Suggestions: What should ESL students know?

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Abstract

This paper describes the linguistic forms used to perform the speech act of suggestions in both real language and ESL textbooks. Comparisons between suggestions in two authentic settings in a corpus, professor–student interaction during office hours and student–student study groups, and six popular ESL textbooks, three old and three recent, were made to evaluate the extent to which textbook materials reflect real-life language use. Register differences between office hours and study groups demonstrate the contextual sensitivity of certain linguistic forms and the complexity of performing speech acts. Although the new generation textbooks introduce more linguistic structures for suggestions than the old generation textbooks, the discrepancies between real language use and ESL textbooks are still apparent. The author recommends that, instead of simply teaching lists of grammatical structures as decontextualized language points in monotonous drills and unnatural dialogues, ESL textbooks should include background information on appropriateness when presenting linguistic structures, provide classroom tasks drawn on naturally occurring conversations, and raise learners’ awareness of the different socio-cultural assumptions underlying various linguistic forms for the same speech act.

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Keywords: L2 pragmatics; Speech acts; Making suggestions; ESL textbooks; Corpus linguistics; Register differences; Linguistic forms; Language functions

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1. Introduction

With an increasing awareness of the “communicative value” of language (Widdowson, 1978, p. 11) and a concern for learners’ language needs, more and more English-as-a-second-language (ESL) textbooks try to make connections between language functions and forms. For each targeted language function, for example, how to express opinions or how to agree or disagree, a group of linguistic forms are presented in textbooks through conversations, exercises, or listening practice. Apparently, text authors are those who make decisions about which forms should be taught to perform certain language functions. There are some questions, however, as to how these decisions are made and whether they are informed by empirical research. Biber et al. (2002) have commented on the lack of availability of empirical linguistic descriptions and language professionals’ over-reliance on “intuitions and anecdotal evidence” of how language is used. Furthermore, as they pointed out, “intuitions about language use often turn out to be wrong” (Biber et al., 2002, p. 10).

The discrepancies between researchers’ analyses of naturally occurring conversations and the language of ESL textbooks have been reported in several studies (e.g., Carter and McCarthy, 1995; Koester, 2002; Scotton and Bernsten, 1988). One purpose of the present study is to focus on suggestions and describe how they are made in real-life interactions, in other words, what language forms are used to perform the function of making suggestions in different contexts. A second purpose is to inform ESL materials developers so that they can make more informed decisions about selecting language forms for the speech act of making suggestions when developing instructional resources. With these goals in mind, suggestions in the spoken data from the TOEFL 2000 Spoken and Written Academic Language Corpus (Biber et al., 2002), (which represent authentic language use in real life) are analyzed. The analysis draws on two specific contexts: interactions during office hours and during student study groups. In addition, six comprehensive ESL textbook series, three published in the 1980s, and three more recently published (1997, 1998, and 2001), are reviewed to show what forms were actually selected by textbook authors for the function of making suggestions and to evaluate how successfully these textbooks reflected real-life language use (see Appendix A for the list of textbooks).

2. The speech act of suggestions in L2 pragmatics

Pragmatics, according to Crystal (1985), “is the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication” (p. 240). Pragmatic or functional use of language, such as suggestions, invitations, requests, apologies, refusals, and agreements, are essential components of language learners’ “communicative competence” (Hymes, 1972).

Performing speech acts involves both socio-cultural and sociolinguistic knowledge (Cohen, 1996). Socio-cultural knowledge determines when to perform a speech act and which one is appropriate in a given circumstance and sociolinguistic knowledge determines the actual linguistic realization of each speech act appropriate to the particular situation. Of particular relevance to the present study is the second component of speech act performance, which some authors would call pragmalinguistic knowledge (e.g., Thomas, 1983; Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Kasper and Rose, 2002). Pragmalinguistic knowledge refers to
the knowledge about available strategic and linguistic resources for communicating interpersonal meanings. As Kasper (1997) puts it, “such resources include pragmatic strategies like directness and indirectness, routines, and a large range of linguistic forms which can intensify or soften communicative acts” (p. 1).

The pragmatic performance of second language (L2) learners often seems to fall short of ideal expectations. Even the most competent learners sometimes appear to have problems with L2 pragmatics in real-world encounters. For example, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1990, 1993) and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) reported the use of different speech acts by native speakers (NSs) and nonnative speakers (NNSs) in authentic academic advising sessions. They found that NSs produced more suggestions but NNSs produced more rejections per advising session. NNSs tended to expect suggestions from their advisor about what classes they should take and as a result, more rejections by the students occurred when they had an idea that differed from what their advisor suggested. NSs, however, showed more initiative in making suggestions and thus managed to avoid most of the contexts for rejections. Even when they did reject their advisor’s course suggestions, NSs provided alternatives such as “how about I take... instead,” which was not found in the NNSs’ data. Apart from the different speech acts they adopted for the same function, even for the same speech acts, different forms were used. NSs were able to cast their suggestions in tentative terms by using mitigating forms such as “I was thinking...” or “I have an idea... I don’t know how it would work out, but...” In contrast, NNSs tended to formulate their suggestions in much more assertive ways, as in “I will take language testing” or “I’ve just decided on taking the language structure” (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996, p. 22). NNSs’ choices and formulations of speech acts can lead to serious miscommunication and compromise their goals. As indicated by Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1990), when NNSs said something inappropriate pragmatically, they were less successful in getting their advisor’s consent for the courses they preferred.

