The pragmatics of advice giving: Cross-cultural perspectives

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Abstract

This article presents the results of our investigation into the giving of advice by native and non-native speakers of American English. Specifically, we examine how advice giving is enacted in a series of advice letters, which were modeled on letters to popular advice columns found around the world in newspapers and magazines, and on the Internet.

Our data indicate that there are important pragmatic differences between how native speakers and non-native speakers in the United States offered advice, regardless of the non-native speakers’ English proficiency. The non-native speakers produced comparatively brief and formulaic responses, requiring coding and analysis based upon form categories. The native speakers produced narrative responses that required coding and analysis based upon content categories. Research such as this underscores the need to provide language learners with an awareness that pragmatic behaviors differ across cultures.

1. Introduction

Considerable research has shown that while speech acts themselves are universal, the socio-pragmatic rules or norms governing the appropriate enactment of any given speech act vary greatly among cultures and languages (e.g. Matsumura 2001 on advice; Golato 2002 & Nelson et al. 1996 on compliments; Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper 1989; Cohen & Olshtain 1993 on requests; DeCapua 1998; Boxer 1993 on complaints; Eisenstein & Bodman 1993 on expressions of gratitude; Beebe & Takahashi 1989; Félix-Brasdefer 2004; Gass & Houck 1999; Kwon 2004 on refusals). When non-native speakers transfer the socio-pragmatic norms of their language into the target language, or are simply unaware of the different socio-pragmatic rules, cross-cultural misunderstandings and
misattribution of intent often result (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei 1998; DeCapua 1998; DeCapua & Wintergerst 2004; Kasper 1998; Kotani 2002; Olshtain & Kulka 1985; Qin 2003). Non-native speaker pragmatic errors are less likely to be overlooked or forgiven by native speakers than are phonological, grammatical or lexical errors, and are more likely to be attributed to rudeness, arrogance, condescension, insincerity, servility and other negative behaviors.

As part of learning a language, it is important that learners develop an awareness of the socio-pragmatics of the target language. Learners need to recognize, understand and, depending upon their goals, learn to engage in pragmatically appropriate exchanges, as well as be cognizant of the wider socio-cultural norms governing pragmatic exchanges (Cohen 1996; Holmes & Brown 1987; Kasper & Rose 2002; Koike & Pearson 2005; Matsumara 2004; Rose 2004, 1999). The development of socio-pragmatic awareness in second language learners has received increasing attention in language classrooms.

At issue, of course, is which target norms are the “appropriate” ones to include in language teaching. If the assumption is that the language instruction is taking place in a country where English is the native language, then we would expect that these socio-pragmatic norms would be the ones taught, although even within one country there are regional, social, ethnic, and gender differences (Cameron 2000; DeCapua et al. 2006; Eckert & McConnel-Ginet 2000; Tannen 1981, 1984).

Any decision to teach socio-pragmatic norms must include an awareness of the different language teaching contexts in which such instruction will occur. The spread of English around the world has led to a recognition of World Englishes, succinctly defined by Jenkins as “indigenized varieties of English in their local contexts of use” (2006: 157), although the term is often used to include all varieties of English in the world (Bolton 2004). According to Kachru (1985, 1988, 1992), we can understand World Englishes as a three circles model. In the expanding circle, (China, for example), English dominates as a second language; in the outer circle (Nigeria, India, Jamaica, etc.) English is an “additional, institutionalized official language;” and in the inner circle (e.g., Great Britain and the United States) English functions as a native language. Varieties of English have developed within the varied cultural and historical contexts of the different societies, each one of which will have its own socio-pragmatic norms, which may differ from inner circle British or American native speaker norms (see, e.g., Kasanga 2006, on Black South African English). When English language teaching takes place outside one of the inner circle countries, the question of which or whose socio-pragmatic norms should be taught, if at all, is of great concern.
However, there is another approach we can take to socio-pragmatic learning. If we approach socio-pragmatic knowledge as an opportunity for learners to develop intercultural awareness, then which norms we teach is less a matter for concern. What is central to such an approach is the belief that successful intercultural encounters depend upon awareness that different socio-pragmatic norms do exist. Intercultural awareness, using socio-pragmatics as a basis, can help language learners understand the interplay of culture and language and how their socio-pragmatic behavior is just one way language is used in communicative situations (Bentahila & Davies 1989; DeCapua & Wintergerst 2004; Fantini 1995; Meier 2003).

In order to include any socio-pragmatics in the language curriculum, we must understand what it is we are teaching in order to undertake successfully the teaching of pragmatics. Consistent with this need, we investigate advice as enacted by both native speakers and non-native speakers of American English in advice letters.

