

Things To Teach About Apologizing

1. Excuses/Reasons

In some cultures it is impolite to give a reason why something happened, as this can be seen to be taking away from your apology by giving excuses. This is true when “There is no excuse for what I did” But generally in English, not giving a reason why something happened shows that you can’t be bothered to explain. This can lead to conversations like “Sorry I’m late.” Well, where were you? For reasons of culture or lack of language, students might find themselves involved in conversations like this (or worse) offending people and never finding out that they have. Fun practice for the language of giving excuses includes matching funny excuses (available on many work-related humor sites on the internet) to what they were excusing themselves for, e.g. “The dog ate it” to “I’m sorry I didn’t hand in my homework.” Another good activity is competing to give the most believable reason for something inexcusable, like taking a bath with your wife’s mother.

2. Apology, reason and promise

A general pattern for a standard apology in English is an apology (“I’m sorry”/ “I apologize”/ “Please excuse my lateness”), then a reason (“I missed the bus”/ “My alarm didn’t go off”), and finally a promise of future action (“I’ll buy a new one this afternoon”/ “I’ll be more careful next time”). There are fun activities you can do with these points like spotting the ones that don’t fit (e.g. “I’m sorry your book is looking a bit bashed up. This is because it was a manual and I had only ever driven automatics before. I promise to keep my mouth shut next time”) and then swapping bits around to make ones that do make sense.

3. What you repeat

In some languages it is usual to repeat the actual apology word, the equivalent of running up to your friend while saying “Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.” This sounds almost comical in English, and the usual rules of repeating yourself as little as possible in English apply to apologizing too, e.g. in this situation “Sorry. I do apologize. You must have been waiting for ages. I’ll try and make it up to you...” and at the end of the meeting, “Sorry again for keeping you waiting.” The exception to the rule is saying “I am so so so so soooooo sorry.” You can practice having a range of apologizing phrases with a board race: half of the class line up in front of the right half of the whiteboard where “Apologizing” is written at the top and the other half on the left have to write under “Thanking.” The teams race to write as many different correct phrases in their category as they can, each person only writing one phrase before they pass the pen and go to the back of the line.

4. Adverbs

Many people use “so” and “very” interchangeably, and there are actually subtle differences. In this case, “so” is almost always stressed and has the same impact as (the much less common) “I am VERY sorry” and much more than “I’m very sorry.” This can be practiced by them listening to different phrases and giving each one between 1 and 5 points depending on how strong the apology sounds. After comparing answers on this, give students cards with the number of points on to show them how strong their apology should be in the next role play. Their partner then guesses what number they had on their card at the end of the role play.

5. Word stress

Which words you stress can have a big impact on the meaning and strength of apologies and working on apologies is a good chance to tackle which words you should emphasize. Another example is “I’m sorry” and “I AM sorry,” where the very strong second version is the only time we don’t use the contraction “I’m.” Stressing every single word, especially if the intonation is flat (see below), can also make the students sound sarcastic. The best way to tackle this point is to read out or play two dialogues with the same phrases but different words stressed in different dialogues, asking students to listen the first time for the difference in pronunciation of the phrases and the second time for how the situations and hence the meanings of the apologies are different.

6. Intonation

Going down at the end of the “so” in “I’m SO sorry” can make students sound like they don’t really mean it (like me as a teenager “apologizing” to my parents). This can again be examined by students analyzing good and bad intonation in context, guessing whether people really mean it by what they say in the rest of the conversation. They can then practice this by being given a card that says “Really apologize” or “Be sarcastic” telling them how they have to respond to their partner’s complaints. Alternatively, they can compete to make the same phrase sound the most polite and then to make the same phrase sound the most sarcastic they can. Note that unmusical students gain very little from being told when intonation goes up and down, so work on word stress, increasing range and copying intonation are generally much more useful.

