

# Advice: A Pragmatic Approach to Teaching Functions in English

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*As contacts between cultures become more frequent in our time, foreign language teachers find that language learners need to be prepared to interact appropriately in foreign cultures. In English as a Foreign Language courses, directives such as advising, requesting and suggesting are often learned through the modal auxiliary verb system. However, the intentions of learners who perform directives by transferring the linguistic pragmatics of their native language culture into the target language may be misconstrued, even when the learners use modal auxiliaries grammatically. This article details the nature of the cross-cultural conflict that arises when Russian speakers of English transfer Russian language pragmatics into English when giving advice to British or North American people. Suggestions are given for designing curriculum which promotes both grammatical and pragmatic competence when teaching how to advise in English.*

Around the globe, the increasing need of foreign languages for international communications is making the foreign language teaching field ever more dynamic. Responding to the imperatives of intercultural contact, many language teachers are finding that they need to teach language beyond the level of grammar, that their learners need adequate language competence to meet work-related objectives in a foreign culture. The teacher's role becomes one of advisor about culturally appropriate usage. This article details the empirical motivation for incorporating cross-cultural pragmatics in teaching language functions to learners of English, and provides suggestions for teaching advisability in English using a pragmatically based approach.

Professional using foreign language for face-to-face interactions inevitably need to perform language functions such as requesting, suggesting, advising, and inviting in ways that their foreign interlocutors can comfortably understand. Foreign language training programs often teach learners to perform these functions as parts of a broader competence in grammar, to be specific, as part of modal auxiliary usage. A teacher would show her learners how to use *would* and *could* for performing requests, *ought to*, *should*, *had better*, and *must* for advice, and so on. There is no disputing that functions such as advising and requesting can be performed using modal auxiliaries. However, the culturally based assumptions that learners draw upon while performing such language functions play a role as great as correct grammatical usage in completion of the language act. The verbal stance of the initiator and the interlocutor toward

each other must be pragmatically acceptable in order for the communicative event to proceed smoothly.

One of the most sensitive areas of interpersonal communication between Russian speakers of English and native English speakers is the use of directives, i.e., speech acts through which the speaker attempts to get the addressee to do something. The way that speakers employ language to perform these acts is influenced by operative assumptions for interaction in their culture. Whereas in English language culture interlocutors tend to preserve each other's right to independence, autonomy, non-imposition and non-interference, in Russian language culture, as in other Slavic cultures, speakers value closeness, intimacy and what might be called "uninhibited emotional expression" (Wierzbicka, 1991). These differences determine the most typical cases of interlanguage transfer in performing such directives as requests, suggestions, invitations, and advice. For instance, in the Russian culture, advice, invitations and suggestions are often imposed on the interlocutor by the use of the imperative and multiple repetitions (Wierzbicka, 1991), while in English language culture it is common to avoid such imposition in these speech acts by the use of indirect structures, hints and preliminary questions. The culture clash that results when Russian and English native speakers communicate with each other employing these different operative assumptions often results in the misinterpretation of intentions. Russian speakers of English, when they use conversational strategies based on their native communication system, often sound abrupt, straightforward, imposing and even aggressive to the native English speaker's ear. On the other hand, native English speakers are often perceived by Russian speakers as cautious, too polite, evasive and even manipulative. The learner who has not yet mastered an adequate level of pragmatic competence in the foreign language may quickly find himself playing a similarly unseemly role.

By including pragmatic aspects in English language teaching as well as in teaching other languages, teachers can raise students' consciousness of linguistic elements crucial for avoiding such clashes of culture. In the Russian English language teaching tradition, "advisability" is commonly taught as an aspect of the meanings of modal verbs such as "should," "ought to," and

"must," the pragmatic aspect of the use of these verbs in communication being ignored. Cultural transfer from Russian is evident when learners persistently choose the strongest forms for giving advice, such as *you must* or *you should*, or even choose the imperative, while avoiding options preferable to the English native speakers, such as *Why don't you...?* and *It might be a good idea to...*, which only sometimes incorporate the modals of advisability. Because of this preference for modals of necessity and imperatives, Russian speakers of English often sound inappropriately imposing in the target language.

