

The Texas Airport Cookies: Pragmatic Variation from an Urban Legend

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Level: Advanced ESL or EFL Students⁷

Time: 2 Week Unit

Resources: Just this chapter

Goals

1) To *enhance awareness* of pragmatic variation with respect to setting (U.S. or home country) and participant characteristics (age, cultural background, and gender) in an airport scenario. The airport situation is introduced in a story that is included in a course unit on urban legends.

2) To *provide practice* opportunities in the following speech acts:

- Expressing a friendly greeting
- Opening a general conversation
- Making a request (to get something from interlocutor)
- Requesting clarification
- Expressing surprise
- Expressing misunderstanding
- Clarifying one's own position

Description of the Activity:

The class reads the following transcription of the urban legend, "The Texas Airport Cookies." Subsequently, the teacher facilitates "awareness" and practice "activities." These activities are outlined in step-by-step fashion below. This project is best accomplished over a period of a week or two to allow time for students to do the story rewrite, to interview a native-speaker informant and to write up the report.

The Texas Airport Cookies

(This story was retold by Brian Sturm)

Not so long ago, a fellow went down to Texas for a conference. When the conference was finished, he returned to the airport to catch his plane home, and he thought how much he had missed his wife while he'd been in Texas. "I'll take her something to show her how much I've missed her," he thought. So he looked all over the airport. He thought about flowers, but he didn't really want to get them; he wondered whether to get her some candy, but that didn't seem quite right either. A book, perhaps...no, there just wasn't anything in that airport the he wanted to take home, and he ended up wandering around in despair.

Until...suddenly a marvelous aroma reached his nose. He sniffed..."WOW, I've never smelled anything that good before," he cried. So he followed the aroma, and it led him to a little shop he hadn't seen before. The sign over it read, "The Best Cookies in the World." "If they taste anything like they smell," he thought, "they will indeed be the best cookies in the world." So he went into the shop. All the cookies and cakes were spread out in a glass display case. "Do you have any chocolate chip cookies," he asked the woman behind the counter. "Of course we do," she replied, "and they are the biggest and the best chocolate chip cookies in the nation." As you and I both know, EVERYTHING in Texas is bigger and better than anywhere else.

"Great," the fellow said, "I'd like half a dozen, please." She boxed them up, and he picked up his briefcase and his newspaper and walked down to the terminal. When he arrived the terminal was crowded, and he looked all over to see if there was one seat that would let him be by himself. You know how when you get to a crowded room you want to have at least one empty seat next to you, preferably two, so you can have some elbow room. Well, the man saw one seat with a table next to it, then a grandmother seated on the far side with her two grandchildren. He walked quickly over to that chair and sat down, put his things down, and took out his newspaper and began to read.

It wasn't long before the smell of those cookies wafted up to his nose once again, and he wondered whether they really did taste as good as they smelled. "I wouldn't want to take something home that didn't taste good," he thought; maybe I should try one." And no sooner had he had the idea, than he decided to act on it. He reached over and took a cookie from the box on the table and began to eat it. "HMMMMMMMM. That was excellent." And he was just beginning to enjoy the flavor when he saw out of the corner of his eye that the grandmother was reaching over toward his box of cookies, and he watched as she took one and began to eat it. He couldn't believe his eyes. The nerve of that woman to take one of his cookies! But he was too embarrassed for her, and he couldn't face her, so he turned back to his newspaper in disbelief.

A short while and a couple of pages later, he thought, "No one ever buys FOUR cookies. You buy three, half a dozen, a nine, a dozen, or if you're lucky, a baker's dozen, but no one EVER buys four cookies." "Well," he thought, "if I eat one more cookie, I can take the last three to my wife and she'll never know the

difference.” So he reached over and took another cookie, and he was stunned to see the grandmother reach over and take not one but two cookies and give them to her grandchildren, who began to happily munching on them. “This is outrageous,” he thought. “This is unbelievable. How can she DO that!” But he was too embarrassed to face her, and again he returned to his paper, but he was seething inside.

“I’ll be DARNED if she’ll get my last cookie, he thought. And so he reached over to take it. But the woman reached over at the same time, and their hands paused over the last cookie. He glanced at her, and she smiled at him. Thoroughly embarrassed, he returned to his newspaper. She took the cookie, broke it in half, and gave him half while eating the other half. That was the LAST STRAW! In fury, he stuffed down the half cookie she had given him, grabbed his briefcase and his newspaper, and stomped over to the other side of the terminal. He waited there seething with anger until his plane arrived, and then he stomped down the gangway and onto the plane. He sat down in his seat, opened the tray table on the back of the seat in front of him, slammed down his briefcase, opened it up...and there...was HIS box of cookies!

Activities for The Texas Airport Cookies story:

Activity 1: “Say Something” (to enhance awareness and understanding)

The story revolves around what the two main characters, the man who bought the cookies and the grandmother, did not say to each other. The outcome would have been different if something had been said. At each of the points in the story given below, students take turns verbally expressing what the man or the grandmother could have said to the each other. Students are also to discuss the reasons/objectives and possible outcome(s) of what was said.

Instructions for teachers:

Teachers should facilitate this activity by discussing, ahead of time, what would be most appropriate to say, pragmatically, if someone wanted to express the following intentions to a stranger who is an older woman and a grandmother, or a businessman of similar or younger age,

- a. make general conversation

- b. make a request
- c. ask a question to clarify
- d. express surprise
- e. express misunderstanding
- f. clarify position
- g. express a friendly greeting

Instructions for students:

- a. Work with a partner
- b. Decide which character you will be i.e. the man or the grandmother
- c. Say something to your partner at each of the points in the story given below
- d. Discuss why your character said something
- e. Discuss the result of what your character have said and how it could have changed the story

Point A

He (the man) reached over and took a cookie from the box on the table and began to eat it. (Line ?)

