

Pragmatic Variations in Giving Advice in L2 by Malaysian Postgraduate Students: The Situational Effects

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Abstract

The present study attempted to describe the giving advice strategies utilized by Malaysian postgraduate students in confronting different situations. In addition, it examined the effects of the situational factors of social distance, power, and imposition on the students' choice of giving advice strategies. Another objective was to categorize the challenges students face in the production of giving advice in English. One hundred and ten Malaysian postgraduate students majoring in different fields voluntarily participated in this study. A Written Discourse Completion Task Questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were utilized for data collection procedure. The results of the questionnaire illustrated that the respondents tended to use more direct strategies to give advice. The first most frequently strategy used by the respondents was obligation strategy, 53.38%, mood derivable strategy with 30.08% as the second most frequently used strategy and performative as the third one, while no respondent used the hedged performative and want statement strategies in any of the situations. The respondents also opted out the same strategies almost with similar frequency in most of the situations. It means that the choice of strategies was not different in terms of the three situational variables of power, distance and imposition. In addition, the results of interviews showed that the challenges they face in the production of advice giving include expression, structure, culture, social values, first language, gender, age and educational background of the interlocutors. This study has some implications for second language acquisition research and intercultural communication.

Keywords: advice giving, Malaysian ESL students, second language pragmatics, situational effects

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the Problem

English as an International language is commonly understood as a shared channel that connects people from diverse socio-cultural background. In fact, it is an international language in the globalised and internationalized world of the 21st century which the development of intercultural awareness and intercultural communication skills, especially in multicultural and multilingual environments is of utmost importance. More importantly, an individual should have an ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with diverse users of English from diverse cultural backgrounds, for local as well as international purposes due to the globalization and multiculturalism.

Therefore, effective and appropriate intercultural communication necessitates not only knowledge of linguistic competence but also knowledge of pragmatic competence as the most important component of intercultural communicative competence which is regarded as one of the complexities of language competence (Farashaiyan & Tan, 2012; Jung, 2013). Being pragmatically competent means being able to comprehend and produce a communicative act which often includes one's knowledge about the social distance, social status between the interlocutors involved, the cultural knowledge such as politeness, and the explicit and implicit linguistic knowledge (Kasper, 1997). Pragmatic awareness is also defined as "conscious, reflective, explicit knowledge about pragmatics", that is, "knowledge of those rules and conventions underlying appropriate language use in particular communication situations and on the part of members of specific speech community" (Alcon & Safont,

2008, p. 193). In addition, pragmatic competence is specifically defined by Koike (1989, p. 279) as “the speaker’s knowledge and use of rules of appropriateness and politeness which dictate the way the speaker will understand and formulate speech acts in a context”. In other words, pragmatic competence is defined as the knowledge of communicative action or speech acts, how to perform it, and the ability to utilize the language in proper ways according to the context or contextual factors (Kasper, 1997). Austin (1962, p. 65) defined speech acts or communicative actions as “acts which are performed by utterances such as giving order, making promises, complaining, requesting, apologizing and so on. When we utter a sentence or a phrase, we are performing an act to which we expect our listeners to react with verbal or nonverbal behavior”.

Among a variety of speech acts, giving advice plays an important role in people’s daily life since it has fruitful impacts on both intra and interpersonal relationships. Referring to interpersonal effects, individuals can consider advice giving as a discourse event from which they can improve their behavior or performance or even they can do things better. With regard to intrapersonal aspect, an individual can be given an opportunity to learn more about himself or herself or the people they are communicating with by receiving feedback or advice from others. Since no one would like to be told what to do and how to act, advice giving can be a complicated act. Advice can serve as an illuminating source of information on the socio-cultural values of a speech community and provide important insights into the social norms that are embedded in cultures.

