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An exploratory study of criticism realization strategies used by NS and NNS of New Zealand English

Abstract: This study explores how a group of learners of English as a second language (ESL) criticize in everyday situations compared to the native speaker (NS) with a view to expanding the range of speech acts under inquiry in the interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) literature. Data were collected from five NSs of New Zealand English and five intermediate learners, with mixed first languages, via eight role-play situations. Findings show that the learners criticized in significantly different ways from the NSs. Unlike the NSs, who made regular use of all strategies, the learners relied predominantly on direct criticism and requests for change. The learners also opted out for different reasons than the NSs in those situations where both groups found criticizing inappropriate, and varied their pragmatic choices less considerably according to context. Furthermore, where learners used the same strategy as the NSs, they differed greatly in their choice of semantic formulas and mitigating devices.

Keywords: interlanguage pragmatics, speech acts, criticizing, second language learning, ESL learners, pragmatic competence

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1 Introduction

This exploratory study examines how a group of native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) of New Zealand English perform the speech act of criticizing in everyday situations. Although ILP research has contributed a great deal to our understanding of speech act acquisition and use by second language (L2) learners, much of it has been confined to a rather small and well-defined set of acts, e.g., requesting, complimenting, inviting, thanking, and so on (see Kasper & Rose 2002; Ellis 2008 for a review). Much less has been done to explore more complex and possibly more face-damaging acts such as complaining and criticizing (Nguyen 2005a, 2008a).

To date, L2 criticism has been addressed only in a few studies (Nguyen 2005a, 2005b, 2008a, 2008b). However, all of these studies have been restricted to one special type of criticism, which is giving critical feedback on peers' written works in institutional settings and thus do not allow an investigation of criticism in other social scenarios which may vary in role relationships (Nguyen 2005b). What is more, institutional criticism might be expected to be constructive and supportive in nature and might involve a lower level of 'infracture' than the more 'biting' type of criticism such as criticizing one's appearance or behavior (Nguyen 2005a). Thus, it is interesting to know to what extent existing findings might be generalizable to the latter type of criticism.

The present study attempts to fill the gap by exploring the pragmatic properties of criticizing as it is used by L2 learners beyond institutional settings. Given that even NSs find this speech act challenging, often needing to pre-plan how to perform it, it can be assumed that L2 learners may experience considerable difficulty when performing this speech act in the target language (TL) and need pedagogical help with it (Nguyen 2008b). With a recent criticism that teaching materials provide misleading samples of speech acts as designers are using merely their language intuition rather than empirical data on NS discourse as their basis (Pearson 1985; Kasper 1997), studies on speech act realizations are of significance.

2 Speech acts and L2 learners

Previous research on the pragmatic aspect of learner language generally supports the claim that TL speech act knowledge is incomplete for many L2 learners (see Kasper & Rose 2002; Ellis 2008 for a review). Low proficiency learners tend to employ a rather narrow range of linguistic realization devices as well as illocutionary force mitigating devices (Scarcella 1979) and exhibit problems in varying their strategies according to context (Tanaka & Kawade 1982). There is also evidence that even advanced learners do not acquire full native-like pragmatic competence (Walters 1979; Carrel & Konneker 1981; Olshtain & Weinbach 1983; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1986; House & Kasper 1987). Their speech acts are usually characterized by over-sensitivity to politeness and verbosity because of their tendency to mark politeness as much as possible in the absence of the TL socio-pragmatic knowledge (Edmonson & House 1991). This evidence seems to suggest that L2 learners' pragmatic competence can lag behind their grammatical competence.

To date, literature on L2 learners' use of highly offensive speech acts such as complaints, chastisements, and criticism has been rather scarce. In a few

available studies, e.g., Boxer (1993) and Trosborg (1995) on complaints; Aktuna & Kamisli (1997) on chastisement, Nguyen (2005a, 2005b, 2008a, 2008b) on criticism, Higara & Turner (1996) and Nguyen (2005a) on responses to constructive criticism, salient differences were found between NSs and NNSs. For example, Boxer (1993) found that while NSs of American English frequently employed indirect complaints (i.e., complaints targeted at the third, non-present party) as a strategy for establishing solidarity, Japanese ESL learners tended to hold a negative view of this speech act, which consequently resulted in ending their interaction with NSs. Boxer went on to argue that this behavior might have deprived NNSs of the opportunity for input and interaction needed for L2 learning. In a study on complaints by Danish learners of English, Trosborg (1995) found that, compared to the NSs, the learners tended to overuse direct strategies and lack the appropriate means to express their complaints in a polite manner. The learners also seemed to experience considerable difficulty in varying their strategies in accordance with the socio-pragmatic constraints of the situations.