This article presents the results of our investigation into the giving of advice in advice columns by native speakers of American English, proficient non-native speakers, and learners of English. We examine how advice giving is enacted in a series of “Dear Abby” style advice letters written by native speakers and non-native speakers. Our research questions were: First, what differences would we find between native speakers of American English and non-native speakers of English when giving advice? Second, would we find any differences between ESL learners and proficient non-native speakers of English in how they give advice, or would proficient non-native speakers more closely resemble native speakers of American English in their advice giving?

2. Methodology

2.1. Data collection instrument

Data were collected using a type of discourse completion questionnaire (DCT). The questionnaire consisted of four situations commonly found in letters written to traditional advice columnists, such as the nationally syndicated “Dear Abby” in the United States and in popular online advice sites, such as The Advice Sisters (advicesisters.net). Known as agony columns in Great Britain, advice columns are newspaper or magazine columns or Internet websites dedicated to the giving of advice in response to readers’ letters or e-mails. Although there are many different types of advice columns, the most prevalent and well-known columns are those

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answering readers’ queries on personal matters on a great variety of topics. These topics range from problems in dealing with one’s relatives, to sexual matters, to relationship issues, to issues of politeness and behavior, to raising one’s children and more. In addition to general advice columns, there are myriad advice columns that specialize in specific types of advice giving, e.g., health, beauty, home, car, finance, and others. With the advent and subsequent explosion of the Internet, there are now hundreds of websites devoted to advice giving.

There has been much discussion regarding the validity of using written DCTs to gather discourse information, the primary objection being that DCTs do not necessarily correspond to the real world. In other words, written data only reveal what speakers believe they would say, but not what they actually say and do in naturally occurring situations (e.g., Clyne et al. 2003; Golato 2003; Holmes 1991; Kachru 1994; Yuan 2001; Rose 1994). Nevertheless, DCTs do allow researchers to control for certain variables, to gather information that may be less readily observable in natural discourse, and to collect quickly and efficiently large amounts of data (Beebe & Cummings 1996; Billmyer & Varghese 2000; Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989).

It is for these latter reasons that we have chosen to use DCTs in the form of advice letters. While most people have probably never written to an advice column, whether in a newspaper, magazine, or on the web, most literate people across the world are familiar with this widespread genre (e.g. Bumroongsook 1995, Thailand; Geeslin 1986, Japan; Gustav 1975, Ghana; Jennings 2001, China; Mutongi 2000, Anglophone Africa; Rojo-Laurilla 2002 Philippines; Stein 1989, China). The topics, too, are similar across cultures: romantic, family, social, and collegial relationships, social behaviors and expectations, finance, beauty, and health. Therefore, since advice letters are a regular feature of U.S. and many other cultures, we believe that they are less likely to be viewed as artificial or contrived by the respondents in the same way that DCTs investigating the production of other oral discourse features might be.

2.2. **Subjects**

There were four groups of respondents in the current study. The first group consisted of 35 advanced learners of English enrolled in a college level, non credit-bearing ESL writing course. After this writing course, students have one more ESL class to take before freshman English. The students ranged from 19 to 25 years of age plus one older student (age 38). Fourteen students spoke Spanish as their native language. Other languages represented included Burmese, Amharic, Bengali, Albanian,
There were 10 males and 25 females. The second group consisted of 14 native speakers of American English from the New York City area and enrolled in a freshman English writing course. There were 6 males and 8 females in their early twenties. The third group consisted of proficient non-native speakers of English. We understand here proficient non-native speakers to be those who have lived at least 5 years in the United States, are not enrolled in ESL classes, and who have achieved high levels of English proficiency. This high level of proficiency is not judged based on the results of standardized test results, but on the fact that speakers are full participants of U.S. society, through participation in the white-collar workforce, graduate school, or a combination of the two.

The respondents in this group had been in the United States anywhere from five and a half years to sixteen years. This group included people out in the working world with jobs ranging from government office employee to teacher to doctor. In addition, some were graduate-level university students; however, they were no longer language learners *per se* and had spent considerable time in the United States. The ages in this group were between 27 and 38, and they were all female. The respondents were recruited via Listserv requests and personal contacts. Their native languages were Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Spanish, Russian, Croatian, Dutch, Thai, and German.

The fourth group was composed of native speakers from a variety of backgrounds and ages, ranging from 24 to 65 years of age. There were 16 females and 2 males. This group was randomly selected via a mass e-mailing to friends and relatives of the researchers with requests to forward the situations to anyone who would be willing to participate in the study. Their jobs ran the gamut from government worker to lawyer to dentist to office manager.