The speech act of giving advice has not yet been studied sufficiently in comparison with other speech acts such as refusals, apologies, and requests (Bordería-García, 2006; Chun, 2009). Accordingly, very few definitions of what advice giving entails are available. For example, Searle (1969) stated that advice giving is a type of speech act which the speaker believes will benefit the hearer. He added that by advice giving, the speaker is doing the hearer a favour because it is not clear to both of them that the hearer will do the act without the advice being given. Searle distinguished between advice and request as advising is more like telling on what is the best for his/her rather than what s/he should do. Another definition was given by Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 65) who described advice giving as an “intrinsically face threatening act where the speaker indicates that s/he does not mean to avoid obstructing the hearer’s freedom of action”. Nevertheless, Brown and Levinson observe that the degree to which advice is a face-threatening act differs among cultures based on several factors such as situational factors (social status and social distance between the interlocutors), gender, complexity of situations, and the politeness strategies considered appropriate in a particular culture. This study focuses on situational factors to investigate the pragmatic awareness of Malaysian postgraduate ESL students in terms of the advice speech acts’ realizations.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The immersion of learners in a particular context affects their opportunities to have contact with the target language (Kasper, 2001; Kasper & Roever, 2005). In second language contexts, learners are exposed to the target language outside the classroom and they have more chances to utilize it for their real-life goals. In addition, they often have high opportunities for interaction outside the classroom context and also high chances to be engaged in communicative situations with other students from different socio-cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the English language plays an important role in intercultural interactions as a communication tool in these contexts which necessitates the issue of proper and appropriate intercultural understanding of speech or more importantly, meaning in interaction between English users (Al-Zubeiry, 2013; Rashidi & Ramezani, 2013). However, there often exist some difficulties among non-native speakers in intercultural communication since a speaker may understand the speech of others based on his/her own native language systems, cultural expectations, values and norms during cross-cultural communication. This may result in intercultural misunderstanding and even a total communication breakdown (Al-Zubeiry, 2013; Tina, Lotfi, & Salemi, 2013).

Therefore, one of the difficulties that non-native speakers encounter in the act of communication with other interlocutors from different socio-cultural backgrounds is intercultural misunderstanding (Rashidi & Ramezani, 2013). In this regard, pragmatic failure is claimed as the main reason of intercultural misunderstanding which is pertinent to the use of inappropriate speech (Farahian, 2012). Therefore, non-native speakers’ pragmatic competence as the key constituents of intercultural communicative competence should be developed to lessen intercultural misunderstandings and the resultant pragmatic failure. This can result in more effective and successful intercultural communication (Nguyen, 2011; Rafieyan et al., 2014). The fact that non-native speakers have continually encountered with the challenges to communicate in L2 and they have mostly failed in their intercultural interactions have inspired SLA researchers to explore the status of their pragmatic competence in both EFL and ESL contexts. More recently, the focus has been given to ESL contexts since less studies have been conducted in these contexts compared with EFL contexts. Therefore, this study aims to investigate Malaysian ESL students’ pragmatic knowledge as unstudied speech community.

1.3 Relevant Literature

In Searle's (1976) classification of illocutionary acts, advice acts are considered directives. In addition, Haverkate's (1984, cited in Martínez-Flor, 2003) distinguished between impositive and non-impositive exhortative speech acts. He put the advice under the latter group since the speaker's imposition is not as strong as in requests. Face-threatening nature of all directive speech acts is another characteristic underlying these acts. Brown and Levinson (1987, p.65) describe giving advice as "an intrinsically face threatening act, even where the speaker indicates that he or she does not intend to avoid impending the addressee's freedom of action".

In comparison with other speech acts such as request, apology and refusal which have been broadly studied, the speech act of advice giving has received little attention. In addition, the research literature in pragmatic performance has shown that the studies done (Borderia-Garcia, 2006; Chun, 2009; Al-Shabou et al., 2012) were mostly intercultural in nature and compared the pragmatic performance of native speakers with non-native. For example, Borderia-García (2006) investigated the cross-cultural variations in the production and perception of the advice giving between Spanish native speakers and English native speakers cross-culturally. The results of the study illustrated that native speakers of Spanish and the native English speakers did not perceive differently the appropriateness of non-conventionally indirect, conventionally indirect, and direct forms of advice. On the other hand, the findings of the study showed that the Spanish speakers showed a significant preference to give direct advices in the oral productions.

In another study, Chun (2009) compared the performance of Canadian English speakers and Korean speakers with regard to the speech act of giving advice. The findings of the study illustrated that Canadian speakers and Korean learners performed differently in terms of the social distance. The Korean speakers were more dependent on social distance compared to the Canadian speakers. They tended to give advice more frequently to peers and superiors in comparison with Canadian speakers.

In more recent study, Al-Shboul, Maros and Subakir (2014) investigated the perceptions of the appropriateness in advice giving in English between American English native speakers and Jordanian EFL students. The findings of the research illuminated that American English native speakers and Jordanian EFL students perceived the social distance similarly in the situations of peer acquaintance and instructor. On the other hand, they performed differently with regard to the types of advice they opted out as the appropriate choice.