What could have the man said?	What could have the grandmother said?
Why would he have said it? (for example, to clarify ownership of cookies)	Why would she have said it?
How would the story have changed?	How would the story have changed?

Point B

And he was just beginning to enjoy the flavor when he saw, out of the corner of his eyes, the grandmother was reaching over toward his box of cookies, and he watched as she took one and began to eat it. (Line ?)

What could have the man said?	What could have the grandmother said?
Why would he have said it? (For example, to clarify ownership of cookies)	Why would she have said it?
How would the story have changed?	How would the story have changed?

Point C

So he reached over and took another cookie, and he was stunned to see the grandmother reach over and take, not one, but two cookies and give them to her grandchildren, who began happily munching on them. (Line ?)

What could have the man said?	What could have the grandmother said?
Why would he have said it? (For example, to clarify ownership of cookies)	Why would she have said it?
How would the story have changed?	How would the story have changed?

Point D

And so he reached over to take it. But the woman reached over at the same time, and their hands paused above the last cookie. He glanced at her and she smiled at him. (Line ?)

What could have the man said?

What could have the grandmother said?

Why would he have said it?

Why would she have said it?

(For example, to clarify ownership of cookies)

How would the story have changed?

How would the story have changed?

Activity 2: Character Morphing (to provide practice in context)

This activity invites students to think about the story and the characters in the story in the context of their own culture or in terms of the people they know. The main aim of the activity is to help students compare what would be pragmatically appropriate for the two characters to say in the students' culture with what American characters would say to avoid the misunderstanding that took place in the story. Suitable for EFL students, this activity helps students to use what they already know in their own setting as a basis for understanding the pragmatics convention in American English. Upon completion of this activity, the teacher can then discuss with students what Americans would say in the same situation. Alternatively, the students themselves could seek native speakers or people who have spent some time in the U.S. or speak American-English proficiently, to ask them about what could have been said by both the man and the grandmother.

Instructions to students:

- a. Work with a partner (if possible, with someone who speaks your language)
- b. Imagine that the man and the grandmother in the story are two people who are from your culture.
- c. Discuss the man's and the grandmother's characteristics.
- d. With your partner, rewrite the story by inserting what the man and the grandmother could have said to each other to prevent the misunderstanding that occurred in the story.
- e. Discuss with a native speaker or someone who has spent some time in the U.S. about what the man and the grandmother could have said to each. Compare their opinions to what you and your partner have written in your version of the story.
- g. Discuss both the differences and similarities and the reasons why they exist.
- h. Write up a short report on your discussion. Your report should include information on what is polite or impolite to say to someone who is older than you, and what is polite or impolite to say when you want to "save someone's face" in your language and in American English.

Rationale

The proposed activities emphasize reflective and participatory elements. Although a stimulus story text with native speaker characters is used, the activity is not model based. To the contrary, the native speakers in the story experience a communication lapse (not a good example to be imitated!), a fact which underscores the point that native control over language forms is not in and of itself sufficient to ensure

successful communication. In the first activity, “Say Something,” it is up to the students to reflect on what went wrong and to co-construct (or co-reconstruct) meaning successfully (not to imitate a “correct” native speaker model). The second activity, “character morphing,” provides practice opportunities and illustrates how “success” may vary with characteristics of the participants (cultural background, age, gender, etc.) as well as setting (airport in U.S. vs. an airport in a student’s home country). The use of the role-play formats also makes the activities especially useful for EFL students, who may have developed the ability to comprehend pragmatic behavior but still require opportunities to practice using appropriate forms in particular contexts (Kasper, 1997). In short, an “awareness” activity and a “practice” activity are proposed with the aim of developing control over pragmatic aspects of English that vary with setting and participant characteristics.

A strength of the design of these two activities is that they lend themselves to current, alternative forms of classroom assessment. Alternative assessment for these activities would have two key (and somewhat surprising) features: use of a nonnative speaker standard, and judgment of performance by peers rather than a native-speaker teacher (another advantage for FL contexts). The associated assumptions are that appropriate language behavior is culturally dependent and that representatives of the cultures involved would be better able to evaluate success in these settings than would teachers from outside the cultures. The teacher’s role would be to help assess whether there is consensus among the student judges, or whether discrepancies could be explained and resolved through conferences or class discussions (Moss, 1994). Such an approach directly addresses some of the problems with the NS model approach to the assessment of

pragmatic ability. These problems include the lack of appropriateness of using a native-speaker standard to judge nonnative-speaker performance and inadequate understanding of sociolinguistic considerations relating to age, gender and status (Cohen, 1999; Hudson, Detmer & Brown, 1995).

Finally, while lessons in pragmatics often emphasize the opportunities to practice grammatically well-formed utterances in a particular situation (e.g., Discourse Completion Tasks), the proposed lesson situates the pragmatic lesson itself in a larger context, or unit, in an ESL/EFL course. Covering the unit over several class meetings (as opposed to in a 15-minute, one-shot lesson) allows students to develop a deeper understanding of the pragmatic aspects in the story and provides them with increased opportunities for practice in role plays—conditions that help to maximize students' chances of actually mastering these aspects of pragmatics.

References

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