The reason for including the fourth group of respondents is that while a great deal of research is conducted on college-age students, these students represent a small portion of the total population of any country and are thus apt to present a distorted view of what occurs within the larger culture (Kachru 1994; Sears 1986; Stanley 1999; Triandis et al. 1988). Although our respondents cannot be considered a true representative sample, their participation in this study provides broader insights into native speaker pragmatic performance than the usual university population of respondents.

In our attempts to collect data from outside the college classroom, we encountered difficulties in trying to obtain data from a non-captive audience, which is precisely why so much research is conducted on the college population. Nevertheless, despite the obstacles, we believe that the
inclusion of non-college age students is essential to the study of pragmatics if we wish to understand what takes place in the real world.

The total number of respondents in the study was 83. Thirty-two of these were native speakers and 51 were non-native speakers.

To give an accurate picture of the data, graphs show the average number of instances of use of *should/not*, strength of illocutionary force, use of alternatives (+rationales), statements of empathy and assertions of individual choice per letter. The number of respondents and number of letters do not correlate exactly because letters were excluded where respondents did not follow instructions. Instead of offering solutions to the person expressing the problem, some respondents wrote letters directly to the person in the situation. For instance, in Situation #2 (See Appendix A), some respondents wrote to the children rather than to the parent.

3. Results and discussion

In our analysis, we found that the data produced by the two groups of native speakers, those enrolled in the college freshman writing course and the other native speakers, did not differ in any significant way. Thus, the results from these two groups of native speakers (Groups 2 and 4 in Table 1) have been combined in the analysis. There were differences, however, in the data produced by each of the two groups of non-native speakers and we examine each group as a separate entity.

The data produced by the two groups of native speakers differed qualitatively from the data produced by the two groups of non-native speakers. The data from both groups of non-native speakers were generally formulaic and patterned, leading us to code the responses based on form. In contrast, the native speaker data were narrative in style and followed no pattern or formula; thus coding based on form was not appropriate and we needed to come up with another way to code these data. This led us to develop two types of analysis for the data: form-based categories which

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Group</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>Number of letters</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Group 1</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>ESL students in advanced writing class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>College-age native speakers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Proficient non-native speakers, mixed ages</td>
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<td>&amp; native languages</td>
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<td>Group 4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Native speakers, mixed ages &amp; backgrounds</td>
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were appropriate for the non-native data and content-based categories which were appropriate for the native speaker data.

In coding the responses, each researcher first worked individually on analyzing the data. Later the two researchers compared and discussed their results. In some instances where there were discrepancies, the researchers examined the data together to reach a conclusion. The initial coding results were put aside, and after a period of about six weeks the researchers returned to the data analysis and reviewed the earlier coding. This later review allowed the researchers to gain new perspectives and insights into the data and to check whether the original coding was systematic and accurate.

3.1. **Form categories**

We begin by examining the two most salient form elements found in the non-native speaker data, the use of *should* and the use of imperatives.

3.1.1. **Should.** The ESL learners’ responses and those of the proficient non-native speakers resembled each other closely in their use of should/not. Instances of direct advice consisting of *should* (not) + base verb (Graph 1) were the most common forms produced by both of these groups. Proficient non-native speakers used *should* (not) + base verb slightly more than ESL students. As can be seen on Graph 1, the ESL learners produced an average of 0.46 uses of *should* (not) per letter and proficient non-native speakers an average of 0.60 instances of *should* (not) per letter. Native speakers, in contrast, produced an average of only 0.19 instances of *should* (not) per letter.

![Graph 1](image-url)

**Graph 1. Respondents’ Use of Should/not**
We suggest that these results may be attributable in part to a teaching effect, the tendency of ESL/EFL grammar texts to associate *should* (*not*) with the giving of advice, an issue which we will address later in greater depth. In addition, the high occurrence of *should* (*not*) may also be linked to a lack of understanding by ESL learners and even proficient non-native speakers of the nuances in advice giving. (This would not be true of those specifically trained, such as professional counselors.)

3.1.2. *Imperatives.* Another major area of difference between the ESL learners, the proficient non-native speakers, and the native speakers was in the use of imperatives. Imperative verb forms, or commands, are considered direct or of strong illocutionary force in the literature (e.g. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989; Clyne et al. 2003; Brown & Levinson 1987; Searle 1976). However, in analyzing the data, we found that imperatives needed further differentiation. Not all imperatives are equal. A key factor is the particular lexical semantic meaning of a given verb. A verb such as *consider, imagine, or let* does not carry the same pragmatic force as a verb such as *tell, demand, or give.* In addition, the surrounding context may have elements influencing the illocutionary force. These two factors led us to classify the imperatives in the data into two categories: strongly communicated illocutionary force and weakly communicated illocutionary force. Examples of these two categories are found in (1).