By looking at the research that has been conducted in the area of speech act of advice, it is found that there has been little research done when it comes to the performance of non-native speakers of English. In other words, when comparing the extensive research conducted on other speech acts such as requests by speakers of other languages, it is clear that research on non-native speakers of English failed to fill the gap in pragmatic research within the area of giving advice. More research is needed on unexplored speech community as it can be extensively beneficial to the understanding of the culture of its speech community. The lack of knowledge of speech act realization patterns and strategies across cultures can lead to breakdowns in intercultural and inter-ethnic communication.

Moreover, there is no single cross sectional study that has looked at the specific speech act of giving advice by Malays in English. The present study steps further by advancing the research conducted on non-native speakers of English through its investigation of unstudied speech community, e.g. Malaysians. Moreover, there is a paucity of study to investigate both students' pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge. No research has so far been carried out to address and evaluate Malay ESL students' pragmatic knowledge at two levels of production and perception. As such, this study seeks to fill an existing gap in pragmatic research by evaluating Malay ESL university students' pragmatic knowledge (both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge) through the production of advice acts and the perceptions of the challenges they encounter in the production of the speech act. This study employed two theoretical models. Brown and Levinson (1987) politeness theory and Austin (1962) speech act theory provide a theoretical framework for the analysis of the Malay ESL students' pragmatic knowledge in this study. The main concept of speech act theory as speech act (giving advice) and politeness theory as contextual understanding of variables of social power, distance and imposition have been employed in this study. The aim is to find out whether students pay attention to the contextual variables when they perform the speech act of giving advice which is a face-threatening act.

1.4 Objectives of the Study and Research Questions

The present study is an investigation of Malay university students and how they perform the speech act of advice in English. It also examines the extent to which the situational factors affect the students' production. In addition, it identifies the challenges that students encounter in producing the speech act of giving advice. The study aims to answer three questions:

- 1) How do Malay postgraduate university students realize the speech act of giving advice in terms of frequency and typology?
- 2) To what extent do the social variables of social distance, social power, and imposition influence students' linguistic choices when giving advice in different situations?
- 3) What are the challenges Malay postgraduate students faced in performing the advice giving in different situations?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

One hundred and ten Malay ESL postgraduate students studying at three Malaysian public universities took part in this study. All the participants were master or Ph.D. full-time students of University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), University Putra Malaysia (UPM) and University of Malaya (UM). The English language was their second language. All of the learners were female since gender was not studied in this research as a variable and their age ranges between 25 to 50 years old. The rationale behind choosing postgraduate students is that they have higher proficiency in English and can understand the situations better.

2.2 Sampling Procedure

To select the required sample for the quantitative part of the study, the researcher conducted the convenient sampling. For the quantitative part of the study, the number of the sample size for the present study was 110 Malay postgraduate students as it is claimed for survey studies, the number of participants should be more than 100 (Dornyei, 2007). For the qualitative part, however, semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty five postgraduate students who answered the WDCT. As it is claimed by Dornyei (2007), the sample size can be between 6 to 10 participants for interview. In addition, as Creswell (2008) suggests, a researcher should accumulate as much data as possible to reach the point that a person considers the adequacy of the gathered data which no new data are not attained. As such, the researcher attempted to gather as much data as feasible to reach the saturation point.

2.3 Research Design

A mixed methods design was employed in this study. It is defined as a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods within a single research study (Dörnyei, 2007). The quantitative aspect of the study includes the evaluation of Malay postgraduate students' pragmatic knowledge through the production of the speech act of giving advice. To this end, the Written Discourse Completion Tasks (WDCT) was administered to the students in order to gauge their pragmatic knowledge. The qualitative part of the study, on the other hand, elaborates on the quantitative results. This was conducted through an interview with a group of students who voluntarily participated in the interview in order to find out what challenges they faced in the performance of the speech act.

2.4 Instruments

2.4.1 The Written Discourse Completion Task/Test (WDCT)

A Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) was the main elicitation instrument of the study and interviews were also conducted to complement the data. The original questionnaire was adapted from Mwinyelle (2005). To capture the reliability of the questionnaire in this study, 20 Malay postgraduate students were voluntarily chosen for the pilot testing. The inter-rater reliability estimate for the questionnaire was satisfactory at around 0.85% which is an acceptable index. For further evaluation of the reliability and validity, eight students were requested to participate in the semi-structured interview. After that, the tape-recorded interviews were transcribed by the interviewer. All of the participants stated that the questionnaire is reliable and fair for tapping the pragmatic knowledge of the students. The WDCT was also showed to the three professors whose expertise was the pragmatics field at UPM and UKM universities and they confirmed the tests' validity.

