SUGGESTIONS IN TEACHER-STUDENT CONFERENCES

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In this paper, we present a preliminary study to explore whether highly advanced L2 speakers realize the speech act of suggestion in the same way as native speakers and the reasons behind their pragmatic choices. We compared suggestions provided by three non-native speaking English Composition instructors and three native speaking Composition instructors when they hold conferences with their American students to discuss how to improve the students' drafts. The data consists of audiotaped conferences between the participating instructors and their students and the final interview data from the three NNS instructors. This preliminary study indicated that although all the instructors provided more direct than indirect suggestions, the non-native speaking instructors were more direct than the native speaking instructors.

INTRODUCTION

Suggestions are common in daily conversations. We often solicit or receive suggestions from different people: we get personal advice from our friends, relatives, strangers, or co-workers; we receive professional suggestions from doctors, lawyers, and professors. Whether suggestions are accepted as proper/ face-threatening or not depends on the authority and expertise of the speaker, and intimacy between the speaker and addressee (Decapua and Huber, 1995). Suggestion occurs more frequently in the educational settings when students seek help from their teachers. One academic situation in which suggestions are regularly provided is the teacher-student conference in the current process-oriented teaching practices of composition classes in America. Conferences are important for the students to get feedback and suggestions from their instructors before they turn in their final draft. Across American universities, there are many international teaching assistants (ITA), i.e. non-native English speaking graduate students working as composition instructors. These ITAs are highly advanced in their linguistic proficiency, but they may lack certain pragmatic skills in dealing with the students and they might provide suggestions to their students in a different manner from native-speaking English instructors in the student-teacher conferences. Banerjee and Carrell's (1987) study noted that NNSs used more direct suggestions than NSs, however, the participants in their study are not advanced language speakers. In pragmatics literature, the issue of highly advanced NNSs' pragmatic choice of suggestions has not been widely addressed, especially when those NNSs are in the more powerful position to

provide suggestions. This preliminary study intends to explore whether highly-advanced L2 speakers, given the fact they have power and authority in the educational setting, offer suggestions to their students in the same way as NSs. The data analysis indicates that NNS instructors used slightly more direct suggestions to their students than their NS counterparts, though both groups used more direct suggestions than indirect suggestions with their American students.

Being ITAs ourselves, both authors noticed the differences in the way that we provided suggestions when we first started teaching in the United States and the way that NS instructors offer suggestions. We hope this preliminary study will help ITAs reflect upon their pragmatic choices of suggestions when they interact with their students. We also believe that the result of this study will contribute to the field of ITA training to help them get a better sense of how to choose proper linguistic forms to fulfill the pedagogical purposes in a more harmonious environment, especially for those ITAs working in the non-language fields who might encounter more problems from their students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Speech Act of Suggestions in English

Suggestion is a directive act, aiming at getting the addressee to carry out an action. According to Brown and Levison (1987), a directive is a potentially face-threatening act (FTA). Face refers to "the socially situated identities people claim or attribute to others" and "face work" includes communicative strategies that enact, support, or challenge these situated identities (Tracy, 1990, p.210). The directive speech act might threaten the negative face of the hearer (the claim to respect autonomy and rights to non-imposition) for the possibility of future action. It could also threaten the positive face (the claim to a positive self-image, approved and appreciated by at least some others) as it entails a negative evaluation of the hearer. Goldsmith (2000) claims that advice can pose additional threat to the negative face if it is interpreted as "nosy". Thus, tactful suggestions could ameliorate the relationship between the two parties and untactful suggestions could create frustration or be offensive to the receiver.