In the excerpt in Example 1, a native speaker respondent produces three imperatives. We argue that these three reflect weak illocutionary force. First, these imperatives are verbs that are not inherently direct. Second, the information included in the sentences following the imperative phrases *be honest, keep in mind,* and *try to* carries a “counseling” tone that mitigates the force of these imperatives.

(1) Native speaker

\[ \ldots \text{Be honest with them that it bothers you that they stay out late on weekends and sleep all day, but keep in mind that you are likely to run into trouble if you revert to talking to your son and his wife as if they are adolescents. Try to focus on finding a solution that you can all live with, and not on passing judgment on how they are living their lives.} \]

Although all four groups of respondents produced numerous instances of imperatives, the illocutionary force of the imperatives used by each group differed. The proficient non-native speakers produced the greatest number of imperatives overall. They also produced the greatest number of imperatives with weak illocutionary force. The ESL learners produced a larger number of imperatives with strong illocutionary force and a
much smaller number of imperatives with weak illocutionary force as illustrated by Graph 2.

Although the proficient non-native speakers produced the most instances of imperatives, these verbs differed from those of the ESL learners qualitatively in terms of illocutionary force. Like the native speaker data in Example 1, the proficient non-native speakers used fewer direct verbs in the imperative form and placed their imperatives in a context that mitigated the force of the imperative itself. Compare the excerpts in (1) and (2):

(2) Proficient non-native speaker

Be nice and smart with your parents. Try to understand them first and try to talk with them and your boyfriend. Remember one important thing, you need to talk with people, open yourself.

Compare the bolded imperatives in (1) and (2), with the bolded imperatives below in (3), produced by an ESL student. The surrounding context with its lack of softening elements strengthens the illocutionary force of the bolded imperatives in (3). The brevity of the sentences, with the imperatives following the if clauses, gives these imperatives a sense of strong illocutionary force. There is a strong feeling of “Do X or else Y.” There are no mitigating elements to modify the illocutionary force in this response and certainly no “counseling” tone.

(3) ESL student

You need to get your married son and daughter together, and speak to them. Tell them how you feel about their behavior. And if they listen (sic), take the key and lock them out. If they don’t give you the keys, change the locks.
We further see the difference between the ESL learners and native speakers if we contrast (3) with (4).

(4) Native speaker
What are the specific reasons that this bothers you? Do they wake you up when they come home? Do they sleep rather (than) helping with household chores? . . . Address the things that bother you about their schedule and explain to them why. Ask that they respect your wishes.

In (4), the imperative sentences are preceded by a series of questions intended to help the advice-seeker evaluate the problem. Although structurally imperatives, address, explain and ask, in this context are very open-ended and broad, allowing the advice-seeker to determine precisely how to address the problem. In (3), on the other hand, the imperatives and surrounding context are strong imperatives and the intended effect of the response is strong.

3.2. Content-based categories

The analysis of form categories is instructive in terms of how the data differ. As noted earlier, form-based categories were appropriate for the non-native speaker data, and content-based categories were appropriate for the native speaker data. The native speaker data, unlike the ESL student or the proficient non-native speaker data, were not formulaic or patterned in any way. Consistent with our earlier findings (DeCapua & Dunham 1993; DeCapua & Huber 1995), the native speaker data were more likely to comprise narratives with the advice embedded therein. Therefore, in order to analyze these data, we found it necessary to develop five content categories: alternatives and rationales, elaboration, expressions of empathy, assertion of individual choice, and introspective questions.

3.2.1. Alternatives (+rationales). Responses were coded as “alternatives/rationale offered” when participants offered the advice-seeker at least two possible solutions for the problem described in a situation [See Example (6)]. The use of (+rationales) reflects the fact that respondents often, but not always, provided rationales for their alternatives. The inclusion of alternatives (+rationales) was an important area of difference between the native speakers and both groups of non-native speakers. The native speakers frequently offered the advice-seeker alternatives and often included a rationale for the alternatives, whereas the ESL learners and proficient non-native speakers rarely did.

Consider the excerpt from a native speaker in (5), in which the respondent offers a rationale for her alternative. This was written in response to
Situation 1, where the advice-seeker has a conflict between going with friends to a concert for which they already have tickets or helping his/her girl/boyfriend study for an exam (see Appendix A). The sentences in question are bracketed and labeled.

