NEGATIVE PRAGMATIC TRANSFER: THE CASE OF ADVICE

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Abstract. Negative pragmatic transfer is often regarded as one of the causes of intercultural misunderstanding. The present study aims to investigate cases of negative pragmatic transfer in advice-giving. Thirty EFL students whose mother tongue was Romanian completed a Discourse Completion Test containing six situations which required advice-giving. The results showed that EFL learners tend to transfer the cultural norms of speaking from their mother tongue into English. Since this is highly likely to lead to breakdowns in communication, more attention should be paid to developing EFL learners' pragmatic competence.

Key words: *advice-giving, cultural norms, pragmatic competence, pragmatic transfer, negative pragmatic transfer.*

At present language educators emphasize that having good linguistic competence is not enough in order to communicate successfully in a foreign language. Effective communication requires more than just linguistic competence. It is true, having good pronunciation skills, mastering grammar and possessing a rich vocabulary is really important in language production. However, social encounters between speakers of English as a foreign language and native speakers of English show that communication between the two parties sometimes fails even in cases when the former have a good linguistic competence. One of the reasons may be that EFL speakers do not always use language appropriately, i.e. they pay little attention to context and to the socio-cultural norms characteristic of English. Foreign language learners tend to transfer the socio-cultural norms of their native language when they speak a foreign language. This often leads to misunderstanding in communication. In order to avoid

miscommunication caused by cultural differences, it is important to know what is appropriate and what is not appropriate in given contexts. Therefore, developing pragmatic competence is becoming increasingly important in TEFL.

Pragmatic competence can be defined as 'the ability to use language appropriately in a social context' (Taguchi, 2009, p.1). According to Leech (1983), pragmatic competence involves two knowledge dimensions: pragmalinguistics (i.e. knowledge and ability to use appropriate linguistic forms needed to convey intended meanings) and sociopragmatics (i.e. the broader knowledge of social rules, social norms, and appropriateness and politeness necessary in a social context).

To be pragmatically competent, learners need to have both types of knowledge. They need to have a range of linguistic forms (e.g. grammar and lexis) at their disposal to perform language functions (e.g., greeting, requesting). At the same time, they need to understand sociocultural norms and rules that govern the usage of these forms (e.g. how greeting a boss is different from greeting a friend). They should be able to evaluate contextual information, select appropriate linguistic resources, and use them efficiently in real-time interactions. For instance, when learners want to make a request, they need to know what linguistic forms are available to perform this function. They also need to assess the nature and size of the request (are they asking for 5 euros or for 100 euros?) and to whom it is directed (are they asking a friend or an acquaintance?), as well as its likely outcomes.

Learning pragmatics is difficult because of this combination of linguistic knowledge and sociocultural sensitivity required for successful communication. In other words, 'acquisition of pragmatic competence entails gaining knowledge of language-specific linguistic and non-linguistic behaviors, and sociocultural norms and conventions behind the behaviors' (Taguchi 2009, p.5).

Although speech acts may be considered universal in that they exist in all languages, their linguistic manifestation is different as are the cultural norms underlying their usage. In other words, there are differences at the linguistic level and differences in using speech acts because of divergent cultural norms.

Intercultural communication may be rather challenging for foreign language learners (FLL) despite the high level of their proficiency. In communication with native speakers of English, even learners who have a good command of the language (good pronunciation, accurate grammar, rich vocabulary) may get into communication breakdowns.

The reason goes beyond the language system. As Ishihara and Cohen (2010) explain, foreign language learners' 'pragmatic behaviour does not always follow expected patterns' (p. 75). What happens is that EFL learners transfer the cultural norms of speaking from their mother tongue into English. When these norms differ, we are likely to witness an inappropriate use of English, this phenomenon being known as 'pragmatic transfer'.

Developing the pragmalinguistic dimension seems to be easier to deal with in the EFL classroom. What is much more difficult for non-native English language teachers is to make learners aware of the cultural norms regarding the usage of speech acts. These norms cannot be found in textbooks. When EFL learners do not know these norms, they follow the norms characteristic of their own culture. If the norms in the two cultures are different, this may result in negative pragmatic transfer, which leads to misunderstanding and even failure in intercultural communication.

Characteristics of the speech act of advice in English and Romanian

Following Wardhaugh (1985) and Tsui (1994), Hinkel (1997) explains that in English, the giving of advice is a complex speech act that should be performed with caution when the speaker is reasonably certain that the hearer is likely to do what is being advised, that all advice must be hedged and never given explicitly to avoid offending the hearer, and that the speaker is presupposed to have the right or the authority to give advice (p.5).