Common structures of suggestions include "you + modal verbs (should, can, could, may, might)", conditionals (if…), performatives (I suggest… or my suggestion is that…), and imperatives (Do/Don't…). Kalia (2005, p. 224) classified the strategies used for suggestions into three categories: direct strategies include imperatives, conventionally indirect strategies (e.g. Why don't you…?), other speech acts include offering (e.g. Shall I open the window?) and granting permission (e.g. You may open the window). The choice of the structure depends on the power relationship and intimacy between the speaker and the listener and the setting (formal or casual, academic or non-academic). To avoid threatening the listeners' face, speakers often use mitigated or indirect forms. Decapua and Huber (1995) found that

co-equals often use status-preserving strategies to mitigate the superiority present in the unsolicited advice. For example, in the work setting, one would talk about how one handled the problematic situation if such a topic came up in the chat to shift the focus and to avoid asserting authority. Mackiewicz (2005) also found that writing tutors use hints quite often in making suggestions to engineering students. When one tutor suggested the student add heading in the essay, he said "Headings help readers understand the organization" instead of "You could add headings to make the organization easier to understand." (Mackiewicz, 2005, p.368). Goldsmith (2000) revealed common patterns of introducing advice into a conversation and noticed that these patterns could aggravate or mitigate the degree to which face is threatened. She thus suggests that we should be cautious about volunteering advice, especially on sensitive topics. Advice is seen as least face-threatening when the suggestion recipient solicits the advice. Thus, indirect way of offering suggestion is preferred as a way to preserve face for both parties.

Suggestions in L2 Pragmatics

Given the complexity of suggestions, one should be very careful to offer advice. Such a fine-tune difference of the impact of direct and indirect suggestion may not be clear to nonnative speakers as the suggestion providers or receivers. Pragmatic competence, including the appropriate realization of the speech acts, is an essential part required for language learning. Though much attention has been given to the L2 pragmatic competence on different speech acts, such as requests, apologies, invitations, refusals, and complaints, there is only a small number of studies related to the speech acts of suggestions (Banerjee and Carrell, 1987; Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Hinkel, 1994, 1997; Matsumura, 2001; Jiang, 2006). Banerjee and Carrell (1987) found that native speakers of English made suggestions more frequently than nonnative speakers. This is also true in authentic academic advising sessions (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1990). The high frequency of suggestions offered by NSs, as Banerjee and Carrell explained, might be related to greater confidence of native speakers in using the language at ease.

Banerjee and Carrell (1987) identified some strategies which are used by native speakers to reduce face-threatening impact in some embarrassing situations, such as making jokes or shifting the focus to an outside cause or back to the speaker in most cases. One specific example provided in Banerjee and Carrell (1987) is about how native speakers said "nice hairdo" or "My, the wind blew your hair!" to suggest the need for combing the hair. In contrast, nonnative speakers said "Your hair is quite messy. Why don't you comb it?" (p. 340). Nonnative speakers sometimes made improper suggestions by incorrectly using forms which sound polite to them. They would utter, "Would you please change your clothes?" as a way to suggest the listener change his clothes. To the listener, the speaker sounds to be offended, thus, he/she request the addressee to change clothes (p.336). This seemingly polite form of request could hurt the face of the addressee and might possibly ruin the relationship between them. Moreover, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1990) reported that

native and nonnative speakers used different forms when making suggestions in academic advising sessions. Academic advising session is characterized by an unequal status of the advisors and the students. With their ranks, expertise and institutional knowledge, the advisors hold a higher status while the students hold a lower status. In this speech event, the advisors' duty is to provide information and give advice to students on the courses to take. And this is congruent with their institutional role. The students are supposed to request advice and information most of the time, but they sometimes reject the advisor's advice to suggest courses to take on their own. These are beyond expectation and are incongruent with students' lower status. To preserve their status as a student, native speakers employed downgraders, like "I was thinking", "I don't know how it would work out, but…". In contrast, nonnative speakers made suggestions on their course selection in an assertive way such as "I want to take…". Such inappropriate forms were incongruent with students' role and were thus perceived by the advisors as "pushy" or "rude" rather than "independent" or "motivated" (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1990).

Suggestion or advice-giving is viewed differently in different cultures. In English, it has been described as potentially face-threatening. And it is often regarded as inappropriate to give advice on one's personal matters. In contrast, suggestions in Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Indonesian, and Arabic cultures are deemed as expressions of friendliness and concern (Hinkel, 1994, for review). Speakers of these languages could give advice on matters which are deemed as private such as physical appearance, well-being and job-related topics, by English speakers. This difference might explain the intrusiveness and inappropriateness of some suggestions provided by L2 speakers. Hinkel (1994) noted NNS gave advice to the superior and peer on topics which are considered inappropriate in American cultures. For example, a large percent of Korean participants made direct advice to the social superior on the topic of pregnancy and raising a family to express benevolence and support. This shows that L2 speakers may transfer their pragmatic knowledge regarding suggestions in L1 to L2 contexts.