(5) Native speaker

{I tend to weigh these types of decisions by order of commitment. Which came first? alternative}. {There is a financial commitment in the tickets as well as the expectations of your friends that you will participate in the evening’s fun that has already been planned rationale}.

The excerpt continues with the respondent providing an additional alternative, but this time without a rationale:

(5a)

If you feel that making a choice by the “first come, first serve method” is not appropriate in this situation, consider if there are options to studying. {If no other days are available to study you may choose to explain to your friends that your boy/girlfriend needs you right now and that you hope they understand alternative}.

When we compare the alternatives (+rationale) produced by the native speakers, the proficient non-native speakers, and the ESL learners and the proficient speakers, we see notable differences. The native speaker respondents as a whole offered 40 alternatives, many with a rationale, in 108 letters. In contrast, the ESL learners and proficient non-native speakers combined offered only 13 alternatives in a combined total of 181 letters.

Interestingly, Rojo-Luarilla (2002) in her examination of Filipino relationship and medical advice columns found that offering alternatives in relationship advice was quite common, but comparatively rare in the medical advice. She suggests that may be due to the fact that advice regarding relationships is generally not as clear-cut and straightforward as medical advice. If this is true, then the question arises why the non-native speakers, regardless of their proficiency, in this study offered so few alternatives when giving advice regarding relationships. Is it a cultural issue, a language issue, or other?

In looking at Graph 3, we see that native speakers produced an average of 0.37 alternatives (+rationales) per letter, while the proficient non-native speakers produced only 0.11 per letter and the ESL learners even fewer, 0.06 per letter. For the proficient non-native speakers one would have to examine an average of nine letters to find an instance of this category. This means that in the non-native speaker data one has to examine several letters to find any alternatives (+rationales).
3.2.2. Elaboration. Closely aligned with alternatives are elaborations. Elaborations are statements in which respondents offered discussion of the rationales, background information, and/or moral support. They provide additional narrative context to the advice giving.

In examining the response letters, if the sentences were adjacent and characterized by topic continuity, we counted these as a single instance. In other words, if a respondent produced more than one sentence of elaboration for a given letter, this was counted only as one instance, regardless of the actual number of sentences, as long as they were adjoining sentences and related by topic. We believe that this gives a more accurate picture since much of the elaboration consisted of sentences building one upon the other, again adding narrative context to the advice giving. Below we see an example of an alternative followed by elaboration. The sentences in question are bracketed and labeled.

(6) Native speaker

... If you tell him that you really care about your job and want to do you best for the company he should appreciate this. {Then tell him you would appreciate some ideas on how to do things more in line with how the company prefers. alternative} {You could tell him that sometimes your interpretation of the expectations on a project seems to differ with what his are. A good manager will see you as caring about your job which is something they may think you do not do. elaboration}

After the alternative, Then tell him you would appreciate some ideas on how to do things more in line with how the company prefers, the respondent provides two sentences that expand upon this rationale. The first of these explains in more detail how the advice-seeker might accomplish the alternative, You could tell him that sometimes your interpretation of the expectations on a project seems to differ with what his are. The second sentence
adds support and encouragement, *A good manager will see you as caring about your job which is something they may think you do not do.*

The native speakers produced 24 instances of elaboration in 108 letters, the proficient non-native speakers only six in 45 letters and the ESL learners zero in 136 letters. The contrast between the two groups of native speakers and the two groups of non-native speaker respondents in their production of elaborations (or lack thereof) underscores again the qualitative difference with respect to narrative context. While we may expect this of ESL learners who have not yet become fully proficient in English, it was somewhat surprising to find similar results among the proficient non-native speakers, all of whom are surrounded by English on a daily basis and most of whom are required to read and write English extensively for work or study, or both.

3.2.3. *Expressions of empathy.* Empathy refers to statements in which a respondent explicitly states understanding of the advice-seeker’s situation. These expressions include statements such as, *I completely understand how you’re feeling* or *Quite a predicament you have there.* They are found at the beginning of a narrative response and serve to set a framework for the advice giving.

The native speakers offered 33 instances of empathy in 108 letters. The ESL learners produced 10 instances in 136 letters and the proficient non-native speakers produced 10 instances in 45 letters. For empathy, the average number of instances per letter for ESL learners was 0.07, for proficient non-native speakers 0.22, and for native speakers 0.31, as shown in Graph 4.

