

The Rules of the Queue

*Jane E. Hardy, Ministry of Defense School of Foreign Languages,
Republic of Slovenia*

Level: Intermediate or above

Time: 30 minutes for initial demonstration, and 15-30 minutes for follow-up role play

Resources: Chalk board, white board, or OHP; at least one movable desk or table and space for students to engage in physical role play.

Goal: To learn the pragmatics and culture of queuing.

Description of the Activity

The teacher asks the students if they have had to wait in line recently and writes the identified places on the board. She then asks what the experience was like: Was the line long? Did you have to wait a long time? How did you feel while waiting? One student describes waiting in line at the bank, and the teacher chooses that example for illustration. She asks for one student to be a bank teller and arranges that student at an imaginary bank window. Then she asks for several volunteer 'customers' to wait in line at the bank. The students line up with varying degrees of orderliness. The teacher asks the remaining students to comment on the form of the line: Is this the way you queue in your countries? Is this the way people queue in the US? How is it different? The teacher illustrates the concept of proxemics by joining the line and standing very close to the student in front of her. A discussion follows about 'personal space,' and other students are asked to show the physical distance with which each feels comfortable. The purpose here is obviously to point out that different cultures have different concepts of personal space.

Next the teacher tells one of the students that her car is parked at a parking

meter and the time is running out. If she doesn't put in more coins, she will get a ticket. Should she leave the line and lose her place, or stay in line and get a parking ticket? One student suggests that she should be able to leave the line and return to the same place. The teacher asks how she could accomplish this, and writes appropriate expressions on the board ("Would you mind holding my place in line?" "It will just take me a minute." "I should be right back." and so on.) From student input, the teacher identifies and numbers the steps that one must go through to ask someone to hold their place in line, and fills in any missing language forms:

1. Getting the attention of the person behind you ("Excuse me")
2. Identifying your reason for needing to leave the line ("I need to put some more coins in the parking meter, or I'll get a ticket..")
3. Asking the person to hold your place ("Would you mind holding my place in line?")
4. Promising to return to the line promptly ("I'll be right back.")
5. Returning to the line ("Thanks a lot.")

The teacher then identifies appropriate responses to the request: "Sure," or "I'd be glad to."

The activity continues with a series of role plays. The teacher divides the students into groups of 4 or 5 and identifies the place that each group will be waiting. One student from each group is identified as the employee, and one as the customer who needs to leave the line. The role plays are successfully completed when the student standing behind the 'customer' requesting to leave the line accepts the request. This student has to evaluate the request to be sure that it included all of the necessary

parts and was sufficiently polite. The employee and other ‘customers’ in the line can serve as judges to be sure that the student granting permission is being fair. Students trade roles until each student has had the opportunity to be the one needing to leave the line.

After the role plays are completed, the teacher follows up by eliciting student reactions or additional questions that arose during the role plays.

Procedure

1. (Warm-up) Ask students where they have to wait in line (the post office, the bank, the airport, a movie theater, or a fast food restaurant.) Ask them to describe the experience of waiting in line.
2. On a chalk board or OHP, identify with student input key vocabulary and expressions for waiting in line (differences between American and British English could be identified here if desired): to queue, to wait in line, to cut in line, ‘no cutting,’ to jump queue, or to hold one’s place.
3. Choose one of the places identified by students in #1 for a demonstration.
4. Choose one student to be the employee at a serving station, and seat the student at a desk or table with plenty of space around it.
5. Invite 6 or 8 other students to stand up and tell them that they are customers waiting in line. Let them arrange themselves in line without any instruction. If they are from different cultures, they may go about this in different ways, providing material for comparison and discussion.
6. Depending on the form of the line, the teacher can illustrate line behavior by pointing out behavior that coincides with or deviates from the accepted norm of the

US or target culture. This could include the way in which the line is formed (straight back from the serving station or to the side), how close people stand to each other, and how much space they leave between the person at the serving station and the next person in line. The students not participating in the demonstration can be asked to identify such points: Is this the way people queue in your country? In the US? If not, how is it different?

7. Ask the students not involved in the demonstration what happens if they need to leave the line for some reason (to put more money in the parking meter, to go to the bathroom, or to make a phone call). Elicit suggestions for what they could do if they needed to leave the line. Is there any way that they could return to their place rather than returning to the end of the line?

8. Through guided brainstorming, identify necessary language for leaving the line, holding one's place, and returning to the line. Add the list of expression to those in #2.

9. Identify for students the crucial steps in leaving and returning to the line (see description above), and how one can respond to a request to hold someone else's place.

10. Divide the students into reasonably sized groups and have them role play waiting in line. For each group, identify the place that they are waiting and designate the roles of employee, customers, and person(s) who want to leave the line and return.

11. A role play has been successfully completed when the person standing behind the student wanting to leave the line has agreed to the request. Other students in the line can serve as judges.

Rationale

Queuing behavior differs from culture to culture. In some countries, people crowd around a serving station *en masse*, a system which unnerves the average American. In other cultures, people line up to the right of a serving station, rather than forming a line which faces the window. This activity is presented to teach the culture and pragmatics of the queues most common in the US: the multi-server queue, where each serving station has a separate waiting line; and the 'snake' line, commonly found in airports and banks, where all stations are served by one single file line (Hall, 1993).

This activity is intended to teach not only the pragmatics of language required while queuing, but to incorporate additional information about cultural expectations and proxemics. Americans in particular expect a high degree of orderliness when waiting in line and become angry when others violate their personal space or attempt to 'cut' in line. In theme parks this cultural expectation is taken to the extreme: violators of the 'rules' of queuing are threatened with expulsion from the park!

By getting learners physically involved in a queuing role play, this activity can prepare students for actual situations they may face in the target culture, and it is more meaningful than merely reading about queues in a book or hearing a verbal description. It also provides an opportunity for kinesthetic learning (Reid, 1995).

Alternatives and Caveats

I have used this activity successfully in mixed-culture ESL classes in the US. Students have expressed interest in culturally appropriate 'queuing etiquette' and the language forms needed to leave and return to a line. Students have also enjoyed sharing experiences they have had when they apparently violated someone's personal space.

This activity can also be used in an EFL context, but it is obviously more interesting and effective when the target culture has different queuing behavior and different proxemics. Nevertheless, the activity can still be presented in abbreviated form to EFL classes which are culturally similar to the US by placing more emphasis on the language forms and less emphasis on the ‘rules of the queue.’

As an alternative to the suggested warm-up, the teacher can show the students a picture of a queue and ask them where they think it is, how it makes them feel, what similar experiences they have had, etc. In the role plays, students can take turns choosing the place where they are queuing, and identify their own reasons for needing to leave the line. This affords the opportunity for more creativity, especially with more advanced students. The activity could be followed by a reading about queuing behavior. Finally, this activity could be used as one in a series focusing on making and responding to requests.

References

- Hall, R. (1993, February 7). Queues: You are how you wait. *San Antonio Express News*. Reprinted in: Defense Language Institute English Language Center (1994). *Module 981 Academic Reading*. Government Printing Office: Defense Language Institute.
- Ladousse, G.P. (1987). *Role Play*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Reid, J.M. (Ed.) (1995). *Learning Styles in the ESL/EFL Classroom*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.