Some speech acts, such as requests, refusals, compliments, apologies, greetings, complaints, and expressions of gratitude, have been extensively investigated in the field of interlanguage or cross-cultural pragmatics (e.g., Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Cohen et al., 1986; Eisenstein and Bodman, 1986; Trosborg, 1987; Wolfson, 1981). The speech act of suggestions, however, has not been as widely studied (cf. Schmidt et al., 1995).

Among the small number of studies related to the speech act of suggestions, Rintell (1979) compared the degree of deference in the speech acts of requests and suggestions and investigated how the factors of age and sex of the speaker and hearer affected the degree of deference in requests and suggestions produced by Spanish ESL learners. She found that utterances used to request conveyed more deference than utterances used to suggest. Banerjee and Carrell (1988) reported that nonnative speakers were significantly less likely to make suggestions in slightly embarrassing and potentially embarrassing situations than native speakers. They also found that nonnative speakers might unintentionally appear to be impolite or at least less polite when making suggestions. Based on their findings, Banerjee and Carrell called on teachers “to sensitize learners to the fine shades of meaning as they learn to use various syntactic structures” (p. 346) and recommended that pragmatics be integrated into other aspects of language teaching, for example, along with modals, question forms, conditionals, and imperatives.

Recently, two more studies on the speech act of suggestions in interlanguage development have been conducted. Bell (1998) examined the production of three speech acts – requests, suggestions, and disagreements – by a group of high-beginning level Korean
ESL learners. Compared to requests and suggestions, these students demonstrated an increase in the level of politeness in their expression of disagreements, but their disagreements were still too direct and unmitigated.

Matsumura (2001) found that Japanese ESL students used direct speech acts in giving advice and suggestions even though indirectness would have been expected by native speakers in specific speech settings. Although Japanese communicative style is commonly considered to be indirect and polite, many Japanese ESL students in Matsumura’s study used direct speech acts, such as *You must*... and *You should*... in response to an instructor’s question “Please tell me what I could do in order to make this class more interesting to you all” (p. 637). Consequently, their speech was considered inappropriate and they were judged as impolite or rude.

In sum, the L2 pragmatics literature on suggestions is quite limited. This small body of studies, however, indicates that English learners have difficulty formulating sociolinguistically appropriate suggestions. Their suggestions are often direct, unmitigated, less polite than NSs, or even rude. The findings of these studies raise questions about how English learners acquire their knowledge of suggestions and what they have actually been taught.

3. The gap between ESL textbooks and target language use

The unsatisfactory results of ESL learners’ ability to perform speech acts more generally have led researchers to consider what learners have actually been taught in classrooms and textbooks. The relationship between the actual linguistic realization of certain speech acts and the presentation of these linguistic forms in ESL textbooks has been the focus of several studies.

Pearson (1986) investigated the speech acts of agreeing and disagreeing in Spoken English classrooms and Scotton and Bernsten (1988) analyzed the language of direction-giving in natural conversations. Both articles drew attention to discrepancies between the language of real-life discourse and the language of textbooks. Bouton (1996) found that 80% of the invitations in one ESL textbook used a form of invitation which appeared only 26% of the time in a published corpus on native speaker invitations. Boxer and Pickering (1995) pointed out a general lack of indirect complaints in textbooks as well as a lack of any discussion of complaints as a social strategy (e.g., to start a conversation, more specifically). Furthermore, Mir (1992) noted that instructional emphasis on one semantic formula over others, as in the case of “I’m sorry” in apologies, may encourage overuse of this formulaic phrase.

Speech act research continues to show that performing speech acts is a complex phenomenon; this complexity, however, “has not always been recognized in the teaching of speech acts or functions” (Koester, 2002, p. 168). McCarthy (1998) claims that textbooks typically try to simplify real language use and reduce complexity to a list of phrase-level options. For example, when they are taught how to give advice, learners may only be given a list of phrases such as: *You should*... *Why don’t you*...? *If I were you I’d*... , and *You ought to*... . The problem with such formulae or phrase-level lists, as Koester (2002) argues, is that they tend to obscure the fact that their appropriateness is context-dependent. Factors such as the nature of the interaction and the relationship between the speakers have to be considered in every specific speech situation. In addition, performing speech acts is an intrinsically interactive phenomenon. In the case of giving advice or making a request, for example, some kind of response is expected from an addressee; that is to
say, advice or a request may be either accepted or rejected. Real language speech acts, as Koester (2002) observes, are generally accomplished over a longer stretch of discourse, which, again, is simplified in textbooks.