The complications of suggestion as a speech act warrant more research in both L1 and L2. As previous studies investigated the ESL learners at intermediate level (undergraduate students enrolled in American universities), we hope to explore whether L2 speakers with near-native proficiency realize the speech act of suggestion in the same way as NSs, especially when the power and authority reside with them.

THE STUDY

The present study aims to determine whether highly advanced L2 speakers, specifically non-native speaking instructors of English composition classes, realize the speech act of providing suggestions in the same way as native-speaking instructors in the teacher-student conferencing scenario.

Participants

There were six participants, two males and four females, in the study. All of them are graduate associates of teaching in the writing program in a southwestern university. The three NNSs are native speakers of Chinese (C1, C2, and C3). Their length of residence in America ranged from less than one year to three and a half years at the time of data collection. Their teaching experience in U.S. also ranged from C2 (0.5 year) to C1 (1.5 years), and C3 (3.5 years). C1 and C2 were enrolled in a master's program in English and C3 had a MA in English and was enrolled in a Ph.D program of language acquisition and teaching. All of them can be thus regarded as highly advanced ESL speakers. The two males and one female are native speakers of English, all enrolled in master's or Ph.D programs at the same university. They are referred to as E1, E2, and E3 in the paper. E1 and E3 are male and E2 is female. All of the participants were teaching first-year composition in the semester when the study was conducted. The ethnicity of the NNS participants was controlled to reduce the complexity of influence from L1 both linguistically and culturally. All NNSs are female due to the fact there was no male native Chinese ITA in the same program. The students in the study are all native speakers of English, enrolled in the first-year composition courses, ENGL101 and ENGL102 at the time of the study.

All these graduate associates of teaching received the same kind of training. They had taken or were taking a mandatory course offered by the Writing Program, to handle the instruction or practices in teaching composition classes. The class activities include seminars, lectures, and some in-depth studies to help the instructors construct their syllabus, design lesson plans, and deal with problems in their teaching.

Setting

First-year composition is a required course for all undergraduates in this university to prepare students with academic writing skills. The process-oriented approach is adopted in the writing program characterized with prewriting, drafting, evaluating, getting external feedback and revising. Evaluating and getting external feedback include peer review and teacher feedback. Peer review is often held in the classroom, while teacher feedback is usually provided in two ways. One way is to provide written feedback on students' drafts and the other way is to provide oral feedback in teacher-student conferences which could be an individual conference, with the instructor talking with the students one on one, or a group conference, with the instructor talking with a group of students. The group conference might incorporate both peer review and teacher feedback. Usually, one student introduces his/her draft, then other students comment on it, and finally the instructor provides comments. In either form of the conferences, the instructor comments on the students' drafts and offers suggestions on how the students could revise his/her paper for the final version.

Data collection

We audiotaped the conferences between these participating instructors and their students for the second paper in the Fall, 2006 semester. Each instructor was recorded for about one hour and these verbal interactions with the students were transcribed with the focus on the segment where suggestions were provided. Greetings at the beginning, long silence (when the instructor was reading drafts or students were writing), and reading aloud activities were excluded from the data. The purpose of the study was to investigate the instructor's use of suggestions, at the current stage, only the instructor's speech was transcribed.

Follow-up interviews were conducted with the Chinese-speaking instructors individually to find out their perceptions on direct/indirect ways of providing suggestions, the role of teacher and students in the conference, and the differences between American and Chinese teaching practices.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed in two steps. First, the instances of suggestions were identified, counted, and classified according to different syntactic structures for each participating instructor. Then, the suggestions were grouped into direct and indirect suggestions.

