

I. Introduction

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Recognizing the importance of achieving the goal of communicative competence in English instruction worldwide, both English teachers and students, either in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) or in ESL (English as a Second Language) context, have started to emphasize language use instead of language analysis for the past decades. However, the common ground that various models of communicative language ability are on is: communicating effectively and efficiently in any given language requires linguistic knowledge and the ability to use this linguistic knowledge appropriately in the given sociocultural context. The ability to use this linguistic knowledge appropriately in the given sociocultural context was described as pragmatic competence in Bachman's model (1990). Understanding and producing the target language appropriately, that is, to use English in a proper way to the right person at the right place and time, has been one of the biggest hurdles for English learners to master a language communicatively.

For EFL learners in particular, exposure to English and to the target language culture is insufficient and limited. To enhance learners' communicative competence turns out to be an ideal aim since real and abundant contact with English native speakers in authentic language is barely feasible and available. Given technology advances make on-line contact with native speakers and learning resources possible, face-to-face communication from which EFL learners acquire communicative competence naturally is by far difficult to realize.

Nevertheless, it is still significant to conform to the current trend of English teaching and learning, that is, to build in communicative abilities, in order to benefit learners with authentic use of English they need. Therefore, to equip English learners with adequate capacity of language use becomes an important task to achieve a communicative aim in language teaching. Within this regard, the author is interested in how learners convey and interpret an English speaker's

intention, more specifically, the implied meaning rather than the literal meaning in a conversation. What is intriguing and crucial is that if learners misinterpret English native speakers' utterances, misunderstanding may occur and a communicative purpose will not be fulfilled in the end. As a result, the purpose of this study will be an evaluation of how well learners, particularly EFL learners in Taiwan, understand so-called implicatures of English utterances by comparing it with that of English native speakers and hopefully specific instruction given will facilitate learners' acquisition of part of pragmatic competence. In the long run, sensitivity to context can be enhanced; intrinsic motivation of learning for real life will hence be lifted and so does language proficiency when communication is not hindered by misunderstanding.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study intends to answer four research questions:

1. Does the understanding of conversational implicatures of college English majors differ from that of American English native speakers?
2. If it does, to what extent do they differ?
3. Does the EFL learners' pragmatic competence correlate with their overall language proficiency?
4. Does instruction work to enhance those college English majors' pragmatic competence?

HYPOTHESES

Four hypotheses corresponding with the four research questions are proposed:

1. The understanding of conversational implicatures of college English majors in Shu-te University significantly differs from that of American English native speakers.
2. The English majors have difficulty conveying and interpreting non-literal meaning.

3. The English majors' pragmatic competence positively correlates with their overall language proficiency.
4. Instruction works to enhance the English majors' pragmatic competence.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

IMPLICATURE

In order to be pragmatically competent, EFL learners have to acquire the ability to perform speech acts, the ability to convey and interpret non-literal meanings, the ability to perform politeness functions and the ability to perform discourse competence (Jung, 2002). Of the four types of ability, EFL learners' ability to interpret non-literal meanings (implicature) and to use appropriate speech acts (such as disagreement and concession) in a given speech event (like an intercultural conversation) and to select appropriate linguistic forms to realize those acts have been recognized as major components of pragmatic competence. However, within time limit, implicature will be mainly investigated with the other components remaining for future follow-up studies.

As Keenan suggested in 1976, the use of non-literal meanings (implicature) in cross-cultural interaction was a potential barrier to effective communication. That, in turn, implied that developing EFL learners' skill in the interpretation of English language implicatures should be one of objectives of the EFL or ESL classroom. Nonetheless, a review of the latest EFL texts available in 2004 uncovered very few instances in which any real attempt was made in this direction (Bouton, 1990). Consequently, the implicature test was developed to explore the extent to which the students from the Department of Applied Foreign Languages were able to derive the same meanings from conversational implicatures in English as the American English-native speakers did. The results of the implicature test would serve as a reference of whether instruction on implicatures is in need.

The types of conversational implicature in the present study rely heavily on Bouton's work (1988, 1994, and 1999). They are examples of violations of

Grice's relevance maxim in 1975 ("Did the mail come? – "It's not twelve yet."), as well as formulaic implicature (Bouton, 1999) such as indirect criticism ("Did you like the book?"-"Well, the picture on the cover was nice.") and variation on the Pope Q ("Is it going to snow this winter?"- "Do fish swim?"). Accompanied by visuals and verbal stimuli to simulate a real life situation, each item consists of a brief situation description and a conversational exchange. Test takers are asked to select the one of four choices that most accurately conveys what the relevant interlocutor means.