Aktuna & Kamisli (1997) found that while American English speakers preferred to state the error and request repair when chastising their lower status co-workers, Turkish EFL learners preferred to give criticism, sarcasms, warnings, and advice. On the other hand, when responding to their higher status co-workers' chastisements, the learners tended to apologize and give assurance more frequently while offering repair less frequently than the NSs. Similarly, Nguyen (2005a, 2005b, 2008a, 2008b) observed that when commenting on their peers' written works, Vietnamese EFL learners tended to give more advice regarding how to make changes and to demand changes more frequently than NSs of Australian English, who preferred to state the problem and give suggestions instead. Learners also seemed to mitigate their criticism far less frequently than the NSs. Nguyen (*ibid.*) argued that learners' behavior might have caused them difficulty, had they been engaged in interaction with the NSs. For example, their preference for 'demand' might have created an impression that they were trying to dictate the behavior of their NS interlocutor and their frequent use of 'advice' could have been considered as 'imposing'.

In their study on responses to criticism, Higara & Turner (1996) noticed that Japanese ESL learners tended to acknowledge tutors' criticism more frequently than British students, who seemed to attend more to their own face, and thus resisted the criticism as often as they acknowledged it. Conversely, Nguyen (2005a) found that Vietnamese EFL learners tended to resist their peers' criticism more often than Australian English NSs, who were more likely to accept constructive criticism from peers. The learners also seemed to rarely hedge their disagreements. Nguyen (2005a) points out that this behavior might have caused

learners to be perceived as assertive interlocutors, which might have adversely affected their communication with the NSs.

To account for L2 learners' idiosyncratic pragmatic behavior, Kasper (1992) assumes that general pragmatic knowledge is universally available, and learners thus have full access to the same range of strategies to realize particular speech acts as do NSs. They are also aware of various contextual constraints on a particular strategy choice. However, a number of intertwining factors may affect their performance. These include learners' restricted L2 linguistic competence and lack of fluency in L2, their incomplete L2 pragmatic knowledge, and especially their reliance on a synergism of both L1 and L2 pragmatic competence in performing speech acts (Kecskes & Papp 2000; Nguyen 2008b). On another note, Kasper & Blum-Kulka (1993) also warn that non-target pragmatic behavior does not always mean a lack of competence in the pragmatics of the TL community. On the contrary, learners may not always choose to target NS norms (see Kasper 1992; Cohen 1997). Sometimes they may deliberately resort to L1 pragmatic norms to mark their own cultural identity (Cohen 1997; LoCastro 1998; 2001; 2003).

3 The study

The present study seeks to explore the following research questions:

1. What criticizing strategies did the learners and the NSs of New Zealand English perform?
2. To what extent did their pragmatic choices vary according to the various contexts of situation?

According to Nguyen (2005a), criticizing refers narrowly to an illocutionary act whose illocutionary point is to give negative evaluation on the hearer's (H) actions/choice for which s/he may be held responsible. This act is performed in the hope of influencing H's future actions for H's betterment as viewed by the speaker (S) or to communicate S's dissatisfaction/discontent with or dislike with regard to what H has done but without the implicature that what H has done brings undesirable consequences to S (adapted from Wierzbicka 1987). From the speaker's point of view, the following preconditions need to be satisfied in order for the speech act of criticizing to take place:

1. The act performed or the choice made by H is considered inappropriate according to a set of evaluative criteria that S holds to or a number of values and norms that S assumes to be shared with H.

2. S holds that this inappropriate action or choice might bring unfavorable consequences to H or to the general public rather than to S himself or herself.
3. S feels dissatisfied with H's inappropriate action or choice and feels an urge to let his/her opinion be known.
4. S thinks that his or her criticism would result in a change in H's future action or behavior and believes that H would not change or offer a remedy for the situation otherwise without his or her criticism.