As seen in the literature section, suggestions could take a variety of forms. Even a hint could be suggestion, depending on the right context. They can be direct or indirect, hinted or hedged. In the present study, we mainly focus on direct and indirect suggestions. Banerjee and Carrell (1987) defined direct suggestions as those including the desired action and indirect suggestions as those not including the desired action. In order to be consistent and comprehensive, we first read through all the transcripts and generated a list of possible structures for making suggestions on our own, then compared our findings until assent was reached. The target structures were classified into eight categories: modals and semi-modals, performatives, pseudo cleft structures, imperatives, want-structure; indirect suggestion such as wh-questions, conditionals, yes-no questions. We borrowed Jiang's classification (2006, p.42) and added the want-structure as direct speech as an additional category. We also differentiated modals with direct addressee "you" as the agent from modals with agents other than the direct addressee "you" because the former structure is more direct and imposing than the latter. Examples are listed below (all examples are taken from the current study):

1) Modals and semi-modals with you

You have to show me why.
You don't have to use all of them.
You need to proofread.
You can check "Rules for Writers" for this.
You could set up your paper in this way.
You may just focus on several areas you mentioned.
You might talk about…not just talk about facts.

2) Modals with agents other than you:

We have to explain why "learn" is the focus.
This should be elaborated.
The thesis should match with what you talk about in body paragraphs.

3) Wh-questions

Why don't you come up with some more concrete examples?

4) Conditionals

If you want to try to look them up, you can also see if they have it in print in our library.
(If I were you,) I would like to take this idea and put it up here…talk about… then we can talk about…

5) Performatives

So what I would suggest here is take a close look at what … is.
So my suggestion here is back at the question might work well with the conclusion.

6) Pseudo cleft structures

I think what you want to say is …
What you really need to focus is to explain the problem, identify the problem that writing in English brings to the literature.
What I am saying here is that we can use… if it has to do…

7) Yes-no questions

Do you think that could be like an audience type of thing?

8) Imperatives

Try to convey that kind of feeling in you essay.
Focus on one word in this quote.
You put it down in your own words.

9) Want-structures

I want you to indicate what problem they bring.
You want to have a paragraph just talking about that poem.

(Here it might be better to put direct and indirect suggestions clearly, than the brief footnote, since that is the base for the grouping of the data)

These structures are further grouped into two categories:

1. Direct suggestions
   - Modals with you
   - Performatives
   - Pseudo cleft structures
   - Imperatives
   - Want-structure
2. Indirect suggestions
   - Modals with agents other than you
   - Wh-questions
   - Conditionals
   - Yes-no questions

RESULTS

Although the length of the transcription of each subject is almost the same, the amount of talking and the number of suggestions vary greatly individually. Table 1 lists the number of suggestions found in each participating instructor in the conferences.

Table 1. Amount of the Speech and Suggestions for Individual Instructor

Participant	Total words	Total number of sentences	Total number of suggestions	Percentage of total number of sentences with suggestions
C1	387	28	11	39.3%
C2	643	44	22	50%
C3	1020	77	22	28.6%
E1	530	65	23	35.4%
E2	365	40	9	22.5%
E3	735	50	22	44%
Chinese group (Average)	683.3	49.7	18.3	36.9%
American grp (Average)	543.3	51.7	18	34.8%

Here we can see that C3 talked more than all other participants and that C1 and E2 talked less than other participants. All participants made about the same number of suggestions except for C1 and E2. The average amount of speech and suggestions according to the language group does not differ greatly.

The suggestions made by each participant were then classified into different categories to reveal their preferred syntactic structures for suggestions. Table 2 lists the number and percentage of different syntactic structures used in the Chinese participants' suggestions. Table 3 lists the same information for the American participants.