WEB-BASED TESTING INSTRUMENT

Web-based testing is a new but rapidly growing field (Roever, 1999; Backman et al., 2000; Birnbaumer, 2000, Alderson et al., 2001) because web-based tests are relatively easy to design and implement, cheap to maintain and administer, and very flexible as to time and space. Using computer technique, FLASH, the researcher developed the test, which is delivered the World Wide Web (WWW). Accompanied by visuals and verbal stimuli to simulate a real life conversation, each situation in the test presents testees with a detailed description of the context. The test consists of a welcome page, a background questionnaire and a section of 20 multiple-choice items with an instruction page respectively. Test takers submit their results through the Internet and their scores of the multiple-section is then computed and immediately displayed. Test features include time limits for the multiple-section, online backup storage of test-taker responses in a cookie, blocking of source code to prevent access to correct answers and randomization of items within a section to exclude sequence effects and prevent unwanted test-taker cooperation in group test sessions. Test takers can furthermore access context-sensitive instructions at any time, can always see how many items in a section they have completed, and how much time remains, and can view their scores on the multiple-choice section after submitting their answers via a button on the final page.

III. METHODOLOGY

SAMPLING AND SAMPLE SIZE

Two groups of participants, namely forty third-year college English majors in Shu-te University (NNS group) and ten American English native speakers (NS group), took part in this study. The NS group served as a reference group on which the results of the implicature test of the NNS group was based for comparison. College English majors were chosen, for they were supposed to possess a certain level of language abilities. Compared to other possible candidates such as common college non-English majors in Taiwan, they were believed to have had more exposure to English and its culture. Their understanding of implicatures is worth investigation after several-year learning of English.

PREDICTOR/INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

English-native speaking abilities are one of the independent variables of both English native-speakers (NSs) or non-English native speakers (NNSs). In addition, another predictor is six-hour instruction of conversational implicature for investigating whether explicit explanations in class foster learners' understanding of implicature.

OUTCOMES/DEPENDENT VARIABLES

Test performance, including scores of the implicature test (a pre-test and a post-test) and scores of TOEIC, was the expected outcomes to compare the participants' understanding of implicature before and after instruction and also the correlation between comprehension of implicature as part of pragmatic competence and their overall language proficiency was to be found out.

INSTRUMENT AND MEASUREMENT

A web-based implicature test (<http://nu.stu.edu.tw/english>) based on

Bouton's work (1999) with visual and verbal stimuli was designed. Moreover, a TOEIC test was conducted at Shu-te University before the study to picture the participants' general English proficiency. Since Shu-te University is vocation-oriented, students' language proficiency is best measured with this test.

PROCEDURES

A conversational implicature pre-test was revised from Bouton's work to test the 40 English majors of Shu-te University and 10 English-native speakers on understanding of implicature with visuals and verbal stimuli to simulate a real life conversation. In other words, they (both NSs and NNSs) were tested on their pragmatic ability to interpret non-literal meaning of natural utterances.

The test consists of a background questionnaire and a section of 20 items, taking about 20 minutes to complete (multiple-choice items from which the participants choose the most appropriate non-literal meaning they assume from a context). Afterwards, the participants (NNSs) were tested on their overall proficiency in a TOEIC test. Following the pre-test and the TOEIC test, six-hour instruction particularly in the third-year course of advanced English listening comprehension training was given to enhance the English majors' understanding of conversational implicature. After the instruction, a post-test, similar to the pre-test, was given more than one month later to evaluate the effectiveness of the instruction on their implicature knowledge.

VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

This study showed strong evidence of strong construct validity and test reliability was sustained by the same group of subjects whose interpretation of implicature was measured by similar versions of implicature tests. In this way, correlations within the group of subjects were obtained to indicate the effect of instruction to the participants through a pretest and a post-test. At the same time, pragmatic competence of implicature is believed to entail a learner's overall communicative competence, the construct this study aims at.