3.1 Participants

Five NSs of New Zealand English and five ESL learners (one Chinese, one Vietnamese, one Sri Lankan, and two Koreans) participated in this exploratory study. All the five NSs were studying at university in Auckland, New Zealand, at the time of data collection. The NNSs, on the other hand, were undertaking an IELTS (International English Language Testing System) preparation course offered by a language school based in Auckland.

The learners reported their levels of English proficiency to range between low-intermediate and intermediate. Their lengths of stay in New Zealand ranged from four to ten months. Interestingly, although they all reported that they had been learning English for at least seven years, they claimed that they were not fluent speakers. In an informal discussion with them, the researcher found that much of their English learning experience before coming to New Zealand was grammar-based.

Among the NS group, three were male and two were female. The NNS group, on the other hand, included two males and three females. The mean age of the NS group was 31.2 ($SD = 14.5$) and the mean age of the NNS group was 31.4 ($SD = 11.7$). Results of a t test shows no significant difference between the two groups in terms of age [$t(8) = .024$, *n.s.* at $p = .981$].

All the participants were randomly selected. A female NS of New Zealand English was employed as an interlocutor who role-played with the participants. She was also a university student from Auckland. The interlocutor and the participants were not made aware that the researcher intended to focus on the speech act of criticizing. They were simply told that the aim of the study was to examine the learners' use of some language function.

3.2 Instrument

Data were collected via eight carefully developed role-play (RP) situations. The rationale for using an RP lay in its capability to provide a rich data source

and to allow for online L2 production and the full operation of the turn-taking mechanism (Kasper and Dahl 1991). In designing RP situations, the researcher was aware that despite the above advantages, an RP might put pressure on participants if they were not good actors or were unable to find themselves in the described situations (Kasper & Dahl 1991; Bownikowska 1988). Thus, care was taken to minimize this possibility (see below).

The eight RP situations were constructed on four primary topics of criticism, including appearance (situations 1 and 2), performance of skills (situations 3 and 4), decision-making (situations 5 and 6), and behavior (situations 7 and 8). According to Tracy, van Dusen & Robinson (1987), those topics of criticism fell into the most common ones among acquaintances, peers, colleagues, and relatives. The situations also represented different social domains and interlocutor role relationships in terms of relative social power (P) and social distance (D).

These situations are briefly illustrated below (see Appendix A for a full description):

1. The participant (P) and Alison (the interlocutor, whose name has been changed for anonymity) were close friends, same age, and were going to a party. P thought the new jacket that Alison intended to wear for the party did not match her trousers (Unsuitable Jacket) (-P/-D).
2. P and Alison were close friends, same age, and were going to a party. P thought the new jacket that Alison intended to wear for the party did not match her trousers. Alison asked P's opinion about the jacket (Asking about Jacket) (-P/-D).
3. P and Alison were new classmates, same age, and were cooking for a class party. P thought the soup Alison cooked was a bit salty (Salty Soup) (-P/+D).
4. P and Alison were new classmates, same age, and were cooking for a class party. P thought the soup Alison cooked was a bit salty. Alison asked P's opinion about the soup (Asking about Soup) (-P/+D).
5. P had been Alison's assistant for years and is 10 years junior. P thought Alison's new plan could not work (Bad Plan) (+P/-D).
6. P had been Alison's assistant for years and is 10 years junior. P thought Alison's new plan could not work. Alison asked P's opinion about her plan (Asking about Plan) (+P/-D).
7. Alison was P's new subordinate and 10 years junior. P felt annoyed about Alison's frequent unpunctuality (Unpunctuality) (+P/+D).
8. Alison was P's new subordinate and 10 years junior. P felt annoyed about Alison's frequent unpunctuality. Today Alison was late again and made an excuse first (Excuse for Unpunctuality) (+P/+D).

As can be seen, situation 1 was almost identical to situation 2. The same was applied for situations 3 and 4, 5 and 6, and 7 and 8, respectively. The twin situations in each pair varied in only one point: in one scenario the participants were left free to either initiate a criticism or to opt out (situations 1, 3, 5, 7). In the other, however, they were prompted to perform the act (situations 2, 4, 6, 8).