To account for the discrepancy in the Russian and English conversational tactics of giving polite advice, learners should be made aware of the fact that the variables relevant for advice have different values in the two cultures. The variables such as who will perform the action in question, who will benefit from this action, and who decided whether to perform the action (see Leech, 1983) are often interpreted in an opposing fashion by the native speakers of Russian and English. In Russian the benefit factor is dominant. From the Russian speaker's point of view, potential benefit to the addressee determines the speaker's right to be persistent and imposing. Russians tend to take the attitude that, "It's good for you!" This explains the extensive use of the imperative and word equivalent to *must* in performing this speech act, as well as giving advice without being asked for it.

Naden shapku, zabalyeyesh. (Put a hat on, or you'll catch a cold)

Tibye nado kvrachu s'hodit, a to huzhe budyet (You must go see the doctor.  
Otherwise it'll get worse)

The Russian speaker of English often phrases advice in English in the same fashion, typically rendering utterances such as:

You must put on your cap. You'll catch cold.

Ann, put on your cap. You'll catch cold.

In English, by contrast to Russian, the dominant factor in the communicative situation of giving advice is the addressee's choice of whether to perform the action or not. In English language culture the addressee's independence and freedom to choose their own actions are highly valued. The presumed benefit

of the action does not in and of itself give the speaker the right to impose and persist when the addresser does not have the status of protector of the addressee, or when the benefit is not extreme or urgent. Hence, in English, speakers do not commonly give advice without being asked, and there are more indirect strategies for giving advice, such as stressing the benefit of the action for the addressee, questioning and/or presenting the idea of performing the action without actually stating that the interlocutor ought to perform it. Advising in English often verges on suggesting. A native speaker of English would be just as likely to say one of the following as use a *should* or *ought to* expression.

It's cold outside. You'd better put a hat on.

Why don't you put a hat on? It's cold outside.

What about your hat? It's cold outside.

Situations of advise-giving are inherently loaded with varying degrees of variables such as intimacy, power and urgency, that determine how directly the addressee can formulate his or her advising statement in an urgent situation, a piece of direct or unsolicited advice such as *You'd better not drive so fast*, might be warranted in English, whereas in situations where the addresser has much less power or status than the addressee, the piece of advice must be couched in mitigating language, such as *I've been wondering if you've ever thought of posting the times of your office hours on your office door, Dr. Brown*. Additionally, in English, the addresser often waits for a prompt from the addressee, such as a question or statement expressing frustration about some situation, before giving advice.

Because performance of this language function is perceived in accordance with a balance of variables, in order to perform advice-giving functions adequately, students are likely to need an intuitive understanding of how their advice will be perceived in a cross-cultural setting in addition to explicit rules for how to structure the language of advising. In many situations of performing directives, beyond the level of grammaticality, there are not "right" or "wrong" ways of carrying out the linguistic function, there are simply consequences for performing this function in ways perceived by the interlocutor as being

appropriate or not. Students should be stimulated to analyze the whole communicative event in order to learn to adequately manage the function and achieve the desired goal. Taking advice-giving as an example, in the following, we suggest ways of training learners in grammatical and pragmatic analysis in order to raise learner's awareness of how to perform language functions in a foreign culture.

### *Grammatical analysis*

A very likely reason for foreign language transfer in English communication is that many languages do not have the wide array of modal auxiliary forms that English has for expressing advisability. To provide the necessary grammatical basis for adequately performing the act of giving advice in English, learners should be given the full range of forms expressing advice, including grammatically encoded advisability within modal auxiliary structure, and alternative forms of introducing advice.

We suggest that one aspect of formal instruction in advising is to present the array of modal forms on a scale<sup>1</sup> of advisability to necessity, and to clarify the unique meanings that each verb conveys according to the following range of meanings.