Table 2. Syntactic Structures of Chinese Participants' Suggestions

Syntactic structures	Frequency			
	C1 (11 total)	C2 (22 total)	C3 (22 total)	Total (55)
All modals	7 (63.6%)	15 (68.2%)	10 (45.5%)	32 (58.2%)
Modals with other agents	0 (0%)	2 (9.1%)	0 (0%)	2 (3.6%)
You have to	1 (9.1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.8%)

You need to	2 (18.2%)	10 (45.5%)	0 (0%)	12 (21.8%)
You can/could	2 (18.2%)	2 (9.1%)	7 (31.8%)	11 (20%)
You might/may	2 (18.2%)	1 (4.5%)	3 (13.6%)	6 (10.9%)
Wh-questions	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (4.5%)	1 (1.8%)
Conditionals	1 (9.1%)	4 (18.2%)	5 (22.7%)	10 (18.2%)
Performatives	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Pseudo clefts	1 (9.1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.8%)
Yes-no questions	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (4.5%)	1 (1.8%)
Imperatives	0 (0%)	2 (9.1%)	5 (22.7%)	7 (12.7%)
Want-structure	2 (18.2%)	1 (4.5%)	0 (0%)	3 (5.5%)

Table 3. Syntactic Structures of American Participants' Suggestions

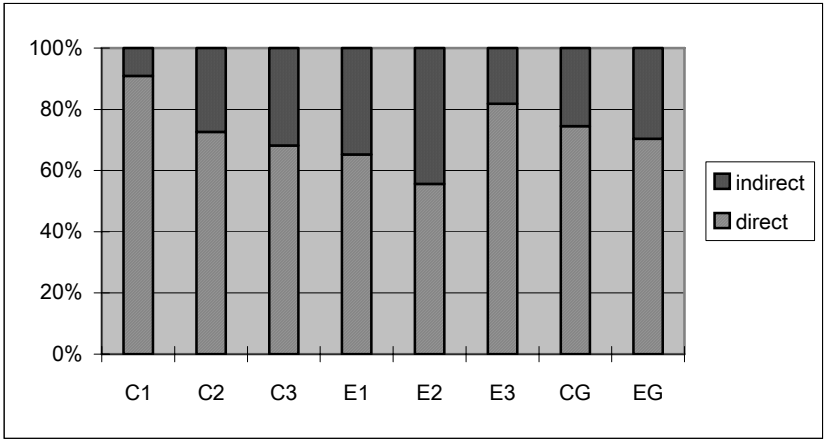
Syntactic structures	Frequency			
	E1 (23 total)	E2 (9 total)	E3 (22 total)	Total (54)
All modals	10 (43.5%)	6 (66.7%)	10 (45.5%)	26 (48.1%)
Modals with other agents	3 (13%)	3 (33.3%)	0 (0%)	6 (11.1%)
You have to	0 (0%)	3 (33.3%)	1 (4.5%)	4(7.4%)
You need to	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (4.5%)	1 (1.9%)
You can/could	4 (17.4%)	0 (0%)	7 (31.8%)	11 (20.4%)
You might/may	3 (13%)	0 (0%)	1 (4.5%)	4 (7.4%)
Wh-questions	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Conditionals	5 (21.7%)	1 (11.1%)	3 (13.6%)	9 (16.7%)
Performatives	3 (13%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (5.6%)
Pseudo clefts	2 (8.7%)	1 (11.1%)	0 (0%)	3 (5.6%)
Yes-no questions	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (4.5%)	1 (1.9%)
Imperatives	3 (13%)	1 (11.1%)	6 (27.3%)	10 (18.5%)
Want-structure	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (9.1%)	2 (3.7%)

Tables 2 and 3 show that both groups prefer to use modals as a way to offer suggestions. Chinese group (58.2%) used a little more modals than the American group (48.1%). The next most favorite structure was conditionals for the Chinese group (18.2%), and imperatives for the American group (18.5%). For both groups, the least used structures in suggestions were wh-questions, performatives, psudo-clefts, yes-no questions, and want-structure. One or two participants in both groups used some of these structures, but the total number of instances is too small for any meaningful comparison.

Among modals, both groups preferred "you can/could". Although the percentage of "you need to" (21.8%) is higher than that of "you can/could" (20%) for the Chinese group, it does not mean that all the participants in Chinese group preferred "you need to" to "you can/could". The high percentage of "you need to" is caused by the high frequency of this structure

by one subject (C2). Subject C3 did not use the structure at all. The next most frequent modal structure is "You may/might" (10.9%) for the Chinese group, and "modals with other agents" for the American group (11.1%).

Table 4. Percentage of Direct/Indirect Suggestions



Note: CG refers to the Chinese participants and EG refers to the English participants.