The WDCT was designed in a way that to elicit advice giving in verbal communication in the English language. A total number of 625 expressions of giving advice were collected since some students did not answer some situations and preferred not to give advice. In addition, some students produced other speech act such as suggestion. The giving advice WDCT includes eight situations to elicit the speech act of advice giving from the students. Participants were given a short description of the situation, which specified the setting, the familiarity and the social power between the participants. Then, they were asked to complete the situation by responding to the situations. The situations were in an open-ended format without a slot or prompt to guide the participants. These situations were reflected the three contextual variables of social distance, power, and rank of imposition. In terms of power relationships, the speaker may be in a lower or higher status than the hearer, and in some cases,

they can also be equal in status. With regard to social distance, the speaker and hearer may know each other or in some cases, they do not know each other. Regarding imposition, the task can be of high imposition or low imposition. The topics and variables are presented in the following table.

Table 1. Topics and situational variables of giving advice situations

Item	Topic	Variable Imposition	Variable Status	Variable Distance
1	Giving advice to friend's brother about the new university	+	-	-
2	Giving advice to a roommate about bad grades	-	=	-
3	Giving advice on clothes for a formal party to a friend	-	=	-
4	Giving advice to a friend on losing weight	+	=	-
5	Giving advice to a stranger on divorce	+	=	+
6	Giving advice to a stranger on leaving her car in the highway and getting to work fast	-	=	+
7	Giving advice to an employee about her wrong doings	+	+	+
8	Giving advice as a principal to an English teacher about the lab.	+	+	+

2.4.2 The Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted as another instrument to answer the third research question. Thirty five Malay students were interviewed. The interviewees were asked to comment on the challenges they encountered in the production and performance of giving advice in different situations. The interviewees were asked to take a few minutes to read their copy of completed questionnaire in order to familiarize themselves with the situations and their own responses again. Each interview lasted approximately 10 to 15 minutes.

2.5 Data Collection Procedure

The data required for the present study were collected from September to December during one semester of the academic year, 2015/2016 in Malaysia. The pragmatics tests (WDCTs) were administered to Malay postgraduate ESL students at three public universities, UM, UPM and UKM. The number of the participants was 110 students. This data collection was arranged at times that the researcher met a student in the faculty or the library and asked her to complete the questionnaire. They were also given their email address for the interview process. The participants were given thirty minutes time to provide the answers for the speech act studied. After administering the questionnaire to the students, thirty five of them voluntarily participated in the interview through the email correspondences. Each interview lasted approximately 10 to 15 minutes. The total interview time collected was therefore approximately 400 minutes. The interviews were carried out in quiet places in the library. Before each interview, the researcher briefly explained the purpose of the interview, the estimated amount of time the interview takes, as well as the use of a voice-recorder. The researcher also asked the participants the permission to have the interview audiotaped. All the interviews were recorded by a voice-recorder.

2.6 Data Analysis

The data accumulated through WDCT were analyzed and categorized according to the taxonomy in terms of the type and frequency of the semantic formulas or strategies used by students. So, the taxonomy of Blum-Kulka (1989) was used for the speech act of giving advice. The justification for the use of afore-mentioned taxonomy is that it has been recognized as the most comprehensive and appropriate speech act realization patterns. The data were analyzed by two raters (researchers themselves) and inter-rater-reliability was established through consensus ($r=.87$). The transcription of the interviews was done by the researchers. First, they listened o each interview and wrote the transcriptions. Then, they listened to each interview several times to write the missing parts. After transcribing all the interviews, a thematic analysis was conducted based on the analytical framework of Braun and Clare (2006). The presentation of the advice giving taxonomy is illustrated below.

Table 2. Taxonomy of giving advice: Blum-Kulka (1989)

Strategy	Description and examples
I. Direct Strategies	
1. Mood Derivable	The mood of the verb signals a command. Stop smoking. Break up with him. Take a taxi to your work place.
2. Performative	The illocutionary force is explicitly named. I am asking you to stop smoking. I am asking you to break up with him.
3. Hedged Performative	The naming of the illocutionary force is modified by hedging expressions. I would like to ask you to stop smoking.
4. Obligation Statement	An utterance that states the obligation of the hearer to carry out the act. You will have to stop smoking. You have to.....You must.....
5. Want Statement	An utterance that states the speaker's desire that the hearer carry out the act. I really wish you would stop smoking.
II. Indirect Strategies	
A. Conventionally Indirect Strategies	
6. Suggestory Formula	An utterance that contains a suggestion to do something. How about stopping smoking?
7. Preparatory Condition	An utterance that contains a reference to preparatory conditions. Could you stop smoking?
B. Non-conventionally Indirect Strategies	
8. Strong Hint	This type of utterance contains partial reference to an object or element needed for implementation of the act. You are seriously damaging your lungs and thus reducing your life span each time you smoke.
9. Mild Hint	An utterance that makes no reference to the advice proper but can be interpreted as advice by context. Be like the pope. (The pop doesn't smoke).