ANALYSIS

Statistical analyses of a paired-samples t-test, an independent-samples t-test and a correlation test were conducted with the software of SPSS. Comparison of NNSs before and after instruction and comparison between NNSs and NSs in the regard of the interpretation of implicature were done along with the correlation between understanding of implicature and overall English proficiency.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The test takers in both the EFL learner and English native speaker groups took the pre-test to measure their interpretation of implicature in the fall semester, 2005. The average score of the American NSs was 16.9 out of 20 items, one point per item while that of the NNSs was 9.2 (See Table 1).

Table 1 Summary of overall multiple-choice pre-test results

	NSs	NNSs
n	10	40
Mean	16.9	9.2
Standard Deviation	2.33	3.72

It can be detected that there was a significant difference (mean difference=7.7; $t=6.226$; $p=0.000<0.05$) in the way NSs and NNSs interpret implicature found in the contextualized dialogues on the test. The types of implicatures, particularly formulaic implicature, have proved difficult for the NNSs initially. Apparently, they did not develop their ability to interpret implicature in American English as did the NSs. These facts then suggest that direct and guided instruction should be done in the EFL classroom to make learners aware of implicature as a tool of communication. Consequently, the time and material oriented toward the development of the students' skill in interpreting implicature were made a part of the regular syllabus for the semester involved. Due to this, the total time available for formal lessons devoted to the

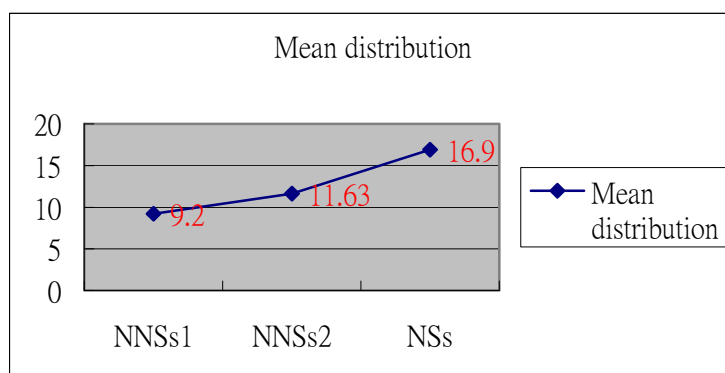
development of that skill was only 6 hours, 1 for each of the different types of implicature to be covered. Of course, once a particular implicature type had been introduced, the instructor sometimes dealt with it informally and briefly as the opportunity arose, but this happened no more and no less than one might return to any other facet of the course that had been taken up earlier simply to keep it fresh in the students' minds.

At the end of instruction, the students had improved as Table 2 indicates. They made statistically significant difference between their means scores of the pre-test and post-test. A repeated measure t-test was performed to confirm this difference (mean=-2.43; $t=-8.281$, $p<.05$). Figure 1 also shows the NNSs' improvement because of instruction and the difference between the NSs and the NNSs in implicature interpretation.

Table 2 Summary of overall multiple-choice pre-test and post-test results of NNSs.

	NSs	NNSs (Pre-test)	NNSs (Post-test)
n	10	40	40
Mean	16.9	9.2	11.63
Standard Deviation	2.33	3.72	3.91

Figure 1 Mean distribution of the results of the implicature test



Note. NSSs1= the mean score of the pre-test; NNSs 2= the mean score of the post=test; NSs= the mean score of the pre-test

Finally, NNSs' implicature competence positively correlated with their overall English proficiency ($r=.824$). Ranging from 225 to 630 with the total score of 990, the average score of the NNSs group as a whole as 441.38; the mean score of the pre-test was 9.2. As a result, their language proficiency was unsatisfactory and was closely related to their implicature competence.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics of the pre-test results of NNSs and their TOEIC scores

	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
TOEIC	441.38	123.82	40
PRETEST1	9.20	3.72	40

Table 4 Correlations between the results of TOEIC and the pre-test of NNSs

		TOEIC	PRETEST1
TOEIC	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.824**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	40	40
PRETEST1	Pearson Correlation	.824**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	40	40

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

DISCUSSION

This study was designed to answer the following research questions about

the implicature understanding of EFL learners in Taiwan by comparing their ability with that of English-native speakers, and thereby to pursue the effect of instruction. The basic findings showed:

1. Does the understanding of conversational implicature of college English majors differ from that of American English native speakers?