#### **advisability** might

... this option may be beneficial

could

should ... in my opinion it is advisable to

ought to ... in my opinion it is advisable to, it is your public duty to

had better ... something bad will happen if you do not

must ... you are inescapably obligated to (in the speaker's opinion, not advice)

#### **necessity**

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1 (See L.G. Alexander. *Longman English Grammar*, 1992 and M. Celce-Murcia and D. Larsen-Freeman, *The Grammar Book*, 1983).

In addition to presenting grammatically encoded advisability in the form of modal auxiliaries, teachers can present and practice alternative forms of expressing advice in English, such as:

I was wondering if you've ever thought of...?

Have you thought about...?

Why don't you...?

I suppose you could...

If I were you, I would...

How about...? / What about...?

Class discussion could bring out the degrees of formality and social distance that condition the use of these alternative forms, as well as highlighting the communicative versatility of phrases such as *How about...?* which can also be used for suggestions, invitations, and various other language functions, versus more restricted forms such as *If I were you, I would...*

### *Cross-cultural analysis*

Beyond the sentence level, the ability to negotiate advice-giving situations becomes as much a matter of intuition as rule learning. Rather than trying to prescribe rules of interaction, teachers can stimulate learners to infer culturally appropriate advice-giving strategies by presenting learners with authentic conversational texts for analysis. Authentic texts for analysis could be taken from transcripts or tapes of real conversations, from movie clips, or from professionally produced teaching materials where available. Class discussion and analysis would likely reveal variables of intimacy, power and urgency that either give rise to or obviate the need for giving advice among speakers of English. General guidelines can then be inferred from the class discussion to provide students with some guidelines, such as *Use indirect strategies when giving advice*, *Avoid giving advice without being asked*, and *Avoid imposition when giving advice*, to help learners make decisions in cross-cultural interaction with native speakers of English.

Once students have analyzed performance of language functions in native language use settings, they can further develop their sense of appropriateness for advice-giving in authentic communicative events through role plays, simulations and socio-dramatic techniques. As is well documented in literature on the effects of psychodrama and sociodrama in language teaching (see Stem, in Oller, 1993), using dramatic techniques can develop learners' empathy, spontaneity and self-esteem. The spontaneous, creative state induced by enacting dramatic roles that require language functions can facilitate acquisition of an intuitive understanding of the parameters according to which those functions operate. Through analysis and acting out different social roles in various communicative settings, learners develop a sense of what kind of advice they can offer, or should refrain from offering to people of various social relationships to them. Situations could range from low power differential and low intimacy relationships, such as a student asking advice of the principal of his school.

One important aspect of developing learners' empathy and understanding of advice-giving as a reciprocal activity, is creating situations in which students themselves learn to ask for advice in a pragmatically appropriate fashion. Helping students practice asking for advice is one way to encourage their empathy for interaction in the foreign culture. Phrases such as the following for asking for advice can be given for use during simulations and other enactments of the communicative encounters.

I'm not sure what to do. Could I ask your advice?

I've got this problem – (statement of problem) What do you think I should do?

What would you do if you were me?

(Statement of problem or complaint) I don't know what to do.

(Statement of problem or complaint) I give up.

(Statement of problem) Do you have any advice?

The suggestions laid out above are based on the view that the grammar of a language is intrinsically linked to authentic usage of the language, which often takes place within a cultural context unfamiliar to the language learner. In order

for the learner to become competent in the pragmatics of the language culture, attention must be brought to the social contexts in which language structures operate. This can be done both in the course of teaching grammar and in the course of teaching communication. Of course, in the case of a lingua franca such as English, there is a genuine likelihood that learners will use English in cultural contexts other than in English-speaking cultures. Accordingly, incorporating pragmatic aspects of cross-cultural contact into foreign language classes can help learners to develop the sensitivity they need in order to temper interference of their native language culture when speaking foreign languages.

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