One cultural value that influences the linguistic expression of directive speech acts in English such as requests, suggestions, advice, invitations is what Wierzbicka (1991) calls 'privacy' – a tradition 'which places special emphasis on the rights and the autonomy of every individual, which abhors interference in other people's affairs, which respects everyone's privacy' (p. 30). This explains why English has a great number of indirect ways to express requests, suggestions, advice, as if protecting every individual's right to freedom of action. The value of privacy explains why in the Anglo culture giving advice, especially unsolicited advice, can be perceived as intrusive and overbearing. For these reasons, in English advice would normally be formulated tentatively:

If I were you, I would tell him the truth.
Why don't you tell him the truth? I think it would be best.

Why not tell him the truth? I think that might be best.
Maybe you ought to tell him the truth?
Do you think it might be a good idea to tell him the truth?
It might be a good idea to tell him the truth.
You could consider telling him the truth.
Have you thought about telling him the truth?
Perhaps you could tell him the truth.
You might try telling him the truth.

It is also worth noting that the English verb *advise* is seldom used performatively in ordinary speech. The phrase *I advise you* sounds very unfriendly and formal.

Meanwhile, the high level of solidarity characteristic of Romanian society explains why people behave in a more direct way, being less formal and vigilant in guarding other people's personal space. Hence, advice will typically be offered in the form of an imperative or by using the performative *I advise you (Te sfătui să ...),* which sounds perfectly colloquial and is frequently heard in everyday conversations.

The study Research questions

We believe that the differences between expressing advice in English and Romanian may lead to a negative pragmatic transfer when EFL learners offer advice in English.

In the present study we aim at investigating EFL learners' production of advice. The following research questions are addressed:

1. What are the differences, if any, between the linguistic expressions of advice used by EFL learners and those characteristic of the Anglo culture?
2. What kind of transfer (positive or negative) can be noticed when EFL learners use the speech act of advice?

Methodology

Subjects

Thirty students of English as a foreign language participated in the study. They were 1st and 2nd year students majoring in English, enrolled at Alecu Russo Balti State University. Their level of English language proficiency ranged between A2-B1. Their native language was Romanian.

Instrument

Data for analysis were collected with the help of an open-ended Discourse Completion Test (DCT) (See the Annex). The DCT contained six situations which required the production of the speech act of advice. Three situations involved an interaction between a student and a teacher and the other three were interactions between two students who knew each other quite well. Students were asked to write what they would say in each of these situations. They were also given the option to say nothing, if they considered it appropriate.

Data coding

In coding the data, we followed Flor's (2003) suggested typology of advising. Thus, advice acts were distributed into indirect, conventionally indirect and direct strategies.

Type	Strategy	Structure
Indirect	Hints	You want to pass, don't you?
Conventionally indirect	Conditional	If I were you, …
	Probability	It might be better for you to …
	Specific formulae	Why don't you …? Isn't it better for you to …?
Direct	Imperative	Be careful! / Don't worry!
	Declarative	You should … You ought to … You'd better …
	Performative	I advise you to …

Results and discussion

The results of this study show differences between the linguistic expressions of advice used by EFL learners and those characteristic of the Anglo culture. In directive speech acts, the most polite forms are considered to be the conventionally indirect formulas (Leech 1983; Wierzbicka 1991). By using conventionally indirect formulas, speakers respect their interlocutor's privacy, i.e. their freedom of action. Hints, although indirect expressions, can sometimes be treated as less polite since they require more mental effort in order to be understood.

In the Anglo culture, as Hinkel (1997) points out, the giving of advice 'should be performed with caution', 'all advice must be hedged

and never given explicitly' (p.5) since this may offend the hearer by breaking their privacy, their right to do what they like without being told by other parties.

The responses to the DCT have shown that in two situations where the degree of power between the interlocutors was different (student – teacher) there was one respondent who wrote that they would not say anything in the given situations, explaining that 'the teacher knows what to do'. There was one similar response in one situation which involved the interaction between friends. The explanation that followed was 'perhaps N. does not need my advice'. Although very few, such responses show that some EFL learners think that their advice might not always be welcome and refrain from giving it. On the other hand, in all the situations there were responses which were other speech acts, not advice, and namely, help offers (48), suggestions (6), asking about health (5), warning (5) and encouragement (5). This fact emphasizes the value of solidarity, characteristic of Romanian culture, expressed through the desire to help, through worrying about the interlocutor's health, through encouraging the interlocutor and warning them against unpleasant things that may happen.

Since the aim of this study is to analyze the linguistic expressions used by EFL students to give advice, the analysis that follows will focus on this. The chart below illustrates the number of direct, conventionally indirect and indirect formulations of advice given as responses to the DCT per situation.