The purpose in creating these twin situations was two-fold. Firstly, Bownikowska (1988) warns IL pragmatics researchers against insisting that participants perform a speech act in the situation where, realistically, they would normally go off-record because data collected in this way could be unnatural. Bownikowska therefore suggests that participants should be given a chance to opt out if they wish to do so. However, there could be a dilemma in so doing, for the researcher who relies on elicitation methods could risk ending up with no data. To avoid these pitfalls, a series of twin situations were constructed to enable the researcher to collect sufficient data while still ensuring the naturalness of the data collected. Another important reason was that it was assumed that not only how to criticize, but also what to criticize and when to criticize could be culturally very variable. Thus, by leaving the chance open for the participants, the researcher could then examine to what extent the learners and the NS groups varied in their judgments of what and when to criticize.

The eight RP situations were included in two separate detailed instruction sheets for the interlocutor and the participants. The situations and the instruction were written in simple English to ensure the learner-participants' complete understanding of the task requirements (see Appendix B). What is more, the instruction sheets also explicitly encouraged the interlocutor and the participants to ask questions before they started if they found any detail they did not understand.

In the instruction sheets, situations 1, 3, 5, and 7 were accompanied by three questions and situations 2, 4, 6, and 8 by two questions. Question 1, identical for all situations, served to check how realistic or close to life the participants perceive a given situation to be. The purpose of this question was to make sure that the learners were not forced to perform the speech act of criticizing against their beliefs. It asked the participants to use a Likert five-point scale (with 1 being the lowest and 5 the highest) to indicate to what extent they agreed with the statement: 'I think I could imagine myself in this situation.' If they scored a situation below 3, i.e., they did not find the situation realistic enough, they could leave that situation and move on to the next one. On the other hand, if they scored 3 or more, they should go to the next question. The results showed that all the situations had a mean score of at least 4.0 on the one-to-five Likert Scale. This suggested that the RP situations were perceived

by the participants to be realistic and natural enough. Of all ten participants (both NS and NNS), only one NNS scored situation 2 (Asking about Jacket) as being unrealistic as he could not imagine that his friend would consult him on how to dress. However, his low score did not affect the total mean score given for this situation ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 1.2$).

For situations 1, 3, 5, and 7, where the participants were free to choose whether to actively voice their opinions or not, Question 2 was ‘Would you normally say something in this situation?’ Again, the participants were required to circle their answers on another Likert five-point scale with 1 being interpreted as ‘Definitely No’ and 5 as ‘Definitely Yes.’ If they scored 3 or more, they would then go to Question 3, which was identical for all eight situations: ‘What would you say in this situation, if you did say something?’ In this way, the participants were provided a chance to opt out if it was what they would normally do in real life. Interestingly, in one case, although the participant initially opted to perform criticism, she finally gave up her intent after a number of unsuccessful attempts to steer her interlocutor into the topic as the latter signaled non-cooperation. This observation suggested that the data collected were almost true to life and thus seemed to clear any doubt about the non-naturalness of the elicited data in at least this case.

In addition, in order not to bias the participants towards choosing the act of criticizing when they did not mean to, such words as ‘criticism’ and ‘criticizing’ were deliberately avoided in both the situational description and the questions.

3.3 Data collection

Data were collected on a university campus in Auckland. Before the procedure started, the participants were introduced to the interlocutor and encouraged to spend some time having a small social chat with her. Then the participants were given as much time as they needed to read and ask questions about the task before they started. When they signaled that they were ready to start, an audio-recorder was switched on to audio-tape their conversations. The interlocutor was in charge of operating the audio-recorder because the researcher avoided interfering with the process by making herself absent. After the participants had completed the RP, the researcher came back and screened their answers on the two Likert scales. If a low score was spotted, the participants were required to write down the reasons why they rated a situation low. The whole procedure took each participant approximately an hour and a half. A total of 67 conversations were produced.

3.4 Data analysis

Data on criticism production collected via eight RP situations were transcribed and categorized according to a classification of criticism realization strategies and modifiers, adapted from Nguyen (2005a). These features are described below.

Criticizing strategies: In order to examine the participants' pragmatic behavior, the following broad criticism realization strategies, each consisting of a number of sub-strategies, were sorted out.