First of all, the average score of the American NSs was 16.9 out of 20 items, one point per item while that of the NNSs was 9.2 (See Table 1). There was a significant difference (mean difference=7.7; $t=6.226$; $p=0.000<0.05$) between the two groups. In other words, the NNSs performed much more poorly than the NSs did in interpreting implicatures. Very obviously, without sufficient exposure to authentic English and interaction with English-native speakers, EFL learners were unable to comprehend implied meanings of speakers. In face-to-face communication, this may cause breakdown and learners thus may stop to negotiate meanings.

2. If it does, to what extent do they differ?

Formulaic implicature in particular such as indirect criticism (“Did you like the book?”-“Well, the picture on the cover was nice.”) has proved to cause difficulties to EFL learners. Mutual cultural understanding this aspect seems inadequate and insufficient.

3. Does the EFL learners’ pragmatic competence correlate with their overall language proficiency?

The English majors’ pragmatic competence positively correlates with their overall language proficiency. ($r=.824$) In other words, learners’ pragmatic competence is a crucial element to predict one’s language proficiency. Therefore, if students’ English proficiency is to be adequate, their understanding and conveyance of implicature must correspond.

4. Does instruction work to enhance those college English majors’ pragmatic competence?

At the end of six-hour instruction, the students had improved with an increasing mean score of 2.43. They made statistically significant difference between it means scores of the pre-test and post-test ($t=-8.281$, $p<.05$). Therefore,

despite the short length of teacher intervention, the students still outperformed themselves afterwards. This suggests that instruction, either implicit or explicit, is necessary to enhance learners' competence of non-literal meanings in natural utterances. This implies that direct or guided instruction is still necessary to equip students with pragmatic competence.

Because of the above findings, the proposed hypotheses were confirmed:

1. The understanding of conversational implicature of college English majors in Shu-te University significantly differs from that of American English native speakers.
2. The English majors have difficulty interpreting non-literal meaning.
3. The English majors' pragmatic competence positively correlates with their overall language proficiency.
4. Instruction works to enhance the English majors' pragmatic competence.

V. IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The major inquiry of this study will provide rich implications for education. The understanding of non-literal meanings of natural conversations proves to be significant to the overall language proficiency of English learners. Guided instruction has been found to be effective in enhancing students' pragmatic competence in terms of implicature. As a result, it illuminates the interrelationship between pragmatic competence and English proficiency as well as instruction. More specifically, NNSs have to possess pragmatic competence if the goal of communicative competence is to be achieved under the CLT framework.

1. Form-focused instruction or even consciousness- raising under contextualized situation may benefit learners in developing their pragmatic competence.
2. The results of a pragmatic ability test are appropriate for diagnosis and perform curricular decisions.

However, the limitations of this study will provide a chance for follow-up studies to reach a sounder conclusion. Generally speaking, small sample size and limited instances of test items to measure the overall pragmatic competence in terms of implicature will make generalization of the findings to a larger population impossible. Accordingly, for future research, an extensive, large-scaled validation can be conducted if higher stakes decisions are to be made.

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Appendix 1 Test questions with transcripts

Web-based Test of Second language Pragmatics

Thank you for being willing to take my test. The test consists a section to understanding your ability to interpret non-literal utterances in American English, 20 multiple-choice items, estimated completion time: 18 min.

1. (Jay) As Hank is walking along Green Street, a car slows down beside him and the driver, a stranger, rolls down the window and speaks to him.
(Jenny) Stranger: Excuse me. Could you help me? I'm almost out of gas.
(Thomas) Hank: Sure. There's a gas station about 3 blocks on down the street on your right.
(Jay) What does the stranger mean?
 - a. She is asking for the nearest gas station.
 - b. She needs Hank's help to fill the gas tank.
 - c. She gets lost in this city and is asking for direction.
 - d. Her car breaks down, and she is asking for the nearest garage.

2. (Jay) As Carrie is preparing for dinner in the kitchen, her son, Jerry, comes to her.
(Thomas) Jerry: Mom, you know Shrek?
(Jenny) Carrie: Jerry, I'm busy.
(Jay) What does Carrie probably mean?
 - a. She does not want to listen to Shrek's story.
 - b. She thinks Jerry can play with Shrek.
 - c. She asks Jerry to help her fix dinner.
 - d. She likes Jerry to tell her more about Shrek.