3. Results

3.1 The Results of the Questionnaire

In order to answer the first research question, the data were collected through the Written Discourse Completion Test/Tasks (WDCT). The researcher examined students' pragmatic knowledge through the production of the speech act of giving advice. It was aimed to evaluate students' knowledge in production of accurate and appropriate speech act strategies or linguistic forms. In so doing, they were given some situations to give advice and they had to write the answers to the situations based on what they would say verbally for each scenario. The tables below represent the descriptive results gained based on the percentage of the speech act' strategies in each

situation. Needless to say, the items of the questionnaire differ in terms of social distance, power and rank of imposition to tap students' awareness in using various strategies. Table 1 shows the results gained from the WDCT regarding giving advice strategies. Totally, 625 statements of advice giving were elicited from the students. Respondents' overall knowledge to give advice assessed through three different types of strategies namely: direct, conventional indirect and non-conventional indirect.

Table 3. Percentage of giving advice strategies across all situations

Situations	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Total
Strategies	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P
I. Direct	88.4	93.5	96.3	93.6	82.1	92.2	87.9	100	85.7
1. Mood Derivable	34.2	25.8	39.2	36.6	25	26.9	27.6	35.8	30
2. Performative	2.8	-	-	2.8	-	-	3.4	8.3	2.1
3. Hedged Performative	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
4. Obligation Statement	51.4	67.7	57.1	54.2	57.1	65.3	56.9	55.9	53.3
5. Want Statement	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
II. Indirect	11.6	6.5	3.7	6.4	25	7.8	12.1	-	14.3
A. Conventional									1.24
6. Suggestory Formula	-	-	-	-	-	4	3.4	-	0.84
7. Preparatory Condition	2.9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.4
B. Non-conventional									13
8. Strong Hint	5.8	3.3	3.7	3.6	14.3	-	5.3	-	9.7
9. Mild Hint	2.9	3.2	-	2.8	10.7	3.8	3.4	-	3.3
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

P= Percentage.

As shown in the above table, the students were given eight different situations to give advice. Moving from situation 1 to 8, the social distance, rank of imposition, and power vary as the respondent is supposed to take role in dialogues in which she gives advice to a best friend's brother, roommate, friend, best friend, recently married woman, stranger, lower rank colleague and students.

The results showed that 85.7% of the strategies employed by the participants belonged to the direct strategies, 13% to the conventional indirect and only 1.24% of the whole strategies belonged to the nonconventional indirect strategies. The results also indicated that the participants strongly favored direct strategies in all of the situations. In other words, the use of the three main strategy types (direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect) follows a similar trend across all the situations. As a whole, direct strategy occupies the first place and is opted out as the most frequently used strategy in all situations by the participants. Nonconventional indirect and conventional indirect strategies are the second and third strategies frequently opted out by the students.

The respondents, however, tended to use more direct strategies to give advice. The most frequent strategy used by the respondents was obligation strategy as it was not only used in all situations but also had the highest percentage, 53.38%. Respondents used mood derivable strategies for all of the situations with the total of 30.08% as the second most frequently used strategy and performative as the third one, while no respondent used the hedged performative and want statement strategies in any of the situations.

The respondents proved to be inept in usage of indirect strategies, either conventional or non-conventional. In the case of strong hint, 9.7% of the respondents could successfully use the strategy and only 3.3% of the respondents were able to give mild hint on what they meant. Respondents used less conventional indirect strategies in giving advice with the total of less than 1% in both use of suggestory formula with 0.84% and preparatory condition with 0.4%.

In answering the second research question, the findings of the participants' variation of advice giving strategies are illustrative that the respondents made use of the same strategies almost with similar frequency in most of the

situations. The participants were significantly more direct in most of the situations without paying much attention to the differences in situations in terms of three social variables. It means that the choice of strategies did not vary in terms of the three situational variables of power, distance and imposition. With regard to each situation, the first most opted out strategy was obligation statement and the second one was mood derivable. Therefore, the trend is the same in each situation. This finding suggests that learners did not notice the three situational factors underlying the choice of pragmalinguistic forms in producing the speech act of giving advice. In other words, they did not pay attention to whom they were supposed to give advice, the extent of imposition involved and how far or close they were to the hearer.