1. *Direct criticism*, including
 - (a) An explicit statement of a problem, or an explicit expression of disapproval of, disagreement with, and dislike of H's choice/actions/work/products, etc.: 'I think it's a bit salty for me, the soup' (NNS);
 - (b) Warning about the consequences of H's choice, actions etc.: 'If this habit keeps [if you keep this habit], then we don't need someone who is always late for work. So remember that, if you do it again, I don't want to see you again' (NNS).
2. *Requests for change*
 - (a) Giving advice or suggestions for changes and improvements or encouraging changes and improvement in H's choice, actions, work, etc. 'I think it's nice but I think it may go well with other trousers' (NNS), 'I'm sure you'll do your best to be punctual next time' (NNS);
 - (b) Insisting that changes be made, or indicating standard and expectations, e.g., '*You should try to go [come] to work on time* because we cannot go to work late everyday' (NNS), 'This is quite an entrenched pattern here and *we rely on you to be here at opening time*' (NS).
3. *Hints*, including
 - (a) Presupposing or asking H's opinion of his/her own choice, actions, work, products etc. to raise H's awareness of the inappropriateness, e.g., 'Do you reckon it goes well with those pants?' (NS);
 - (b) Other kinds of hints, light teasing or sarcasm: 'Well, you are certainly attracting attention' (an NS criticized her friend's way of dressing), 'Excuse me, what is the time?' (an NNS criticized her subordinate's being late for work), 'Ah, yeah, that's been quite a good excuse for the last three times' (an NS criticized his subordinate's being consistently late for work).
4. *Opting out*
 Opting out, as suggested by Bownikowska (1988), is also pragmatic behavior and has thus been addressed in this study. It was counted when there was no performance in a situation in which the participants scored below

3 in response to the question: ‘Would you normally say something in this situation?’ Besides, in one case, the learner initially intended to perform the criticism but after a number of her failed efforts to steer her NS interlocutor into the topic, she finally gave up. This behavior also counted as opting out:

- (1) NNS (participant) to NS (interlocutor):
 I: Do you think I should wear this jacket to the party?
 P: Yeah, your [your jacket] is great
 I: You like it?
 P: Yeah
 I: Cool then. OK, let’s ...
 P: Is your [your jacket a] new one? ←
 I: Yes, very new
 P: Where did you buy it? ←
 I: Earlier today
 P: Ah hmm oh great ←
 I: Shall we go?
 P: Hmm OK. ←
 (Situation 2: Asking about Jacket)

Modifiers: Several mitigating devices were employed by the participants in order to soften their criticism. These devices included both supportive moves and internal modifiers.

1. Supportive moves occurring before or after the act, including the following:
 - (a) *Steers* were those utterances that S used to lead H onto the issue he or she was going to raise, e.g., ‘Is this your new jacket?’ (NNS); or to announce S’s intent although he or she did not specify the nature of the proposition following them, e.g., ‘Ah, I think you and I are gonna talk about this’ (NS);
 - (b) *Sweeteners* were compliments paid to H either before or after a criticism was delivered to compensate for the offensive act, e.g., ‘I know you work very hard and very efficiently, so if you [are] not late, I will be happy with you’ (NNS);
 - (c) *Grounders* were usually the reasons given by S to justify his/her intent, e.g., ‘You know, money is what we’re on about here and it just seems too risky’ (NS);
 - (d) *Disarmers:* were those utterances that S used to show his or her awareness of the potential offence that his or her speech might cause H. This could be done by forewarning, apologizing/showing appreciation

of H's efforts or self-abasing, e.g., 'Really, I appreciate your new idea but what I think ...' (NNS), 'Your coming to work late has been a problem for me. *I normally wouldn't mind one way or the other. I tend to be late also.* It's just that part of your job description says you have to be here at opening time' (NS); 'A little bit too much salt *but I like salty* [soup]. *Do you know in North of China people like salty food*' (NNS), 'It's a bit salty *but I'm not a food connoisseur*' (NS), 'I personally found it a little bit salty *but then we really cut down on salt in our house*' (NS).

2. *Internal modifiers* occurring as an integral part of the act, including
 - (a) Understaters: 'I think it's *a bit* salty for me, the soup' (NNS);
 - (b) Hedges: 'You are making *kind of* a statement with the pants though' (NS);
 - (c) Downtoners: 'Yes, I mean it *might be* but it still *seems* to me at the moment that *perhaps* it's not a good idea' (NS);
 - (d) Cajolers: 'you know,' 'you see';
 - (e) Subjectivizer: 'I think,' 'I feel,' 'I guess,' 'I believe,' 'I suppose,' etc.