Kasper (1996) claims that one of the causes of learners’ non-target-like pragmatic performance is the incomplete or misleading input provided by pedagogical materials. Providing authentic, representative language to learners is a basic responsibility of classroom instruction. Nonetheless, as Kasper (1997) points out, due to the asymmetrical roles between the interlocutors in classroom teacher–student talk, the teacher often monopolizes discourse organization and management. As a result, classroom interactions often produce a limited range of speech acts, simplified openings and closings, a lack of politeness marking, and a limited range of discourse markers in the classroom discourse. (See Kasper, 1997, for references of these findings.) In other words, teacher-fronted classroom discourse does not serve as a pragmatically appropriate model for the speech of ESL learners. In this case, appropriate and adequate input from teaching materials, especially ESL textbooks, becomes crucial in the development of ESL learners’ pragmatic competence.

4. The present study

This study aims to investigate how suggestions are performed in two authentic settings – professor–student interaction during office hours and student–student study group interaction – in order to compare the results with the treatment of suggestions in six popular ESL textbooks. The goal is to evaluate how well corpus findings match the forms of suggestions in textbooks and to make possible pedagogical recommendations. The reasons for choosing these two authentic settings are threefold: first, these two contexts for suggestions are very important for the successful functioning of international students in academic contexts; second, both encounters are considered relatively rich in the use of suggestions; and, last but not least, the two different settings allow the consideration of status differences among interlocutors, where the former is between higher status and lower status and the latter is between interlocutors of equal status. The present study aims to answer the following questions:

1) How are suggestions framed in office hours and study groups? Are there differences in the linguistic patterns of suggestions in these two registers? How do these patterns differ? What are the factors affecting the choice of different patterns?
2) What do ESL textbooks teach about suggestions? Are there changes in textbooks published in the 1980s and those published in the late 1990s and early 21st century?
3) How good is the fit between corpus findings and textbook language for suggestions?

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Corpus information

The naturally occurring data used in this study are from office hours and study groups of the TOEFL 2000 Spoken and Written Academic Language Corpus (T2K-SWAL Corpus) by Biber et al. (2002). The T2K-SWAL Corpus is a collection of spoken and written academic texts in US universities, comprising more than 2.7 million words. The spoken register includes class sessions, office hours, study groups, on-campus service encounters,
and labs/in-class groups, totaling approximately 1.7 million words. The written register includes textbooks, course packs, course management documents, and other campus writing such as university catalogues and brochures, with a total of about 1 million words. The detailed information about the corpus construction process and composition is available in Biber et al. (2002). Descriptive information about office hours and study groups, the two T2K-SWAL subcorpora used in this study, is provided in Table 1.

4.1.2. Operational definition of suggestions

Suggestions are a type of speech act which belongs to the category of directives (Searle, 1969). Like commands, requests, warnings, and pleas, they are attempts to get the hearer to do something. However, suggestions are directives that the speaker believes will benefit the hearer (Searle, 1969) and leave the hearer free to do as he or she chooses (Verschueren, 1984).

In this study, the speech act of suggestions is construed as encompassing what we know as advice, proposals, suggestions, and recommendations. In making a suggestion, the speaker:

1) mentions an idea, possible plan or action for other people to consider; or
2) offers an opinion about what other people should do or how they should act in a particular situation; and
3) believes that the action indicated is in the best interest of the hearer, or is desirable for the hearer to do.

4.1.3. Syntactic structures and concordance search

In order to conduct a concordance search in the corpus, I generated a list of possible structures for making suggestions. This list is composed of structures from different sources. First, I read through a sample of the corpus transcripts, identified instances of suggestions, and looked for structures which fulfill the function as making suggestions. Second, I made an inventory of all structures used in the six ESL textbook series that I reviewed for this study. Finally, I collected additional structures from other teaching materials, ESL websites, grammar books, and other sources, for the purpose of making the overall list as inclusive as possible. The structures were grouped into nine categories based on their grammatical features. A complete list of structures used for concordance search can be found in Appendix B. A concordancing program, MonoConc Pro 2.0 (Barlow, 2000) was used to search each structure in the corpus in order to determine the individual frequencies of these expressions, as well as to eliminate those occurrences where the structures were used in the corpus for functions other than suggestions. In searching for imperative structures, the tagged version of the texts was used. Although the list I used to guide

| Table 1 |
| T2K-SWAL Corpus: office hours and study groups |
| Office hours | Study groups |
| Number of texts | 11 | 25 |
| Number of words | 50,412 | 141,140 |
| Average length of individual text (words) | 4583 | 5646 |
the search was not exhaustive in that it probably did not retrieve all possible structures used for suggestions, it did include the most commonly used ones. The concordance search allowed the efficient identification of the forms for suggestions and their frequency of occurrence in the corpus.