Table 4 shows the proportion of direct and indirect suggestions offered by all participants. We can see that all participants provided more direct suggestions than indirect suggestions and the Chinese group provided slightly more direct suggestions and fewer indirect suggestions than the American group.

To explain why more direct suggestions were used by these participants, we interviewed the three participating Chinese instructors after we analyzed the verbal data. We first wanted to examine whether the difference between a more direct and imposing suggestion such as "you should" and a less imposing one such as "you might" is known to them. If such a difference remains unknown to them, though we highly doubt that, it might explain their unconscious choice of the direct speech act. If they clearly realize the different impacts, then what are their rationales of providing suggestions in a more direct way to the students. When asked how they view "you might" and "you should" as ways of providing suggestions, C1 took "might" an optional choice and "should" an obligation. But for C2 and C3, these two forms made no difference in terms of their follow-up movement. Their decision of whether to follow the suggestion depends on whether they agree with the suggestion or not. Thus, it seems that the difference is clear to them, but they have more agency. So we went on to ask them to reflect upon their own ways of giving suggestions. C1 and C2 reported they tended to express suggestions explicitly and directly to students so that students could take it seriously as the suggestion they need to follow. Such a choice was based on their previous encounters with the American students where their

suggestions were not followed. C2 explained that she used more moderate suggestions such as "you might think about adding…". However, she found out that students were not taking her suggestion in the follow-up revision. So she decided to make her suggestion strong and clear. This might explain why they tend to produce slightly more direct suggestions. C3, in contrast, expressed concern for students' face in providing suggestions to students' writings and she is the one who chose more variety of syntactic structures and used "I would change this idea" strategy. Meanwhile, C3 is also the one with the longest teaching experience of the three Chinese. Though all of them felt that to make the best use of the conference times, teachers are expected to provide more negative comments than positive ones they differed in the degree of the directness in their suggestions. C2 indicated the time issue as an important factor why she provided more negative feedback and made her suggestions more direct to the students.

So far, it seems that the institutional role and the expectation they have about the specific educational conferences determined more direct suggestions provided. However, could this way of providing suggestion be influenced from the Chinese educational practice where teachers tend to provide suggestions in a more direct way? Though the Chinese culture is generally regarded as being more polite, indirect, we feel that when the social rank between interlocutors is clearly marked, the higher-rank one tends to provide suggestions in a very direct way, sometimes rude to the English speakers. So we proceeded to ask them how they thought about the different educational practices in China and in US. All of them agreed that students in China show more respect to teachers and that teachers are more direct in providing suggestions. They thought that the teacher-student relationship in U.S. is more equal and that students have more autonomy. "They do not always follow your instructions", expressed one of the participants. Thus, perhaps due to the fact that all these participants grew up and were educated in the Chinese setting, they are used to the fact that students should follow teachers' suggestions. When this is not happening, they tend to switch to the more direct suggestion strategies. We wondered whether the power and authority issue was involved behind such a pragmatic choice. Finally, when asked whether they used direct suggestions as a way of gaining power in front of the students, only C1 confirmed that as her deliberate choice. She explained that native-speaking instructors have more power than non-native speaking ones. Due to some previous unhappy encounters with the students, she decided to use possible means to set up her authority as a teacher. It is often through the real writing and the comments provided explicitly by ITAs that students realized that these ITAs have more disciplinary knowledge and they are the ones who can really help them improve their writings. C2 verbally denied authority as a factor in her choice, but her answer to the previous question of why more direct suggestions are provided clearly indicated that she felt that being a teacher, her suggestions are valid and students should listen to her. When previously her suggestions were not followed, she decided to use the more explicit suggestive forms instead. Thus, the assuming power issue is

clearly implied in her answer. C3 also denied using direct suggestions s a way to gain power. She said "I am an instructor and whatever I say, however I say it, students should consider that as valid suggestions". It seems that she is the most confident one about her power and authority as a teacher among the three ITAs.

