the space between two people. As Goffman (1981) puts it, "*footing is about the alignment we take to ourselves and to others present.*" Footing becomes most visible in small talk, where tone, topic or formality can betray or break a conversational balance. An individual deploying small talk may suddenly find their footing slipping if the other person doesn't play along, generating silences or sudden turns of subject. These missteps aren't accidents. They happen when roles blur, intentions clash, or signals get crossed. Small talk? It's never just words. It's a push and pull, drawing people in or shutting them out, all without saying a thing outright.

Face and Turn-Taking

Face denotes an individual's public persona; the manner in which they choose to be regarded and interacted with by others.

There are two major components:

Positive face: the desire to be liked, approved, or included.

Negative face: the desire to act freely, without imposition.

We constantly manage our own face and attend to others' face in communication — a process called facework.

Turn-taking is the system by which people coordinate speaking turns in conversation. It works by invisible rules and quiet hints, like:

Intonation (rising or falling pitch)

Pauses

Body language

Turn-yielding cues ("So yeah... that's about it.")

It's not just about taking turns, but how you take them — and how that reflects or threatens face.

Behind every greeting and fragment of small talk lies the ongoing management of face—our projected self-image in interaction. Drawing on Goffman, and later Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, face is what we try to uphold through our words, tone, and timing. A minimal greeting such as "hi" serves dual pragmatic functions: it may affirm the addressee's social belongingness (positive face) or acknowledge their autonomy (negative face). However, in unscripted interactions, particularly among unacquainted participants, these functions are vulnerable to misinterpretation due to the absence of shared interactional history. A delay in responding to a greeting, for instance, might be interpreted as disinterest or rejection, even when it results from uncertainty about whether a response is expected. This becomes even more pronounced in turn-taking, where the rhythm and flow of talk depend on shared expectations. Who speaks next? How long should the pause be? Is silence respectful or awkward? In some contexts, quick replies show attentiveness; in others, brief silences indicate thoughtfulness. When participants don't share the same assumptions about timing, interruptions, overlaps, or long pauses can cause discomfort or breakdowns in interaction. These aren't merely social errors—they're signs that the underlying frameworks for managing face and turn-taking are misaligned. And yet, it's in these subtle misalignments that the everyday complexities of conversation are most visible.

Literature review

The study of greeting rituals sits at the Intersection of three research traditions. From politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), we inherit the understanding that even formulaic exchanges like "hello" serve crucial face work functions – either affirming social bonds (positive face) or respecting autonomy (negative face). However, as Haugh's (2015) work on initial interactions demonstrates, these ostensibly simple acts remain vulnerable to misinterpretation, particularly when interlocutors lack shared cultural frameworks.

Conversation analysis research (Sidnell & Stivers, 2012; Goffman, 1981) reveals how greetings establish participation frameworks through precise coordination of turn-taking,

prosody, and embodied action. Yet Larsen-Freeman's (2019) complex systems perspective reminds us that these "rules" emerge dynamically rather than existing as fixed templates – a crucial insight for L2 pedagogy. This aligns with Hall's (2019) concept of interactional competence as the ability to co-construct meaning in real time amid uncertainty.

Recent L2 pragmatics research has begun addressing this tension. While Kasper (2022) documents learners' systematic difficulties with pragmatic markers, studies like Mugford et al. (2024) show how explicit instruction can enhance small talk skills. Taguchi and Barón's (2024) work on adaptive competence particularly informs our understanding of how learners adjust linguistic resources to listener feedback – a process deeply tied to Swain's (2013) assertion that cognition and emotion remain inseparable in L2 use.

The classroom Implications become clear through corpus-informed studies (Caprario et al., 2022), which demonstrate how authentic interaction patterns often diverge from textbook presentations. This body of research collectively suggests that greeting competence requires more than memorized phrases – it demands the flexible deployment of linguistic, paralinguistic, and sociocultural knowledge in moment-to-moment interaction.

Discussion

Fighting Uncertainty: What L2 Learners and Teachers Should Know

When it comes to greetings, L2 (second language) learners and teachers should understand not only the vocabulary and grammar, but also the cultural context, tone, and body language associated with greetings in the target language. Here's what both learners and teachers should be aware of:

1. Common Greeting Phrases (Linguistic Knowledge)

L2 learners should be introduced to both formal and informal greetings. For example, in English:

Formal:

“Good morning.”

“How do you do?”

“Nice to meet you.”

Informal:

“Hi!”

“What's up?”

“Hey there!”

Teachers should highlight:

When each is appropriate (e.g., “Hi” is not for job interviews).

Pronunciation and intonation.

2. Cultural Norms and Politeness

Different cultures have different expectations around greetings.

In some cultures (e.g., Japan), bowing (お辞儀, *ojigi*) is a common greeting.

In others (e.g., many Western countries), handshakes, eye contact, or even hugs/kisses (e.g., in Latin cultures) are the norm.

The phrase "How are you?" may not actually expect a detailed answer in English—this can confuse learners.

Teachers should emphasize:

Cultural appropriateness of verbal and non-verbal greetings.

How to interpret and respond to common greeting questions.

3. Response Strategies

Learners need to practice both sides of the interaction.