4.1.4. Review of ESL textbooks

Three popular, recently published ESL textbook series (*Passages, American Headway, and New Interchange*) and three series published in the 1980s (*New Intercom, On Your Way, and In Touch*) were reviewed for the linguistic forms of making suggestions and the ways they present these forms (see Appendix A for the bibliographical information of these textbooks). The selection of these book series followed the recommendations of ESL program directors and ESL curriculum experts. According to the publisher’s website, *New Interchange* is considered “one of the world’s most successful English courses for adult and young learners at the beginning and intermediate levels” and *Passages* is aimed to follow the *New Interchange* series for high-intermediate to advanced level learners (http://uk.cambridge.org/elt/interchange). *American Headway* is also an internationally well-known ESL series. These three textbook series are also used in many EFL contexts. The three old-generation textbooks, *New Intercom, On Your Way, and In Touch* were popular in 1980s and early 1990s. The purpose of reviewing textbooks from two different generations was to see if changes were made during a gap of approximately 15 years and also to determine if the criticisms from early researchers on textbooks were still valid, considering the new generation ESL textbooks.

4.2. Results

4.2.1. Findings from corpus data

The target structures were classified into nine categories based on their grammatical features, including *Let’s*. . . , certain modals and semi-modals, *Wh*-questions, conditionals, performatives, pseudo cleft structures, extraposed *to*-clauses, yes–no questions, and imperatives. The complete list of structures is included in Appendix B with examples for each category. Searches were conducted for each structure and the results of these searches are presented in Table 2 with the number of total occurrences and frequency of occurrence per 10,000 words.

4.2.1.1. Register differences. The primary differences in the use of syntactic structures for suggestions between office hours and study groups (as presented in Table 2) occurred with the use of *You need to*. . . , *You should*. . . , conditionals, performative verbs, pseudo cleft sentences, and imperatives. All of these structures were used more frequently in office hours than in study groups, with the exception of imperatives. The passive use of modals (e.g., *should be considered*) appears only in the study group data. Table 3 presents the major differences between the two registers.

One possible reason for the syntactic differences in office hours and study groups is the status difference between participants. During office hours, the interaction is between professors and students; while in study groups, the participants are status-equal classmates. The forms *You need to*. . . and *You should*. . . are very often used by interlocutors with higher status toward the party with lower status (*Boatman, 1987*) when there is a clearly defined difference in authority or expertise (*DeCapua and Huber, 1995*). Among
status-equal interlocutors, the same forms may sound imposing and presumptuous. In reality, advice-givers will often try to avoid unwarranted bossiness by resorting to softeners, downgraders, mitigators, and hedges in their speech (DeCapua and Huber, 1995). Conditionals and pseudo cleft sentences are quite formal ways of making suggestions. Their structural complexity and formality have an effect of mitigating the imposition, so that the suggestions sound more polite (Boatman, 1987; DeCapua and Huber, 1995).

The professors’ use of You need to... and You should... on the one hand, and conditionals and pseudo cleft sentences on the other, shows that they want to be direct and explicit to pass their message across, but at the same time they do take steps to avoid unwarranted presumptions and to maintain harmony with their student interlocutors.

The passive structure of modals is sometimes used in study groups but not once during office hours. One possible explanation is that in study groups, the focus of attention is on how to solve problems related to course materials. Interlocutors may have a more pronounced tendency to choose content-related nouns as subject of sentences instead of personal pronouns.

### Table 2
Syntactic structures from office hours and study groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntactic structures</th>
<th>Office hours</th>
<th>Study groups</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Occurrence</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Occurrence</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Let’s...</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Modals</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Passive with modals</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. You have to...</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. You need to...</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. You should...</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. You ought to...</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. You must...</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Wh-questions</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Conditionals</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Performatives</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Pseudo clefts</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Extraposed to-clauses</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Yes–no questions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Imperatives</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Occurrence refers to total occurrences in the corpus and frequency refers to the number of occurrences per 10,000 words.

### Table 3
Major register differences between office hours and study groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntactic structures</th>
<th>Office hours</th>
<th>Study groups</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Occurrence</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Occurrence</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. You need to...</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. You should...</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Conditionals</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Performative verbs</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Imperatives</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Pseudo clefts</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Passive with modals</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.1.2. Analysis of individual structures. In this section, I look at the use of the following individual structures for suggestions: *Let’s*..., modals, performative verbs, conditionals, and pseudo clefts. These five structures were commonly used for suggestions in the corpus. A more detailed examination of these forms will facilitate an understanding of why context is important with respect to their use.

*Let’s*... The structure *Let’s*... is described as “an inclusive imperative,” which “includes the speaker with the addressee” (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 233). According to Biber et al. (1999), *Let’s*... is typically used to propose a joint action by speaker and hearer. However, it sometimes veers towards second person quasi-imperative meaning, in proposing action which is clearly intended to be carried out by the hearer. This style is said to be “cryptodirective,” camouflaging an authoritative speech act as a collaborative one (p. 1117). This happens quite often during office hours, where professors don’t want to sound too authoritative and try to be more collaborative. For example:

Professor: *Let’s* shut the door (office hours).