DISCUSSION

Suggestions or advice-giving is a complicated speech act. The choice of suggestion forms varies with different power relationships, distance between speakers, and the settings. Similar to academic advising sessions, the teacher-student conference can be regarded as "an unequal status encounter" (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1996, p.171). In the teacher-student conference setting, the teacher, as a higher status interlocutor, may serve as an authority figure in the suggestion. Along with the unequal power relationship, there is a distance between the teacher and student in this professional setting. With a desire to improve their essays, the students anticipate suggestions from the teacher in the conferences. Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed a linear relationship between social power and distance and the degree of imposition of an FTA. This relationship indicates that suggestions provided by an authority may threaten both positive face and negative face of the students who hold a lower status in this encounter. Suggestions provided in the conferences may threaten students' positive face as they entail some negative evaluation of the students' drafts. Students may feel that their efforts involved in the drafts are not appreciated by the teacher. Suggestions can also threaten students' negative face as they imply that the students should take actions entailed in the suggestion. Thus, teachers in the conferences face a dilemma: they must make suggestions, but they must also maintain students' face so that students will be confident in their own writing.

The results of the study indicate that the Chinese group and the American group produced roughly the same amount of suggestion in the conference, though there are individual differences in terms of the number of suggestions offered. This conforms to the setting of the conference. Conferences are important activities in process-oriented composition classes and suggestions are expected from the instructor so that the students can revise their drafts based on the instructor's comments. This institutional event requirement defined that there will be more suggestions provided by instructors, despite their first language background.

When examining the preferred structures of suggestions, we can find both groups prefer modals as the primary suggestion form, as a structure to clearly direct what can be done, but the American group is definitely more strategic in providing their feedbacks. Among the modals, "you can/could" was preferred over other structures. "You should" and "You have to" were seldom used as they express strong obligation and threaten the negative face of the students. One Chinese subject C2 used "You need to" more frequently than other modals. "You may/might" was used less frequently by both Chinese and

English group, probably because it entails an option to the students (students could choose not to do that) more than the "you can/could" structure. Among the modal structures, American participants chose more modals with agents other than "you" than Chinese participants. Instead of saying "you should", they said "there should be a couple of sentences talking about how they would do this", "we have to explain why 'learn' is the focus of the sentence." By using other agents or passive forms, the speaker switched the focus away from the hearer, thus saving the hearer's face. The use of there-be structure, in the agent-less sense, unloads the writers' responsibility of not presenting sufficient or clear information in their own writings. The use of "we" also unloads the pressure from the student writer to create cohort between the instructor and the student that they are working together to improve the writing. The suggestions "This could be reworded" and "You could reword this" both convey the same meaning, but the former expresses it in a softer tone, again by removing the agent from the student writer to the writing. These strategies are more tactful and less imposing in terms of their impact. This conforms with Banerjee and Carrell's (1987) findings that native speakers were more tactful than non-native speakers in making suggestions to reduce the face-threatening impact.

The Chinese group's preference of using "must, need to" leaves a general impression that they want to be clear and absolute of what the students need to work on to improve their drafts, but at the same time, makes them more imposing. Such a choice contributes to the fact that they used slightly more direct suggestions and less indirect suggestions than NSs, as revealed from the data in Figure 4. This might relate to how they perceive the effect of direct and indirect suggestion on their own students. Austin (1962) divided speech act into locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. A perlocutionary act refers to the impact, the effect, intended or not, on the addressee from a speaker's utterance (Austin, 1962). The perlocutionary act of a direct suggestion would be "do it as you are told", but the perlocutionary act of an indirect suggestion is less clear. The students may choose not to change accordingly if they do not feel the need. To those Chinese NNS instructors, "must and need to" and other types of direct strategies chosen by them clearly indicate the necessity for the students to change a part of their essays that were deemed problematic. As indicated in the interview results, for them, the whole point of the teacher-student conference is to provide feedback and suggestions to the students on how to improve their essays. If certain areas of students' essays were regarded as in great need of improvement, they will choose to make it as clear as they can through the choice of direct suggestive strategies, as C1 and C2 verbalized. When these "must, need to" suggestions by the Chinese group were analyzed in context, we saw that those suggestions were more likely to be associated with basic elements of the essay, such as a lack of a thesis statement or topic sentences. The tendency of more direct suggestions provided by the Chinese-speaking instructors could be partly attributed to the educational practices in China, since all three participants claimed that Chinese teachers are more direct in providing suggestions and all of them received their education in China for a long time. When their suggestions are

not followed, they might purposely switch to the more direct strategies for the belief that students need to follow teacher suggestions.