Rather than expressing empathy, in the non-native speaker data the respondents more often began the advice sequence using either *should* or an imperative. Moreover, when the non-native speakers did preface their

![Graph 4. Respondents’ Use of Statements of Empathy](image-url)
advice giving, they were more inclined to produce statements with a reprimanding or chiding tone as in Example 7. The brackets indicate the chiding sequence.

(7) **ESL student**

{Your problem is not that difficult.} I think you should sit with your children and talk to them about it.

(8) **Proficient non-native speaker**

{Kick them out! It’s simple.} Or you could be a little nice and try to talk to them first. If they listen, then it’s good. If not, just kick them out of your house.

In (7), rather than offering understanding or empathy, the ESL student downplays the advice-seeker’s dilemma. The respondent then continues with a suggestion using *should*. In (8), the proficient non-native speaker instructs or orders the advice-seeker what to do and downplays the issue by not acknowledging the dilemma the advice-seeker is facing. In the subsequent sentence, the advice-giver does offer an alternative, but hedges it by using both the condition *could* and the phrase *a little nice*. She then continues on to be very direct or to “lay it out on the line” with *If not, just kick them out of your house*.

Compare (7) and (8) to (9) with a typical empathy lead-in to the advice sequence by a native speaker:

(9) **Native speaker**

This sounds like an uncomfortable situation for you and your husband.

Statements of empathy such as (9) establish a rapport between advice-giver and advice-seeker, contribute to the general “counseling” tone found in many of the native-speaker responses, and again provide narrative context to the advice giving.

### 3.2.4. **Assertions of individual choice.**

The fourth category, assertions of individual choice, refers to statements that emphasize the importance of, or need for, the advice-seeker to do what was best for him/herself. In such cases respondents often alluded to the fact that only the person involved can know what is right or best for him/her. These assertions of individual choice were found primarily in Situation 2, where the married son and daughter have returned home and keep late hours on the weekends, and in Situation 4 where the advice-seekers parents and boy/girlfriend are pressuring for marriage (see Appendix A). An example of
an assertion of individual choice is found in (10), produced by a native speaker.

(10) Native speaker
You owe it to yourself to explore [these issues] until you have satisfactory answers.

Proficient non-native speakers produced an average of 0.22 assertions of individual choice per letter, native speakers an average of 0.19 and ESL learners an average of only 0.02 instances per letter as seen in Graph 5.

Whether the higher use of assertions of individual choice among native speakers and proficient non-native native speakers reflects facility with language or other factors has yet to be established and requires further study before any conclusions can be drawn. However, regardless of why such statements were included, the fact is that such statements provide a larger narrative context, and the establishment and/or maintenance of social roles.

3.2.5. Introspective questions. The fifth and final content-based category refers to questions that are intended to help the advice-seeker gain a perspective into the problem. The respondents pose questions that encourage the advice-seeker to reflect upon his/her situation or alternatives in order to come up with a solution to the problem. The respondents also pose questions that ask advice-seekers to consider priorities and what the implications of different choices might be. The use of introspective questions such as these reinforces the counseling tone of many of the responses.

As with elaborations, introspective questions were coded according to whether or not they appeared in an individual letter, not according to the actual number of introspective questions a respondent wrote within a
given letter. For example, if, as in (11), a respondent produced four introspective questions in one letter, all were coded as one instance for that letter. Examples of introspective questions are found in (11), produced by a native speaker.

(11) Native Speaker
You need to ask yourself who is more important to you? Is your boyfriend asking you to help only because he can’t go? Or do you offer him a unique advantage to the material he needs to know? How important is the event to you and your relationship to these friends?

Native speakers produced a total of 15 introspective questions in 108 letters, proficient non-native speakers 8 introspective questions in 45 letters. Of the ESL learners there was only one student who asked an introspective question, “How would you feel if you needed him to help you study for your upcoming exam. . . .”

4. Discussion

There were important pragmatic differences between how native speakers and non-native speakers offered advice. The ESL learners and proficient non-native speakers produced comparatively brief and formulaic responses, requiring coding and analysis based upon form categories. The native speakers produced longer narrative responses that required coding and analysis based upon content categories. The native speakers used a more counseling tone, generally offered alternatives and rationales for their alternatives, and frequently prefaced their advice sequence with expressions of empathy.

Although all the groups of respondents included numerous imperative verbs in their responses, the “tone” or “feel” was different between the native and non-native speakers. The native speakers softened their imperatives by using downtoners, by the way in which the imperatives were situated within the context of a response, and by the semantic properties of many of the imperatives themselves, such as try, be honest, or think about. Last, the two groups of non-native speakers used many more instances of should + base verb than did the native speakers.