3. (Jay) Linda and Ally are having lunch at the campus cafeteria.
(Jenny) Linda: The Beetles are coming this Saturday.
(Thomas) Ally: I have two term papers due next Monday.
(Jay) What does Ally mean?
 - a. He thinks Linda will help him write his term papers.
 - b. He has no ideas about who the Beetles are.
 - c. He wants to discuss the Beetles in his term papers.
 - d. He is unable to go the Beetles show with Linda.

4. (Jay) Frank wanted to know what time it was, but he didn't have a watch.
(Thomas) Frank: What time is it, Helen?
(Jenny) Helen: The postman has been here.
(Jay) What does Helen probably mean?

- a. She is telling him approximately what time it is by telling him that the postman has already been there.
 - b. By changing the subject, Helen is telling Frank that she doesn't know what time it is.
 - c. She thinks that Frank should stop what he is doing and read his mail.
 - d. Frank will not be able to interpret any message from what Helen says, since she did not answer his question.
5. (Jay) Jack is talking to his housemate Sarah about another housemate, Frank.
(Thomas) Jack: Do you know where Frank is, Sarah?
(Jenny) Sarah: Well, I heard music from his room earlier.
(Jay) What does Sarah probably mean?
- a. Frank forgot to turn the music off.
 - b. Frank's loud music bothers Sarah.
 - c. Frank is probably in his room.
 - d. Sarah doesn't know where Frank is.
6. (Jay) Jose and Tanya are professors at a college. They are talking about a student, Mark.
(Thomas) Jose: How did you like Mark's term paper?
(Jenny) Tanya: Well, I thought it was well typed.
(Jay) How did Tanya like Mark's term paper?
- a. He liked it; he thought it was good.
 - b. He thought it was important that the paper was well typed.
 - c. He really hadn't read well enough to know.
 - d. He did not like it.
7. (Jay) Toby and Ally are trying the new buffet restaurant in town. Toby is eating something but Ally can't decide what to have next.
(Thomas) Ally: "How do you like what you're having?"
(Jenny) Toby: Well, let's just say it's colorful.
(Jay) What does Toby probably mean?
- a. She thinks it is important for food to look appetizing.
 - b. She thinks food should not contain artificial colors.
 - c. She wants Ally to try something colorful.
 - d. She does not like her food much.
8. (Jay) Maria and Frank are working on a class project together but they won't be able to finish it by the deadline.
(Jenny) Maria: Do you think Dr. Gibson is going to lower our grade if we hand it in late?
(Thomas) Frank: Do fish swim?
(Jay) What does Frank probably mean?

- a. He thinks they should change the topic of their project.
 - b. He thinks they will get a lower grade.
 - c. He thinks their grade will not be affected.
 - d. He did not understand Maria's question.
9. (Jay) Jenny and her housemate Darren go to college in Southern California. They are talking one morning before going to class.
(Jenny) Jenny: Darren, is it cold out this morning?
(Thomas) Darren: Jenny, it's August.
(Jay) What does Darren probably mean?
- a. It's surprisingly cold for August.
 - b. It's so warm that it feels like August.
 - c. It's warm like usual in August.
 - d. It's hard to predict the temperature in August.
10. (Jay) Max and Julie are jogging together.
(Thomas) Max: Can we slow down a bit? I'm all out of breath.
(Jenny) Julie: I'm sure glad I don't smoke.
(Jay) What does Julie probably mean?
- a. She doesn't want to slow down.
 - b. She doesn't like the way Max's breath smells.
 - c. Max is out of breath because he is a smoker.
 - d. Max would be even slower if he smoked.
11. (Jay) At a recent party, there was a lot of singing and piano playing. At one point, Matt played the piano while Brian sang. Jill was not at the party, but her friend Linda was.
(Thomas) Jill: What did Brian sing?
(Jenny) Linda: I'm not sure, but Matt was playing "Yesterday".
(Jay) What does Linda probably mean?
- a. She was only interested in Matt and didn't listen to Brian.
 - b. Brian sang very badly.
 - c. Brian and Matt were not doing the same song.
 - d. The song that Brian sang was "Yesterday".
12. (Jay) During a coffee break, Felicity is talking to her co-worker Brian about their supervisor Mrs. Jenkins.
(Jenny) Felicity: I do think Mrs. Jenkins is an old windbag, don't you?
(Thomas) Brian: Huh, lovely weather for March, isn't it?
(Jay) What does Brian probably mean?
- a. He thinks weather in this season is nice.
 - b. He thinks it is not good for Mrs. Jenkins to take a walk outside in a windy day.
 - c. He does not want to talk about Mrs. Jenkins.