Chart 1. Results
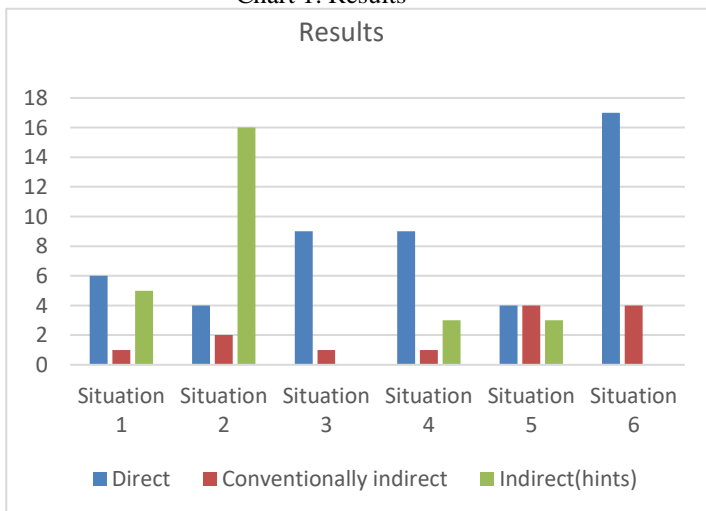
As can be seen, the direct expressions were used most often, even in the situations where the degree of power between the interlocutors was different (student – teacher) (Situations 1, 2, 3). The analysis of the direct expressions used by respondents shows that imperative sentences were used most often in conversations between friends (11 instances) and seldom in conversations between the teacher and the student (4) (See Table 1). This fact shows that students seem to be aware that the imperative sounds imposing especially when the degree of power between interlocutors is different. Declarative sentences with 'should' have a high frequency in both groups of situations (student – teacher: 9 and students – student: 12). Performative sentences
(I advise you to…) were used three times in student – teacher interactions only. This seems to be a transfer from students' native language.

Table 1. Direct expressions of advice

	Direct advice	Student – teacher interactions (Situations 1, 2, 3)	Student –student interactions (Situations 4, 5, 6)
	Imperative sentences	4	11
	Declaratives with 'You should'	9	12
	Declaratives with 'You need to', 'I don't recommend it', 'You have to', 'You must', 'You'd better'	3	7
	Performative (I advise you …)	3	-
	Total	**19**	**30**

Conventionally indirect advice had the lowest occurrence (see Chart 1). Students seem not to be aware of the expressions that may be used to give advice following the norms characteristic of the Anglo culture. The palette of such expressions is not very rich:

It would be better for you to go home because I see you don't feel very well; Why don't you go home? Maybe you will choose the easier one? I think it is better to choose another one which would be easier; Maybe you want to go to the healthcare worker?

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Students tried to hedge the advice with the help of *maybe*, *I think, I'm sorry*.

However, other types of hedges, such as *Do you think..., Have you thought about..., Perhaps* were not used. Another important thing is the use of the modals *might* and *could*. Students seem to be unaware that the past form of these modal verbs expresses tentativeness, thus making the advice less imposing as in *Perhaps you could tell him the truth* or *You might try telling him the truth*. Another structure which is appropriate for advice-giving in the Anglo culture, but which never occurred in the responses to the DCT of the present study is the conditional sentence *If I were you, I would ...*

Indirect advice in the form of hints occurred more frequently in the situations where where the degree of power between the interlocutors was different, i.e. in student-teacher interactions, and namely in Situation 2, in which the student was supposed to tell the teacher that they could find the book they needed at a lower price in another shop. Students' responses in this situation sounded like hints about this possibility. This shows that students seem to be aware that it is not appropriate to tell the teacher what to do, i.e. where to buy the book.

Conclusion

The results of the present study have revealed differences between the language of advice characteristic of the Anglo culture and the one used by EFL students. The differences refer to the degree of directness, to the expressions used to give advice as well as to hedging this speech act. The advice given by EFL students is often expressed directly, i.e. by means of imperative structures, of declarative sentences containing the verb 'should' and of performative sentences (I advise you …). Many advice-giving expressions characteristic of the Anglo culture were missing from students' responses, which shows that EFL teachers should pay more attention to language functions and how to express them in English. When students lack knowledge about the cultural norms of the target language, they tend to transfer the norms characteristic of their native culture.

In the present study the transfer seems to be negative. Direct advice and advice which lacks hedges is likely to sound imposing and rude. This may lead to breakdowns in communication.

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Annex

Discourse Completion Test

Several situations are described below. In the space provided, please write down what you would say in each situation. If you wouldn't say anything, please write down why you wouldn't say anything.

Please keep in mind the following information:
N. and you are students at the same faculty. You have similar interests and you participated in several extra-curricular activities together.
Mrs. X is a teacher at the Faculty of Philology, where you study. She is teaching you this semester.

1. You see Mrs. X working in the library very late in the evening. She looks tired. What would you say in this situation?
2. You and Mrs. X are in a bookshop. She is considering buying an expensive book. However, you think that another bookshop may sell the book at a lower price. What would you say in this situation?
3. You are having a class with Mrs. X. She looks ill and clearly does not feel very well. What would you say in this situation?

4. You see N. working in the library very late in the evening. N. looks tired. What would you say in this situation?
5. N. has to choose a course for the next academic year. You know that one of the courses is really difficult. What would you say in this situation?
6. N. looks ill and clearly does not feel very well. What would you say in this situation?