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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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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