In order to establish the inter-rater reliability, an independent coder was recruited to repeat the coding process. The inter-rater agreement rate was found to be 90 percent. To compare the performance of the NS and NNS groups, the raw frequency of each criticism strategy used by the two groups in eight RP situations was calculated and computed using Chi-Square tests for relatedness (χ^2). The alpha level was set at $p < .05$.

4 Results and discussion

4.1 NS and NNS criticism

Table 1 presents the overall frequency of use of the four broad types of criticizing strategies by the NS and NNS groups. As can be seen, learners made use of all strategy types that were employed by the NS group but seemed to show different patterns of preference for particular types. For example, they tended to rely more predominantly on 'direct criticism' and 'requests for change' and much less on 'hints' (36 percent and 42 percent respectively as opposed to 15 percent for 'hints') while their NS counterparts tended to make a regular use of all these three strategies (35 percent for 'direct criticism,' 25 percent for 'requests,' and 32 percent for 'hints'). What is more, learners employed almost twice as many 'requests for change' as did their NS peers (42 percent vs. 25

percent respectively) while making use of only half the number of ‘hints’ as compared to the latter group (15 percent vs. 32 percent respectively). These differences were found to be statistically significant by the results of a Chi square test for relatedness run for the two groups [$\chi^2(3, N = 193) = 10.691$ at $p = .014$].

Criticizing Strategies	Group			
	NNS <i>n</i> = 5		NS <i>n</i> = 5	
	f	%	f	%
1. Direct criticism	33/92	36.0	35/101	35.0
2. Requests for change	39/92	42.0	25/101	25.0
3. Hints	14/92	15.0	33/101	32.0
4. Opting out	6/92	7.0	8/101	8.0

Table 1: Frequency of use of criticizing strategies by the NS and learner groups.

Learners also seemed to differ from the NS group in their choice of linguistic resources for realizing criticism as well as in the content of their criticism. For example, ‘requests for change’ constituted an area where learners showed most salience. Table 2 indicates that learners tended to rely heavily on the structure ‘You should’ when asking for changes to be made. This structure occurred 10 times out of 39 instances, representing the single most frequently used structure. While some other highly frequently occurring structures such as ‘conditional clauses’ or the non-idiomatic expression ‘I’m sure you will do your best to be on time’ reflected individual stylistic preferences (i.e., used exclusively by one or two learners), the structure ‘You should’ was consistently employed by all the five learners. Learners also seemed to employ ‘You should’ in the contexts of all situations, regardless of interlocutor role relationships and topics of criticism, e.g., ‘Looking at the color and the little star on it, I think you should really reconsider that’ (criticizing a close friend about her choice of clothing), ‘You should put sugar’ (criticizing a new classmate for her bad cooking skills), ‘You should think about the future, the market, and the need for customer’ (criticizing a long-time boss for her bad marketing plan), and ‘If you join our company, you should be here on time. That’s our standard’ (criticizing a new subordinate for often coming late for work).

This finding echoes what has been found in Nguyen (2005a, 2008b). Nguyen (ibid.) reported a relatively high percentage of use of the structure ‘you should’ by a group of Vietnamese EFL learners, regardless of their proficiency

Modal verbs	NNS (<i>n</i> = 5)	NS (<i>n</i> = 5)
Should	10	4
Must	1	1
Have (got) to	3	4
Need	0	3
Imperative	1	7
(Would) like	2	0
Will/ going to	0	1
It's time to	1	1
Why don't	3	0
Can	2	1
Could	2	1
May	1	0
Conditional -if	8	0
Others	5	2
Total	39	25

Table 2: Frequency counts of linguistic structures for realizing ‘requests for change’ used by the NS and NNS groups.

levels in English, when giving critical feedback on their peers’ written work. When asked to explain this behavior, these learners revealed that they believed saying ‘you should’ was a polite way of giving advice. In most instances, their belief was induced by their L1 pragmatic rules. In the present study, learners came from different L1 backgrounds (Chinese Mandarin, Korean, Vietnamese, and Tamil); thus it was difficult to attribute their behavior to L1 influence. More probably, their preference for the structure ‘you should’ might have been affected by their English learning experience. Perhaps this structure was introduced at the very early learning stage, so it became well-automatized in the learner’s interlanguage system (see Kasper 1982, for a similar discussion about German EFL learners’ overuse of *must* and *have to*). What is more, the fact that the structure ‘you should’ is formulaic in nature could also add to the ease of its retrieval under communicative pressure (as compared with more complex structures such as the bi-clausal request). However, without conducting retrospective interviews with learners, these explanations are only tentative.