The native speakers softened their imperatives in several ways. For one, they used downtoners, which serve to lessen the impact of a given utterance, often by adding an element of tentativeness to, or by introducing or increasing the degree of vagueness of, an utterance (Blum-Kulka & Olishatain 1984; Hübler 1983; House & Kasper 1981). Imperatives that are
prefaced by such words as *maybe*, *just*, or *please* are examples of downtowners found in these data, as for example:

(12) *Native Speaker*

   Maybe try explaining that this is making you uncomfortable in your own home.

(13) *Native Speaker*

   Just take the attitude that this is a learning experience.

In addition, the way in which native speakers often situated the imperatives situated within the context of a response softened them.

(14) *Native Speaker*

   Criticism, although unpleasant, can be helpful. Check it out in a positive manner. You may learn from it.

The sentences surrounding *Check it out* and the rest of the phrase, *in a positive manner*, convey a sense of encouragement and optimism.

Also, the semantic properties of many of the imperatives themselves, such as *try*, *be honest*, or *think about* have weaker illocutionary force than imperatives such as *do*, *tell*, or *demand*. Finally, the two groups of non-native speakers used many more instances of *should* + *base verb* than did the native speakers.

Although we expected to find many differences between the native speakers and the ESL learners, we were surprised to find that the data produced by proficient non-native speakers were more often similar to the ESL learners than to that of the native speakers. Given that these proficient non-native speakers were part of the larger American English-speaking community, whether through marriage, work, university studies, or a combination thereof, we expected these respondents to be closer to native speakers than to ESL learners. Nevertheless, the data indicate otherwise, but the reasons for this remain unclear. We wonder whether at least some of the differences in the data between native speakers and non-native speakers are due to unfamiliarity with the socio-pragmatics of advice giving, an overgeneralization of grammar rules from ESL/EFL teaching, and in the case of the ESL students, the lack of a strong command of English.

In consideration of differences in the pragmatics of advice giving, Rojo-Laurilla (2002) observes that, in Filipino, advice givers’ letters include elaborations that consist of “partial remedies done to solve the problem (75).” Rojo-Laurilla contrasts this with elaboration in the English letters,
where she notes that elaboration consists of expanding the details of the problem, regardless of whether or not the advice giver has suggested a remedy.

Learners of English are generally taught to associate *should* + VP with advice (e.g. Azar 2002; Broukal 2004; Elbaum 2001; Foley 1998). This contrasts with earlier findings by DeCapua and Dunham (1995) and DeCapua and Huber (1993) where data revealed that native speakers in giving advice rarely used specific grammatical forms such as *should I* + base verb? or you *should* + base verb. Instead, they found that in American English, native speakers use a variety of different discourse strategies, and very often advice, both giving and receiving, is embedded in larger narrative contexts.

With respect to ESL teaching, it is instructive to examine some of the popular grammar texts on the market in North America, which provide additional insights in the teaching of *should/not*. One popular text (Elbaum 2001), in introducing *should*, presents a short dialogue where A & B exchange advice about tenants’ rights (219). Immediately afterwards there is a table reiterating that *should* is used for advice and then exercises where the students practice giving advice using *should* (220–221).

Broukal (2004) introduces *should* with a chart and some sample sentences, then moves on to an activity where students are supposed to “say what Sandra should or should not do (212–213).” The text then moves on to other modals. In another text, *Applied Grammar* by Bryd and Berson (2001: 144), *should* is presented as referring to “advice and recommendations” and practiced accordingly. Azar (2002: 160) groups together *should*, *ought to*, and *had better* as communicating advisability but suggests that *had better* is stronger and hints of the possibility of negative consequences. In one exercise students are given prompts and then are directed to work in pairs, in groups, or as a class using *should*, *ought to*, or *had better*. Different situations given, for example:

I don’t feel well. I think I’m catching a cold.
My roommate snores, and I can’t get to sleep.

The *Longman Dictionary of American English* (2004) has a “Learner’s Handbook” with a section on giving advice (A60–A61), which is representative of how a number of ESL texts teach advice giving. The *should* form stands out: “*You should do something*” or “*The best thing to do would be to do sth.*” or “*What you should do is do sth*” (A60).

While this is not an extensive examination of all popular ESL grammar texts and fails to consider EFL texts—which is both outside the scope of the current study and the authors’ expertise—it does underscore how
closely *should/not* is associated with advice. While this may be a good place to begin to teach ESL/EFL students how to give advice, we see from the native speaker data in this study that advice giving in the United States is more complex than “You should do X.” Students at higher levels of language proficiency need to become aware of the larger narrative contexts in which advice is often embedded.