Therefore, it is inferred that the range and frequency of strategies in all of the situations and also in each situation do not differ to show much variations in the use of different strategies by students. As a result, learners' use of strategies was confined to obligation statements since this strategy was opted out by students more than other strategies. So, it can be said that they were not aware of different context and contextual factors of social power, distance and imposition to be considered by them in choosing more appropriate pragmalinguistic forms in different situations.

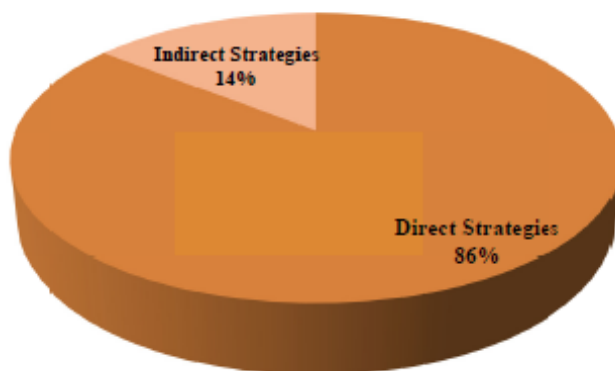


Figure 1. Giving advice strategies across all the situations

This pie chart shows the percentage of direct and indirect strategies in all the situations. As can be seen in the figure, direct strategies with 86% were used about six times more than indirect ones with 14%.

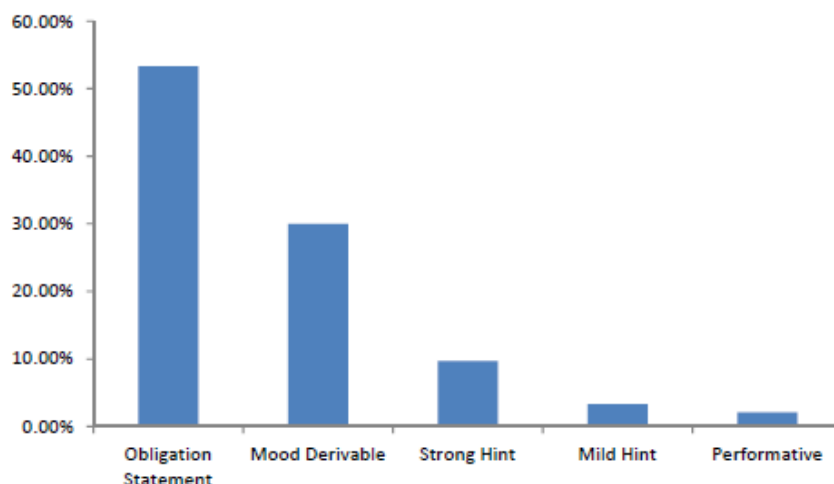


Figure 2. The most frequently used giving advice strategies in all situations

The above figure shows the giving advice strategies opted out in all situations from the most utilized one to the

least. As it can be seen, obligation statement, mood derivable, strong hint, mild hint and performative statements were opted out by the students respectively to give advice to the hearer in different situations.

3.2 The Results of Interview

In answering the third research question, thirty five Malay students were interviewed by the researcher. They were asked to give their comments about the challenges they faced in the performance of advice giving in different situations. The first question they were asked was in which situations they had more problems. Most interviewees (27 out of 30) declared that they had difficulties in situations with more social distance and unequal social status. In other words, they had problems in more formal situations than informal ones. About eight interviewees just mentioned that they had more problems in situations with equal status and low distance, informal situations. Then, the respondents' opinions were achieved about the challenges they faced in the production and perception of giving advice in different situations. Having analyzed the data generated from the interviews, the researcher came up with a number of categories that are described below.

Table 4. Students' perceptions of factors affecting their production of giving advice in different situations

Factors	N	Percentage
Appropriate expression	12	34
Difficult structure	8	23
Cultural diversity	5	13
Social norms	2	6
Mother language (L1)	2	6
Gender	2	6
Age	2	6
Educational background	2	6
Total	35	100

As can be seen in the above table, most of the interviewees (12 out of 35, 34%) mentioned that they have problems in using the appropriate expression. They stated that they did not know the correct expression to use. They were either not fully familiar with the expression or couldn't distinguish the expression with a similar one in terms of politeness and face saving speech acts. The interviewees mentioned several reasons affecting this problem such as lack of knowledge in distinguishing formal and informal expressions, lack of exposure to different expressions, lack of awareness of contextual characteristics, lack of input and practice. Another important factor that the interviewees described as contributing to their challenges in the production of giving advice is the use of structure. Eight interviewees (8 out of 35) mentioned this factor as their challenge. They declared that some structures are complicated and difficult for them. They did not know which phrase or sentence they use to start and then give advice. The reasons they mentioned in this regard were lack of sufficient knowledge of grammar, lack of input and practice, lack of information in the course books, and more importantly lack of instruction.