Compared with the learner group, the NS group tended to prefer ‘imperatives’ (7 times out of 25 instances of counts) (see table 2). A close examination showed that this structure was used exclusively in the pair of situations 3 (Salty Soup), and 4 (Asking about Soup) (3 instances of counts), and in situation 8 (Excuse for Unpunctuality) (4 instances of counts). The former involved criticizing the soup made by a new classmate for a party, and the latter involved

criticizing a new subordinate for being frequently late for work. However, what is noteworthy is that, in all three instances of occurrence in situations 3 and 4, ‘imperatives’ were used only after the recipient of the criticism asked the criticizer for advice, e.g.:

(2) NS (participant) to NS (interlocutor)

P: This soup’s pretty salty, eh? What are we going to do about this?

I: Ah you don’t like it.

P: Ah it’s pretty salty.

I: Alright, any idea how to fix it? ←

P: Add more water. ←

The NSs also made use of structures ‘you should’ and ‘you have (got) to/this has got to be’ more frequently than the remaining structures (4 times each out of 25 instances of counts) (table 2). This is because most of their ‘requests for change’ occurred in situations 7 and 8, where perhaps performing this act was sanctioned by their authoritative role and thus might involve a lower level of ‘infraction’ (as opposed to criticizing someone’s appearance in situations 1 and 2, for example).

In terms of the propositional content, at times NNS criticism was less detailed, shorter and less elaborate, which, according to Takahashi & Beebe (1993), was very typical of L2 learners who are lacking in fluency and proficiency in the TL. Let’s compare these two conversations (situation 5, Bad Plan):

(3) NNS (participant) to NS (interlocutor):

P: I think your idea is great, about our company.

I: Okay?

P: But in my opinion, your idea is just a little bit [more] developed to [than] before. ←

I: Oh why’s that? ←

P: So, if you change it a little bit, change this idea, it will be successful for us. ←

(4) NS (participant) to NS (interlocutor):

P: You know I’ve got some serious reservations about this project.

I: What’re your reservations?

P: I just can’t see that there is enough of a market. It just seems really, really risky financially. We’ve been together a long time and I’ve never said anything along these lines, so you know I’m really serious. ←

I: Okay?

P: You know, money is what we're on about here and it just seems too risky. ←

Apparently, it seems that the above instances of criticism were very different in terms of length and complexity. Firstly, the criticism by the NS was more grounded ('I just can't see that there is enough of a market,' 'Money is what we're on about here') and disarmed ('We've been together a long time and I've never said anything along these lines'), and thus more detailed and elaborate, although she employed only one strategy, i.e., 'direct criticism' ('I've got some serious reservations about this project,' 'It just seems really, really risky financially,' 'It just seems too risky'). At the same time, the NNS made use of more strategy types, i.e., 'direct criticism' and 'requesting change,' yet her criticism was less effective as it was vague and without any explanation and explication. This finding was similar to the finding of Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz (1990) that American NS explanations were more informative whereas Japanese ESL learners' explanations were vague and less specific. What is more, the two examples above also show that while the NS targeted her criticism at the project but not her interlocutor, the NNS failed to do so due to her untactful use of the possessive adjective 'your' ('In my opinion, your idea is just a little bit [more developed] developed to [than] before').

Table 3 demonstrates how frequently the learner and the NS groups made use of supportive moves and internal modifiers. As can be seen, while the learners made use of as many supportive moves (49 percent or 53/109) as they did internal modifiers (51 percent or 56/109), the NS group tended to show a preference for internal modifiers (67 percent or 68/102) over supportive moves (33 percent or 34/102). These differences were found to be statistically significant by the results of a Chi square test [$\chi^2(1, N = 211) = 6.295$ at $p = .012$]. This finding comes as no surprise, and in fact it echoes earlier findings that intermediate-level learners tend to produce verbose speech acts as they overuse supportive moves as compared to the NS (see Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1986; House & Kasper 1987; House 1988; Faerch & Kasper 1989; Blum-Kulka 1991; Edmonson & House 1991; Hassall 2001; Nguyen 2008a).