Finally, we must address the question, “Are non-native speakers obligated to learn the socio-pragmatic norms of the target language?” If they wish to participate successfully in the culture of a particular target language, the consensus seems to be that non-native speakers need to be at least somewhat familiar with the dominant socio-pragmatic norms. Failure to do so results in pragmatic failures and misunderstandings (Thomas 1983). However, we suggest that teachers and curriculum planners do not take the approach of “teaching the appropriate rules of speaking,” which is in itself unrealistic, and even undesirable if one considers World Englishes and English as a global language. What is more relevant is incorporating opportunities to use socio-pragmatic knowledge to inform learners’ intercultural awareness and the interplay of language, culture, and communication.

5. Directions for further research

There were several limitations to this study. First, the study focused on one specific genre, namely advice giving modeled on written advice columns. The data collection instrument used here was a type of DCT, with its own limitations. While advice letters to advice columns in print media or on the Internet are common in many cultures, the use of advice letters to solicit data is not authentic data. It was not always clear whether respondents themselves could relate to the problems described in the situations. The two groups of NNSs were younger overall than the two groups of NSs, and the age range of all the subjects was between 19 and 65, which may have affected both their advising style and their ability to provide satisfactory advice in some of the situations. Maturity and life experiences have impact on people’s perceptions of advice-giving (McGeorge et al. 2004). The second situation, for instance, describes a mother and her married daughter and son (See Appendix 1). Younger respondents may well not have had enough experience to provide adequate advice. A related concern is that we do not know whether the respondents felt they could relate to any or all of the problems described in the situations. An inability to relate to or unfamiliarity with the problem may be a reason why some respondents did not respond to some situations.
Second, although we gathered data from respondents of different ages, backgrounds, and life experiences, it is important to include an even broader spectrum of respondents and include a more random sampling of native speakers and non-native speakers, both ESL and proficient, in order to ensure that the data are truly representative of the different groups. It would also be valuable to study gender differences in responses, which requires ensuring a more balanced representation of male and female respondents than in the present study.

Ideally, a study such as this will be replicated and will employ different methods of data collection to gain a broader understanding of how advice is given in American English and in varieties of English worldwide. Incorporating data obtained from role plays or simulations, for example, would provide researchers with additional data and insights. Simulated oral data, however, also has limitations (e.g. Yuan 2001). Another option would be to conduct follow-up interviews with respondents in order to learn more about the socio-cultural variables governing the enactment of advice, both from an individual perspective, and within different cultural contexts. Natural data would, of course, provide the most valuable insights into advice giving. Gathering natural data, however, has its own limitations, including limitations in being in the right place at the right time with the right participants in enough situations, and the ethical and legal issues involved in videotaping or tape recording unwitting participants (Cohen 1998; Kasper & Rose 2002; Wolfson 1981.)

This study has provided insights into differences in how native speakers of American English and non-native speakers, regardless of their proficiency, give advice within a specific genre. While these findings are preliminary, we believe that they are significant because they highlight once again the need to include socio-pragmatics in language teaching in order to develop learners’ intercultural awareness and sensitivity.

Appendix 1

Situations Used in the Study
Age _____ Sex _____
Are you a native speaker of American English _____ yes ____ no
If you speak another variety of English, what is it? __________
If not, what is your native language? __________ and how long have you been in the U.S.? __________

1. Please read each of the following 4 situations.
2. Then write a letter responding to each person who has asked you for helping in solving the problem, for a total of 4 letters.
3. In your letter, address the person directly. In other words, don’t write, “I would say XYZ” but write, “Dear X,…”

4. If you don’t feel you can respond to a particular situation, say so. If you know the reason why you don’t feel comfortable responding, please explain it.

**Situation 1**
My boy/girlfriend is a student and has asked me for some help studying for an upcoming exam, but some friends and I have tickets to a concert that night.

**Situation 2**
My married son and daughter recently moved into my home. They go out every Friday and Saturday night, come home anywhere from 1 a.m. to 4 a.m. and then sleep all day.

**Situation 3**
The boss at my job is unpleasant. He is always criticizing me and making me feel stupid. I can’t quit because I need the money and the hours are convenient for my classes.

**Situation 4**
My boy/girlfriend and our parents want us to get married soon, but I want to wait until I’ve had a chance to experience life more.

**Note**
1. Although some researchers have called into question the notion of speech acts, particularly across cultures (e.g. Flowerdew 1990; Krachru 1994; Yu 1999), the area of speech acts remains a fruitful and viable area of pragmatics research.

**References**