Example:

A: "Hi, how are you?"

B: "I'm good, thanks! And you?"

Tip for teachers: Use role-play to help learners practice full exchanges, not just isolated phrases.

4. Non-Verbal Communication

Body language matters:

Smile, eye contact, personal space.

Gestures vary: waving, nodding, shaking hands.

In many cultures, physical contact is avoided in greetings.

Learners may come from backgrounds where this differs greatly, so this should be taught explicitly.

5. Situational Awareness

Teach how greetings change depending on context:

Greeting a friend vs. greeting a teacher or boss.

Meeting someone for the first time vs. seeing a friend daily.

Teachers should create situational dialogues to show learners how greetings shift with context.

6. Mistakes and Misunderstandings

L2 learners often:

Overuse or underuse formality.

Translate greetings literally from their native language, which may sound awkward.

Teachers should encourage:

Patience and confidence in making mistakes.

Awareness of tone and setting.

Summary for L2 Learners and Teachers:

What to Focus On	Why It Matters
Appropriate greetings	Avoids sounding rude or too casual
Cultural sensitivity	Ensures respectful interaction
Practice both roles	Prepares learners for real conversations
Non-verbal cues	Aligns with social norms of the target language
Adjust for context	Makes communication natural and fluent

For many second language learners, the hardest part of using English in real life isn't grammar or vocabulary. It's figuring out how to enter a conversation, when to speak, or

whether a greeting will be welcomed or ignored. These uncertainties are shaped by subtle interactional forces such as participation, footing, and face, which learners often have to navigate without explicit guidance.

Recent research emphasizes the importance of flexibility and awareness in real-time communication. Taguchi and Barón (2024) note that “*pragmatic competence involves the ability to use the knowledge flexibly in interaction,*” highlighting that learners who attend to timing, tone, and social cues tend to communicate more successfully. In other words, saying “Hi” or “Busy day?” is not only about the words, but about how, when, and to whom they are said.

The role of small talk in pragmatic development is also gaining scholarly attention. According to Timpe-Laughlin et al. (2015), “*the pragmatic task that international employees perceive critical is small talk,*” yet they found that language instruction often fails to address this area in depth. This suggests that learners should not treat casual conversation as peripheral, but as a key zone for building rapport and negotiating their way into social participation.

What can learners do with this knowledge? It helps to observe first, noticing how people initiate and receive greetings in different settings. Starting with low-pressure openers like “Long line today” or “Waiting too?” can make room for others to join the exchange without feeling forced. Silence or a lukewarm response should not always be read as rejection. It might simply reflect differing expectations around participation or face. For teachers, there is value in framing small talk not as a fixed routine but as an interactional skill that invites interpretation and adaptation. Learners benefit from classroom activities that explore shifts in footing, role alignment, and face negotiation. Encouraging reflection after such exercises can help students understand not just what went right or wrong, but how they were positioning themselves in the interaction. As Caprario, Taguchi, & Reppen (2022) puts it, learners must “develop a sensitivity to the micro-moments of talk,” moments where language, social intention, and timing all intersect.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding years of formal instruction and communicative rehearsal, the realities of spoken interaction remain inherently unpredictable for second language learners. From the very outset of any conversation, learners are not merely decoding linguistic input or retrieving rehearsed expressions; they are positioning themselves within evolving participation structures, interpreting subtle shifts in footing, and managing their own and others’ social face.

This unpredictable terrain requires more than grammatical mastery. It demands what Hall (2019) describes as interactional competence – “*the ability to co-construct meaning in real time, attuned to the dynamics of context, power, and interpersonal nuance*”. Yet, as Taguchi and Barón (2024) have recently emphasized, such adaptability is rarely cultivated

explicitly in language classrooms, where fixed routines and scripted dialogues often fail to prepare learners for the contingencies of authentic communication.

Larsen-Freeman's (2019) complex systems perspective invites us to reframe this uncertainty not as a pedagogical problem, but as an essential condition of language use. Learners do not step into fully predictable linguistic environments; they participate in ever-shifting ecologies of meaning. Improvisation, then, is not a last resort but a core communicative resource — one that reflects not just fluency, but flexibility and resilience.

At the heart of this understanding is a pedagogical shift: to teach language not as static content to be mastered, but as a form of social action that is fundamentally open-ended. As Swain (2013) reminds us, cognition and emotion are inseparable in second language learning; learners bring not only knowledge, but vulnerability, hesitation, and hope into each interaction.

Thus, to be “ready” to communicate means, paradoxically, to accept that one can never be fully prepared. Readiness, in this sense, is not about mastery, but orientation — a cultivated openness to the unfolding moment, and a willingness to participate even amidst uncertainty. And it is within this space of not-knowing that learners begin to speak with authenticity.

Conclusion:

Three constraints temper our findings. First, the analysis privileges casual conversation over workplace or academic exchanges where different uncertainty norms apply. Second, we've sidestepped the messy reality of assessment – how exactly should teachers measure improvisational skill? Third, the leap from theory to practice remains incomplete; our coffee-stained lesson plans from actual classrooms would help bridge this gap. These unanswered questions reveal where the conversation must go next.

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