Another factor that the interviewees described as contributing to their production is the issue of culture or cultural diversity. Five students referred to this issue. For example, one interviewee elaborated on this issue. She said that since Malaysia culture is influenced by the Asian culture and the Islamic religion, their culture is different from other cultures. Other factors interviewees referred to are different social norms, the transfer from the first language (L1), gender of the hearer, age and the educational background of the interlocutors.

4. Discussion

The results of this study indicated that the students almost favored the direct strategies in all of the situations. In this regard, Haugh (2014) indicated that the advice-giving can be seen as a positive expression of concern in Asian culture. What is obvious is that Malay advice-givers utilize the same strategies in different contexts, mostly the routinized ones in giving advice. This finding could be attributed to the fact that speech acts mirror the routinized language behavior (Dastjerdi & Farshid, 2011). Moreover, the results of this research showed that Malay students did not make use of different speech act strategies in giving advice to a higher, an equal, and a lower-status person in terms of the frequency, shift and type of the semantic formulas. In other words, Malay

students did not make use of a variety of strategies and their utilization of semantic formulas was almost similar in all of the situations. In fact, they did not pay enough attention to the contextual variables of social power, social distance and imposition across the situations. This finding can be discussed in light of interlanguage pragmatics theory (politeness theory) and SLA theory (Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis).

The finding of this research is inconsistent with politeness theory because as Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed, the speaker should pay attention to the three situational variables of social distance, power and imposition in producing the face-threatening acts. In fact, there is a direct relationship between these three factors and the use of language. This study revealed that the students approximately produced the same semantic formulas in giving advice to a higher, an equal and a lower status person with high and low imposition task to a familiar or stranger just with some variations. It means that they did not pay sufficient attention to the three situational variables of social distance, power and imposition. Furthermore, based on Schmidt's noticing hypothesis (1995, p. 30), two levels of the pragmatic features are identified, noticing and understanding. "Noticing refers to the "conscious registration of the occurrence of some event, while understanding implies "the recognition of some general principle, rule, or pattern. Noticing refers to surface level phenomena and item learning, while understanding refers to deeper level (s) of abstraction related to (semantic, syntactic, or communicative) meaning, system learning".

In pragmatics domain, "awareness that on a particular occasion someone says to his/her interlocutor the statement like I'm terribly sorry to bother you, but if you have time could you look at this problem?" is something pertinent to noticing. Connecting a variety of forms by considering the politeness issue and recognizing their co-occurrence with the elements of context or contextual factors such as social distance, power, level of imposition and so on are all matters of understanding. "Therefore, it can be discussed that the students may just have reached the noticing level to opt out a semantic formula and produce the speech act without understanding the contextual variables underlying the choice of appropriate strategy or linguistic form. In other words, they have not reached to the deeper levels of abstraction and rule learning.

Other factors that may contribute to learners' lack of pragmatic knowledge (both pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics) are lack of instruction of pragmatic features, lack of appropriate and sufficient input, output and feedback, learners' individuality and cultural identity, the nature of the speech act and their functionality. The findings of the interview also showed that the challenges the students faced in the production of giving advice were insufficient knowledge of appropriate expression, difficult structure, culture and personality factors.

In this study, students' lack of sociopragmatic knowledge in considering the contextual variables of imposition, distance and power can be justified by this matter that the students may not be exposed to the explicit instruction of pragmatic features since the explicit instruction can develop the understanding of sociopragmatic rules governing the linguistic forms or speech act' strategies (Dastjerdi & Farshid, 2011; Martinez-Flor & Fukuya 2005; Nguyen, 2011; Rose & Ng, 2001; Takahashi, 2001). In other words, the lack of appropriate and sufficient input, practice and feedback can cause the lack of pragmatic competence. The inappropriate use of some linguistic forms or syntactic structures (e.g. the overuse of "obligation statement" in all situations) can be justified by this fact that the students' pragmatic development (both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge) in terms of appropriate use of speech acts' strategies in different situations by considering the socio-cultural constraints depend on the provision of input, practice, and feedback (Khodareza & Lotfi, 2012). As Ellis (2008) claimed, the acquisition of the frequently occurred features in the input is easier than infrequently occurred features.