In this example, no joint action will take place. The professor may be indirectly asking the student to close the door if the student is sitting closer to the entrance.

For study groups, on the other hand, students are discussing and trying to figure out ways to solve problems. Usually a joint action will be carried out. For example:

Speaker 2: now is there anything else that we need to what what are the requirements?
Speaker 1: *Let’s* look at this again.
Speaker 2: OK (study groups).

*Modals.* Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) observe that speakers use modals to perform a variety of social functions, for example, expressing politeness or indirectness when making requests, giving advice, or granting permission. They ordered modals based on the speaker’s degree of authority or the urgency of the advice. For instance, the following three examples, (1) *You must see a doctor*, (2) *You should/ought to see a doctor*, and (3) *You might/could see a doctor*, show the decrease in speaker’s authority or urgency of the message. According to the authors, *You have to/have got to/need to see a doctor* is an informal, rough equivalent of the above three examples. Data from the corpus provide strong empirical evidence for the use of modals in making suggestions.

The modals that frequently appear with suggestions in the data are *have to, need to,* and *should*. During office hours, *have to* was used 24 times, among which the speech was hedged five times by *just, probably, might,* and *will,* all of which are mitigators. By using mitigating hedges, the degree of authority and urgency is weakened and the speech act of suggesting is less imposing and face-threatening. The frequency of *have to* in study groups is almost the same as in office hours. What differs between the two registers, however, is the choice of hedges. In study group meetings between students, more aggravators like *do, really, must* are used. These aggravating hedges show the urgency of the message rather than authority in this case.

Although the frequency of *have to* in both registers is very similar, the modals *need to* and *should* are used much more often in office hours than in study groups. Two factors may account for this: the nature of the interaction and the status of the speakers. Office hours are also known as advising sessions, where students meet with professors or advisors for advice, whereas study groups are more focused on discussions and exchanges of ideas, so there may be fewer occasions for advice. In addition, for office hours, the suggestions are given by professors or advisors who enjoy higher status. Not surprisingly, no example
of suggestions from students is found in office hours. Therefore, the use of You should... and You need to... seems to be natural.

**Performative verbs.** Speech act theory distinguishes between direct and indirect speech acts, whereby explicit performatives are associated with the performance of direct speech acts, for example, saying I suggest that you... or I advise you to... in order to perform the act of advising (Searle, 1969). As a result of the focus on such performatives in speech act theory, learners have frequently been taught the most direct way of expressing a speech act via the use of performative verbs. In spite of the prominent role of explicit performatives in speech act theory, such forms are, in fact, the exception rather than the norm in performing speech acts in naturally occurring speech (Koester, 2002). The performance of direct speech acts through the use of performative verbs and their corresponding nouns (e.g., suggestion, advice, proposal, and recommendation) in the corpus did not happen in study groups, but it did appear 11 times in office hours. Performative verbs are used in suggestions more frequently from the higher-status to the lower-status interlocutor on more serious topics, or things the speaker strongly believes the hearer should do. By using these constructions, the speaker seems to be more authoritative and the resulting suggestion sounds more formal and forceful. For example:

1. “And again I would, really suggest, one forty one.” “OK” (office hours).
2. “...if you haven’t done it yet, I’d really recommend you uh, uh, we do have a career office on campus that has some software, so if you’ve never done a resume before it’s a good place to start” (office hours).

**Conditionals.** Conditional structures are used much more frequently during office hours than in study groups: 17 times in office hours but only once in study groups (Table 3). Conditionals are often considered an indirect way of making suggestions, showing the politeness of the speaker. Brown and Levinson (1987) named the subordinator if in conditionals a possibility marker. By including a notion of possibility, suggestions may sound more polite. Since study groups are conversations between classmates, it is not surprising to find that the interlocutors feel less obliged to show a high degree of politeness with each other. It is interesting, however, to find that during office hours, professors and advisors use many more conditionals with their students than students do among themselves in study groups. People generally assume that speakers with higher status tend to show less politeness when they talk to addressees of lower status, because the former have more power and control over the latter. In fact, this is not always the case. One explanation for this phenomenon is the consideration of solidarity and maintenance of harmony (DeCapua and Huber, 1995; Harris, 2003). On the other hand, politeness can also create greater distance reflecting a status differential.