- d. He knows Mrs. Jenkins promises to give Felicity a nice raise in March.
13. (Jay) Mike is trying to find an apartment in New York City. He just looked at a place and is telling his friend Jane about it.
(Jenny) Jane: So, is the rent high?
(Thomas) Mike: Is the Pope Catholic?
(Jay) What does Mike probably mean?
a. He doesn't want to talk about the rent.
b. The rent is high.
c. The apartment is owned by the church.
d. The rent isn't very high.
14. (Jay) After Jill has withdrawn money from an automated teller machine, her neighbor Mike approaches her.
(Thomas) Mike: Jill, I need some cash.
(Jenny) Jill: Your credit card also works on this machine.
(Jay) What does Jill probably mean?
a. She suggests Mike to use his bank card to withdraw some money.
b. She thinks Mike can buy what he wants using a credit card.
c. She does not plan to lend some money to Mike.
d. The automated teller machine offers an on-line shopping service.
15. (Jay) Larry and Charlene are talking about a test they recently took.
(Jenny) Charlene: Do you think you got an "A" on the test?
(Thomas) Larry: Do chickens have lips?
(Jay) What does Larry mean?
a. He does not like to talk about the subject.
b. His answer to Charlene's question is "no".
c. He is not sure what grade he could get on the test.
d. He is curious whether chickens have lips.
16. (Jay) Lee has spent a lot of money on a new suit and he asks his friend, Sandy, about it.
(Thomas) Lee: How do you like my new sweater?
(Jenny) Sandy: It's an interesting color.
(Jay) What does Sandy mean?
a. She doesn't like that sweater.
b. She is interested at the color of that sweater.
c. She thinks it's a bore to discuss that sweater.
d. She thinks Lee is color-blind.
17. (Jay) Two friends, Maria and Tony, are talking about what happened the night

before. They had dinner with Sean, a friend of theirs, in a little town just outside Philadelphia. Then, after dinner, Sean left. Now, this morning, Maria and Tony are trying to figure out what Sean did after he left them.

(Jenny) Maria: Hey, I hear Sean went to Philadelphia, stole a car, and won \$ 5,000 in Atlantic City.

(Thomas) Tony: Not exactly. He stole a car, won \$ 5,000 in Atlantic City and went to Philadelphia.

(Jenny) Maria: Are you sure? That's not the way I heard it.

(Jay) According to the cartoon, which of the two friends has the right story—Maria or Tony?

- a. Maria.
- b. Tony.
- c. Both are right. Since they are both saying essentially the same thing, they really have nothing to argue about.
- d. Neither of them has the story right.

18. (Jay) Pat is in a store, looking around, confused.

(Jenny) Clerk: May I help you?

Pat: _____.

(Jenny) Clerk: It's over there by the back entrance – on your right...

(Jay) What does Pat probably say?

- a. Yes, please. I'd like to buy some toothpaste.
- b. Hi. Do you have size C flashlight batteries?
- c. Hello. I am just calling to ask if you have Marlboros?
- d. I have had a serious headache for two days.

19. (Jay) Hilda is babysitting her two nephews, Tommy and Frankie at home. Her friend, Peter, is visiting her and makes a suggestion.

(Thomas) Peter: Let's get the kids something.

(Jenny) Hilda: Okay, but I veto I-C-E C-R-E-A-M

(Jay) What does Hilda mean?

- a. She teaches the two boys to spell out ice cream.
- b. She would rather give the kids a surprise.
- c. She would rather not have ice cream mentioned directly in the presence of the children.
- d. She gives the boys a guessing game. If they win, they can have ice cream as an award.

20. (Jay) Hilda is babysitting her two nephews, Tommy and Frankie at home. The two boys' father, John, picks up the kids in the evening.

(Thomas) John: What did Tommy and Frankie do today?

(Jenny) Hilda: Boys are boys.

(Jay) What does Hilda probably mean?

- a. Tommy and Frankie were so energetic as to help her do a lot of household chores.
- b. Tommy and Frankie were missing their parents, crying and nagging all day long.
- c. Tommy and Frankie had so good appetite as to have many meals and snacks.
- d. Tommy and Frankie have the kind of unruly behavior we could expect from boys.