One of the Chinese participants (C2) sounded more assertive by using many "you need to" in giving suggestions. This can be regarded as a sign of efforts to assume power in the conference. C2 was in her first year of teaching English composition and she had never taught in America before. In the interview, she expressed frustrations when facing students and she expected students to follow her suggestions. The reliance of "need to" could be taken as her struggle of gaining power, authority and her positive face in front of the students. Compared with C2, C3 used more "you can/could", conditionals, and imperatives as forms of suggestions. This could be explained by her increased confidence in giving suggestions over three years' experience in teaching composition in the same program. When transcribing the conferences, we felt that she sounded the most confident among the three Chinese participants without heavily relying on direct forms of suggestions (her percentage of direct suggestions was the lowest among the three Chinese participants). She also expressed this confidence in her interview. Besides, she is the only one among the three Chinese participants who expressed concern for students' face. C1 was in her second year in teaching English composition. She did not make many suggestions as she was holding a group conference. She used "you need to", "you can/could", "you might/may", and want-structures equally frequently in her conference. Among the 11 suggestions she produced, two of them were in want-structures. For example, "I want you to indicate what problem they bring." Want-structures express very strong obligation and they can be more assertive than imperatives. One American instructor, E2, also used this structure twice, but the agent was "you" instead of "I'. For example, "You want to have a paragraph just talk about one poem, its theme…" Using "you" as the agent in want-structures sounds much less assertive than using "I" as the agent as it sets an option for the hearer. "I want you to do something" expresses a strong request and gives the hearer no other options. The use of "I want you to do something" can be accounted by C3's own explanation in the interview. She thought students were not following her suggestions, so she turned to more direct way to gain power and authority. As nonnative speakers of English with less teaching experience, C1 and C2 did not realize the effect of the suggestions on students' face and just tried to fulfill the general goal of the conference – provide comments and suggestions so that students can improve their drafts. Making suggestions in the structures of "you need to" and want-structures sometimes sounded very assertive, directly requiring students to make the specific revisions. This may harm students' face even if the instructors did not mean to. Without realizing these, C1 and C2 view suggestions as beneficial to students. As indicated in their interviews, they provided the suggestion directly and explicitly for the students' concern. This different perception of suggestions from that of the target culture may lead to inappropriate realization (Hinkel, 1994).

CONCLUSION

This preliminary study investigated the suggestions offered by native/nonnative writing instructors in teacher-student conferences. With the small number of participants and great individual variety, the results did not reveal any significant difference in the choice of suggestion forms between the NS group and NNS group. This could be due to the high language proficiency of the non-native instructors and the same training all the participants received and the institutional expectation of conferences. Both groups preferred modals to express suggestions to students. American instructors used more imperatives while Chinese instructors used more conditionals, which could reflect their power status in the conference. Overall, both groups of participants tended to make suggestions directly and to convey their intention to the students. At the same time, these instructors tried to avoid assertiveness in order to save students' face and maintain students' confidence in their writing. Some nonnative instructors relied heavily on one structure of suggestion, which sounded very assertive. This shows the lack of concern of students' face in the conference and it may arouse students' frustration and affect the teacher-student relationship. This phenomenon warrants some attention in teacher training. Some discussion on how to provide suggestions to students' drafts appropriately would be necessary in teacher training, especially for beginning nonnative-speaking instructors.

Unlike previous studies on pragmatic choices made by NNSs which present a clear-cut picture, we did not find a clear-cut difference between the suggestions provided by NS and NNS instructors. The reason could be that our participants are more advanced in their linguistic proficiency level than those in Bardovi-Harlig and Hinkel studies. Follow-up interviews with students would reveal their perception of the suggestions provided by the instructors, and further research can be conducted with more participants in order to improve the reliability of the findings.

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