**Pseudo cleft constructions.** Another construction associated with suggestions is the What-cleft, as in What you need to do is... or What I would suggest is.... These pseudo cleft sentences are considered “as mechanisms for agent de-emphasis” by Hudson (1990, p. 288). Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) refer to Wh-clefts as important focus constructions that give special emphasis to the constituent following some form of the verb be. According to Biber et al. (1999), Wh-clefts are most frequently used in conversation, when compared with other registers such as fiction, news, and academic prose (p. 961). They assume that the association between Wh-clefts and conversation probably has to do with the low information content in the Wh-clause which speakers use as a
springboard in starting an utterance: What I mean..., What I want to say..., etc. (p. 963). However, based on “the end weight principle” (Biber et al., 1999, p. 898), the constituent in the focus slot is the most important information in the sentence. Therefore, a cleft performs the function of emphasizing and drawing the hearer’s attention to the most important part of a suggestion. Although people who make suggestions often have good intentions, suggestions are to some extent face-threatening (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Most people want to delay the possibly unpleasant information to the very end. Therefore, the functions of the Wh-cleft construction include giving the speaker thinking time, emphasizing the content, and delaying unpleasant information (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Biber et al., 1999). From the corpus findings we can see that What-cleft and its related All constructions (e.g., All you have to do is...) are used more frequently in office hours between professors and students than in study groups, nine times (with a frequency of 2.0 per 10,000 words) in the former case and only three (0.2 per 10,000 words) in the latter. In this case, the syntactic structure helped professors make the important messages of their suggestions salient, but at the same time enabled them to leave the face-threatening part to the end.

4.2.2. Suggestions in ESL textbooks

4.2.2.1. New generation textbooks. All three textbook series include practice on making suggestions or giving advice; however, their coverage of linguistic structures varies. Table 4 shows the linguistic structures present in the new generation textbooks.

Among all three newer textbook series, the repertoire of forms for suggestions differs considerably. American Headway covers only four categories of the nine patterns: Let’s..., modals, Wh-questions, and conditionals. Passages covers six patterns: modals,
conditionals, imperatives, performative verbs, extraposed to-clauses, and yes–no questions. New Interchange covers seven: modals, Wh-questions, imperatives, performative verbs, extraposed to-clauses, pseudo cleft sentences, and yes–no questions. Some patterns are covered only in one of the textbooks. For example, Let’s... is only found in American Headway; Wh-questions and pseudo cleft sentences appear only in New Interchange. All three textbook series use modals to make suggestions; however, the types of modals and semi-modals covered are also quite different, ranging from two in American Headway, to four in Passages, and to nine in New Interchange.

Table 4 shows that Passages and New Interchange have an adequate list of grammatical structures for the function of making suggestions. The number of linguistic structures taught in American Headway, however, is very limited compared to the nine categories available for the speech act of making suggestions. Four forms of Let’s... , modals should and must, Wh-questions, and conditionals are not a sufficient repertoire to meet learners’ language needs, which confirms Bouton’s (1996) concern of the mismatch between ESL textbooks and native speaker spoken language. This limitation also supports Mir’s (1992) concern about the overuse of certain formulae over the others as a reflection of instructional emphasis.

However, the availability of linguistic structures in textbooks is only a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition to ensure students’ ability to perform the speech act of making suggestions. The way these structures are presented in text materials is also crucial. One thing the three newer textbook series have in common is that all of them presented these forms as grammar topics and emphasized them in boxes as language points. The examples and exercises for practice were decontextualized sentences without any discussion about the context in which these different forms can be appropriately used. This phenomenon confirms McCarthy’s (1998) observation that textbooks typically simplify real language use and reduce complexity to a list of linguistic options. Such simplifications obscure the context-dependent nature of their appropriateness (Koester, 2002).

4.2.2.2. Old generation textbooks. The old generation comprehensive ESL textbooks reviewed also have separate topics on making suggestions and giving advice. Table 5 shows the syntactic structures presented in these three textbook series.

In the three old generation ESL textbook series, In Touch, On Your Way, and New Intercom, the syntactic repertoire for making suggestions is very limited. Altogether, only four patterns were presented. The structure of Let’s... and the modal should are covered by all three series. Wh-questions are covered by On Your Way and New Intercom; and conditionals are covered by New Intercom only. Examples were provided in decontextualized sentences or short dialogues with no explanation of appropriateness of social contexts.

The three textbook series are not only limited in the number of structures being taught, but also by their lack of contextual information on the appropriate use of these structures. ESL textbooks are supposed to reflect the theoretical development in the field of applied linguistics and language pedagogy of their times. In the early 1980s, the communicative approach (Widdowson, 1978) has just begun to be recognized by applied linguists and classroom teachers, so the actual use of language in real life has not yet been the focus of language classrooms or ESL textbooks. However, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed an ever increasing emphasis on the development of learners’ communicative competence and the connection between linguistic forms and functions; therefore, ESL textbook authors should reflect these changes in their textbooks.
4.2.2.3. The textbook generations comparisons. One apparent change in the more recent textbooks is their extended repertoire of structures for suggestions, especially in *Passages* and *New Interchange*. Both series cover imperatives, performative verbs, extraposited *to*-clauses, pseudo cleft sentences, yes–no questions, and a variety of modals. Surprisingly, the most recent publication among all the six series, *American Headway*, presents only four structures, *Let’s*..., two modals (*should* and *must*), *Wh*-questions, and conditionals. Table 6 compares and contrasts all the textbooks with regard to the syntactic structures for suggestions that they teach. In this respect, *American Headway* is not very different from the old generation textbooks published in the 1980s.