Another factor worth mentioning is the role of students' individuality and cultural identity on the pragmatic performance. In producing the speech act, some students tended not to perform the speech act or they performed the speech act with some new semantic formula. This matter can point to this fact that not all of non-native speakers tend to perform pragmatically like the English native speakers of the language (Washburn, 2013). In fact, non-native speakers may not wish to gain native speaker pragmatic competence but they may just become competent L2 users and have enough mastery to make use of target language appropriately while keeping their cultural identity and subjectivity (Hinkel, 1996; Sigal, 1996). It means that the target language may just function as a means for interaction or communication not as a language for identification like the first language (House, 2003).

The nature of speech act can have an impact on the students' choice or lack of choice of pragmatic strategies. Some speech acts are more complex and difficult for students. For example, the production of the speech acts of apology and request is easier for learners than giving advice (Nguyen 2011). In addition, the multifunctionality of some speech acts can contribute to their inappropriate or wrong choice of speech acts by ESL students. For

example, in some cases, students used the wrong speech act. Although they were asked to give advice, they produced the speech act of suggestion instead. The fact is that there is no clear and direct relationship between a semantic formula and a specific function because, for example, sometimes giving advice appears as a suggestion or recommendation or vice-versa. Therefore, in order to understand a speaker's intention, one should pay attention to the context. As a matter of fact, the multifunctionality of speech act is considered as a necessary construct of pragmatic competence (Rose, 1999; Thomas, 1995).

Finally, the findings of WDCT showed that the most used strategy was direct type (85%) and the least used one was indirect type (14.3%). In line with the findings of this study, Martinez-Flor (2003) found that all students (university and secondary school students) employed the direct type of advice strategies. Borderia-Garcia (2006), too, found out that Spanish speakers showed more preference on the use of direct advice giving. Contrary to these findings, Chun (2009) found that Korean learners made use of indirect strategies to peers and superiors. The findings of Al-Shaboul, et al. (2014) study also showed that Jordanian learners preferred indirect strategies.

5. Conclusion and Suggestion for Future Research

This study has attempted to investigate Malay university postgraduate students' pragmatic knowledge through the production of advice acts in confronting different situations. The results indicated that the Malay university students mostly utilized more routinized strategies to perform the speech act and the frequency and type of the strategy used was not different significantly across different situations. Moreover, the contextual factors of social power distance and imposition did not affect the students' choice of the strategies that much. It can be concluded that the learners did not aware of the mentioned factors since they almost made use of the same strategies across different situations. In addition, the results of interviews showed that the challenges they face in the production of advice giving include expression, structure, culture, social values, first language, gender, age and educational background of the interlocutors.

This study has some limitations. The first limitation is the employment of written Discourse Completion Task for the evaluation of Malay ESL students' pragmatic knowledge since it is practical for a large sample. Therefore, the findings can be limited to the students' production of giving advice. The second limitation is the selection of the students. The participants were postgraduate university students from three public universities in Malaysia. So, they may not represent all Malay ESL students. Another limitation is that although all participants were university students, they were not homogeneous in age and fields of study which may have some effects on the results of this study.

Based on the results of this study, it is suggested that although WDCT was used as a data collection method in this study to measure students' pragmatic knowledge through the production of giving advice, other data collection methods such as role-plays or other tasks can be employed for future studies to examine the pragmatic knowledge and also multiple turns of interaction. Furthermore, three contextual variables of power, social distance, and imposition of the task were investigated in this research. Other internal and external situational factors, such as age and gender of interlocutors in situations can be investigated in further research. This study investigated one ethnic group, i.e. Malays. Future studies can examine other ethnic groups in Malaysia such as Chinese and Indians.

Finally, based on the results of this study with regard to the Malay university students' performance, they might require some explicit pedagogical intervention to become pragmatically competent since pedagogy could play a role in guiding learners to develop their pragmatic awareness in confronting different situations. Therefore, the instruction of the cultural and pragmatic aspects of second language is a vital part of ESL pedagogy to help students in becoming successful second language speakers. According to Param (2010), Malaysia is a multicultural nation comprising Malays, Chinese, Indians and other races. This mixture of ethnicities contributes in the differences in language use and cultural practices. In this regard, the curriculum developers would be better convinced of the significance of incorporating the pragmatic dimension of language ability into ESL materials. Since the prerequisite for pragmatic instruction is the availability and provision of especially fitting and suitably prepared materials, material writers/developers can embrace a 'speech act pedagogical model' in planning, developing or writing instructional materials. Therefore, ESL material writers and curriculum developers should design contextualized, task-based activities that expose ESL learners to various types of pragmatic information along with the linguistic strategies required to perform a particular speech act appropriately based on the different situations.

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