7. Eye contact

In some cultures, people apologizing tend to keep their eyes down to show contrition, but a stereotypical American dad disciplining their teenage kid might assume that means the excuse is just a lie and tell them to “Look at me when I am talking to you.” You can introduce this with the story “Juries in America often assume that witnesses from Japanese companies are lying or feeling guilty. Why do you think that misunderstanding happens?” Answer: They tend to look avoid eye contact with the judge and jury to show respect or to sit up very straight for the same reasons. To Americans this makes them look stressed and/or shifty. This topic can be just as useful for students whose culture would keep eye contact when apologizing but might come across people whose culture is different. Another way of approaching the subject is to tell students to mime certain attitudes with just their faces and eyes until their partner guesses which one it is (such as “confident”, “arrogant”, “defiant”, “apologetic”, “lying” and “guilty”), and then discuss cultural universals.

8. I'm afraid that

I'm not sure why you can't say this when you can say "I am confident that", but "I'm afraid I haven't" is the much more natural English phrase that students tend to avoid.

9. Past apologies

One difference is the one between "I'm sorry to hear that" (used when receiving bad news) and "I'm sorry I heard that" (I wish he hadn't told me that-rarely used). A similar but more common confusion is when trying to produce something like "I am sorry to have given away your secret." This can be explained by telling students that the present tense of "to be" shows that the feeling is still true and therefore doesn't minimize the apology, whereas "I was sorry to break his vase" means the feeling is finished and could even mean "...but now I know that it was a fake, I don't feel so bad."

10. Regret

Students tend to misuse this verb in apologies. The most common mistake is using it for normal apologies in conversation, whereas in English it is very formal and usually a written form. Another possible confusion is between "I regret to inform you that..." (regret + infinitive for announcements of bad news) and "I regret informing you that..." (regret + ing, where the second verb is something that has already happened, therefore making this structure very different in meaning and very rare with "inform").

11. Excuse me

This is mainly used to get someone's attention or asking to get past. There are exceptions like British people using "Sorry" to get past on the underground (especially to avoid having to repeat themselves) and "Please excuse me for phoning you at this early hour," but unless students ask these are usually best ignored! An amusing way of introducing the topic is with dialogues where people use the wrong one, e.g. (to a waiter) "Sorry" "Why, what did you do?"

12. Pardon me/I beg your pardon

A use of "Pardon me" that students are hardly ever familiar with is after you burp. "(I) beg your pardon" is used in similar circumstances to show a child that you heard the rude word or noise that they made, a use that I have heard many more times than the "I (do) beg your pardon (for...)" for apologies that students are often familiar with. It can be difficult to tackle the topic of letting off wind in class though!

13. The right amount of apologizing

I bring this point up with another apparently true story on the topic of cultural misunderstandings. A Japanese company writes to an American supplier hoping to have their machines fixed or replaced and are very annoyed just to be given advice of how to fix them themselves. What happened and why? Answer: The Japanese started the letter with 'We are sorry to bother you but we are having some problems with...' which the Americans took as a sign that the Japanese were accepting that they were at fault for the problem and only asking for help. Needless to say, some nationalities have the exact opposite problem, annoying their counterparts in the UK by never saying they are sorry with phrases like "I disagree" rather than the much more British "I'm afraid I can't agree."

14. Apologizing without accepting responsibility

A more practical and recent cultural difference is the need of American companies and now many others to apologize without that statement being taken as an acceptance of having done something wrong and so being ammunition when the customer sues or threatens to. This is a difficult thing to do even for a native speaker, which can lead to some amusing examples of convoluted or downright rude “letters of apology” that students can laugh at and try to improve. This topic is especially good for students in customer service or studying English for law.

15. Formality

Students often sound overly formal and old fashioned, for example by using written forms like “I regret...” when speaking. You can overcome this by marking all phrases you give them with “written,” “slang,” “formal,” etc, or by asking them to look at a dialogue, email, official notice, etc. and spot which ones are used in each.