The lack of socio-contextual information for the use of these linguistic structures as suggestions is a shared limitation among textbooks from both generations. In order for students to learn to use these structures appropriately in real-life communication and recognize the nuances among their meanings, socio-contextual information plays a critical role.

Table 5
Syntactic structures in old generation ESL textbooks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntactic structures</th>
<th>In touch</th>
<th>On your way</th>
<th>New intercom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Let’s...</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You should...</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You shouldn’t...</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why don’t you...?</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What/How about...?</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you want to/like ... you should/have to ...</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6
Structures for suggestions in six textbook series

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old generation</th>
<th>New generation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In touch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Let’s</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Modals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Must</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ought to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Might</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had better</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be supposed to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Wh-questions</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Conditionals</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Performatives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Pseudo clefts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Extraposited to-clauses</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Yes–no questions</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Imperatives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Discussion and pedagogical implications

This study was based on a small corpus with only two registers of real language data (office hours and study groups) and a review of only six textbook series. However, an interesting discrepancy emerges from this focused comparison.

The corpus research on office hours and study groups shows that: (1) *Let’s*... is the most frequently used structure for suggestions; (2) the use of modals *have to* and *need to* for suggestions is more common than *should*; (3) the formulaic use of *Wh*-questions such as *What about/How about...?* and *Why don’t you.../Why not...?* is not frequent at all; (4) conditionals are more common in office hours than in study groups; and (5) performative verbs and pseudo cleft sentences are also commonly used in office hours.

When the ESL textbook materials are compared with the corpus findings, it is not difficult to find the discrepancies between the patterns of making suggestions in naturally occurring discourse and those in the textbooks. In what follows, I offer some suggestions for textbook writers and classroom teachers, gleaned from the corpus-based findings of the present study.

*Let’s*... is by far the most frequently used structure for making suggestions in the corpus data, and as such, it should be taught in ESL classes at an early stage of instruction. As a recently published textbook series for beginning and intermediate level learners, *New Interchange* does not present this form. It seems that this structure should be introduced as one of the first ways to make suggestions. Furthermore, the “cryptodirective” collaborative function of *Let’s*... (as a polite command) should be made clear to learners, so that they understand that the speaker may mean either joint action, or the addressee’s individual effort.

Modals are essential for making suggestions. All textbooks emphasize the use of *should*; however, corpus findings shows that *have to* and *need to* are used much more often than *should* in the two registers examined. Among the six textbook series reviewed, only one of them teaches the use of *have to* and two of them teach *need to*. As mentioned earlier, these three modals function differently in terms of formality and also demonstrate different degrees of authority of the speaker and urgency of the message. Not only should *have to* and *need to* be included in textbooks as structures for making suggestions, but the explanation of their functional differences and socio-contextual preferences should also be presented explicitly.

In the corpus data, *ought to* and *must* were seldom used for suggestions. The passive structure of modals was used in study groups but not in office hours. When students discuss their academic work on a specific topic and try to figure out what should be done to solve problems, their sentences often include inanimate nouns, especially terms related to their field of study. Lexical hedges such as *just*, *probably*, *really*, and *only* were quite often used together with modals. However, none of the textbooks introduced the use of hedges with modals, which might be one of the reasons why hedges are underused by ESL students, as reported in Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993).

Furthermore, the conventionalized *Wh*-questions such as *How about/What about...?* and *Why not/Why don’t you...?* seem to have acquired idiomatic status for indirect suggestions. The formulaic use of these questions has been considered one of the most common forms for making suggestions and students are often told to learn them as preferred structures. For example, one ESL website presented six structures to perform the speech act of making suggestions, among which are *What about...?*, *How about...?*, and *Why don’t...?*
you...? However, the present corpus findings suggest that these structures are actually not as popular in real-life conversations as textbook writers have us believe. As a result, their importance should not be overemphasized.

The negative question form Why don’t you...? has been reported to be almost three times more frequently used by nonnative speakers than native speakers (Banerjee and Carrell, 1988). Although Why don’t you...? appears acceptable, the authors argue that “it is probably less polite in that it presupposes that the hearer knows that he or she should perform the desired action and asks for the reason that the hearer has not” (p. 342). Moreover, it “leaves the hearer with few options” and, as a result, “does not help to lessen the threat to the hearer’s face” (p. 342).

Another implication gleaned from the corpus findings is that, for certain structures at least, register differences seem to be important; as a result, textbooks need to contextualize making suggestions in ways that are register appropriate. For example, conditionals and performative verbs for suggestions are shown by corpus data to be register sensitive. Some of the textbooks presented these structures, but none of them provided contextual information on their pragmatic use, or presented them in a seemingly authentic conversational environment. Instead, they were listed as grammar points in decontextualized sentences followed by sentence-level exercises. Two recently published ESL textbooks, Passages and New Interchange, for example, presented the use of advise, propose, recommend, and suggest under the language point of “subjunctive.” Performative verbs such as suggest, recommend, advise, and propose are very direct in making suggestions and may be too formal for most occasions, particularly among equal status speakers. Consequently, textbook writers should not present these forms in grammar exercises without explicitly explaining the situations of their use. Finally, pseudo cleft sentences are also fairly common structures for suggestions, but they only appear in one of the six textbook series. Future textbook writers might consider including pseudo clefts when introducing forms for the function of making suggestions; but similarly, register differences and relevant socio-contextual information should be provided for learners.

When teaching speech acts, it is insufficient to simply teach lists of phrases or sentence structures. Not all structures are equally appropriate in every situation. In addition to being able to cope with the syntactic structure of speech acts, learners need to develop awareness of the differences between various realizations of the same speech act, for example, between explicit performatives and more indirect ways of communicating the same meaning. The appropriate realization and level of directness of any speech act are highly sensitive to socio-cultural contexts. This is particularly important when there is a status or power differential, as in the situation of office hours.

The review of two generations of ESL textbooks shows that some changes have taken place in the selection of syntactic structures for suggestions. A variety of structures have been included in the new generation textbooks, especially Passages and New Interchange. The way they presented these structures, however, is no more than providing an expanded list of linguistic forms. A longer list of structures or linguistic formulae does not necessarily mean that the new generation textbooks are doing better in teaching pragmatics than the older textbooks. The lack of contextual information for appropriate use, or discussion about the differences in their fine shades of meanings, or illustration of these structures in authentic materials undermines the authors’ purpose in teaching functions. More importantly, this limitation could mislead language learners in the development of their pragmatic competence. The weaknesses in the textbooks’ portrayal of this speech act limit
their pedagogical value for teaching the pragmatics of suggestions appropriately or fully. In addition, the limited selection of certain structures, and not others, is not well supported by real-life language use, as reflected in the corpus materials.

Classroom teachers need to realize the limitations of the textbooks they choose to use in their classes and make efforts to compensate for these shortcomings. It is true that textbooks are usually not responsive enough to the most current pedagogical theories. It takes several years for textbooks to be written, piloted, published, and finally available on the market, and much longer still before they are revised and replaced by new editions. Classroom teachers, however, have opportunities to upgrade their knowledge about language teaching and to expose themselves to the most current pedagogical developments and new teaching materials. Teachers should be encouraged to complement their textbooks with additional materials that they consider beneficial to their students. In the case of teaching pragmatics, for example, corpora of authentic spoken language will be helpful for making the connections between language forms and functions. Classroom tasks should draw more on naturally occurring conversations rather than drills and seemingly artificial dialogues. The more naturally occurring conversations will develop students’ awareness of such socio-cultural issues as register differences, interlocutor relationships (boss–employee, teacher–student, between classmates or friends, etc.), and cultural preferences.

6. Conclusion

Textbooks are one of the main sources of knowledge for language learners, especially for those learners in a foreign language context. In the case of teaching the speech act of making suggestions, most textbooks take the approach of making connections between linguistic forms and function. However, the number of linguistic forms they teach varies from textbook to textbook. On one hand, it is encouraging to find that new generation textbooks provide a richer repertoire of linguistic forms than do older generation textbooks. On the other hand, the decontextualized ways in which these forms are presented in the textbook materials is disappointing and in opposition with the very nature of pragmatics, the appropriate use of language in context.

Over the past decade, several studies describing ESL/EFL textbooks have been published (e.g., Bouton, 1996; Boxer and Pickering, 1995; Koester, 2002; Mir, 1992; McCarthy, 1998; Pearson, 1986; Scotton and Bernsten, 1988). From corpus linguistics studies, we also have increasingly richer and broader descriptions of how various language forms and functions are used in real encounters (e.g., Biber et al., 1999; Conrad, 1999; Housen, 2002; Biber et al., 2002). However, less is known about how teachers use materials and corpus linguistics information in their teaching. Actual descriptions of teachers’ use of materials, textbooks, and corpus findings in L2 classrooms may add to our insights about ESL learners’ pragmatic development and the effectiveness of pragmatics instruction in classrooms.

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Appendix A. ESL Textbooks Reviewed


Appendix B. List of structures used for concordance search

1) Let’s …
2) Modals and semi-modals
   You have to…
   You * have to… (* means with one word in-between.)
   You need to…
   You * need to…
   You should…
   You shouldn’t…
   You ought to…
   You must…
   You can…
   You could…
   You might…
   You’re supposed to…
   You’d/had better…
3) Wh-questions
   Why don’t you …?
   Why not…?
   How about …?
   What about …?
4) Conditionals
   If I were…
   If you…
5) Performatives
   suggest/recommend/advise/propose
   suggestion/recommendation/advice/proposal
6) Pseudo cleft structures
   What…is…
   All…is…
   One thing you could do is…
   Another thing to keep in mind is…
   One of the most important things to remember is…
7) Extraposed to-clauses
   It might be... to...
   It might not be... to...
   It is * to...
   It never hurts/...won’t hurt/...wouldn’t hurt to...

8) Yes–no questions
   Have you thought of/about ...?
   Would you consider ...?

9) Imperatives

References