Explanations for this phenomenon are various. Edmondson & House (1991) assume that in the absence of socio-pragmatic knowledge in the TL, learners may desire to 'play it safe' by making the propositional and pragmatic meanings as transparent as possible. Compared to internal modifiers, supportive moves carry more explicit propositional meaning. They also do not form an integral part of the speech act but are planned in separate constituents to the speech act, thus causing less processing difficulty to learners and being more available

for use (Hassall 2001). Nguyen (2008a) assumes that when reaching intermediate level, learners have achieved sufficient linguistic resources to express their sensitivity to politeness, but have not yet developed a good control over more complex structures such as certain types of internal modifiers. Therefore, they tend to compensate for this by drawing more heavily on supportive moves, the addition of which usually does not increase the structural complexity of the utterances and thus requires only minimal processing attention.

	Steers		Sweeteners		Grounders		Disarmers		Internal modifiers	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
NNS (<i>n</i> = 5)	4/ 109	4.0	22/ 109	20.0	12/ 109	11.0	15/ 109	14.0	56/ 109	51.0
NS (<i>n</i> = 5)	4/ 102	4.0	12/ 102	12.0	5/ 102	5.0	13/ 102	13.0	68/ 102	68.0

Table 3: Frequency of use of criticism modifiers by the NS and learner groups.

Table 3 also shows that when it came to preferences for particular types of external modifiers, no differences were found between the learner and the NS groups [$\chi^2(3, N = 87) = 1.908, n.s. \text{ at } p > .05$]. Both groups seemed to prefer ‘sweeteners’ (NNS: 20 percent; NS: 12 percent) and ‘disarmers’ (NNS: 14 percent; NS: 13 percent) to ‘grounders’ (NNS: 11 percent; NS: 5 percent) and ‘steers’ (NNS: 4 percent; NS: 4 percent). They also made use of the ‘steers’ and ‘disarmers’ with very similar frequencies. Regarding the ‘quality’ of use, however, a closer investigation of the data indicates that learners might use supportive moves in a greatly different way from the NSs. For example, among 12 grounders that learners employed, only three were provided at the same time as the criticism given. The other nine were not provided until the learners were asked to. This behavior could be accountable for the above claim that the NNS criticism was vague and non-elaborate. The NSs, on the other hand, always provided grounders at the same time they gave criticism to make it more justifiable (5 out of 5 instances of counts), e.g., (situation 6, Asking about Plan):

- (5) NNS (participant) to NS (interlocutor):
- I: I’m thinking of constructing a new plant in province A. What do you think?
- P: In my opinion, I don’t think it’s good idea to build [it] there.
- I: Oh really? Why’s that? ←

- P: Hmm I didn't see the new development for that place, so I don't think it development [will develop] in the future. ←
- (6) NS (participant) to NS (interlocutor):
- I: I'm thinking of constructing a new plant in province A. What do you think?
- P: Ah I'm not sure if that's a good idea because I don't know that province A is a big enough market for our product? ←
- I: Oh really? I guess we can do some more research in province A before we start it up.
- P: Yeah I mean it might be but it still seems, perhaps it's not a good idea.

In sum, the quantitative analysis of the criticism production data by the NSs and the NNSs provided evidence of notable differences between the two groups with regard to their preferences for certain criticism strategies and for supportive moves. It also indicated that learners, despite their potential to have access to the same range of criticism strategies as do the NSs, were lacking in necessary linguistic resources in order to be able to make full use of these strategies. Thus, they had to draw on more direct criticism strategies and formulaic structures, which possibly required less sophisticated language to perform. The qualitative analysis of the data also revealed that where learners employed the same criticizing strategies as the NSs, they might still vary considerably from the latter in their choice of linguistic resources as well as in the propositional contents of their criticism. For example, their criticism was usually found to be less elaborate and less specific due to the ineffective use of grounders.

4.2 Criticism across situations

This section examines the extent to which criticizing strategies might vary according to situations. First, the NSs and NNSs were grouped together in order to examine their performance as an entire group (see table 4). Results of a Chi square test run for the frequencies of use of criticizing strategies by the ten participants indicated that their pragmatic choices differed significantly from one situation to another [$\chi^2(21, N = 193) = 46.513$ at $p = .001$].

As can be seen from table 4, 'direct criticism' occurred most frequently in situation 7 (Unpunctuality) (7 percent), immediately followed by situation 4 (Asking about Soup) (5 percent), and situation 6 (Asking about Plan) (5 percent). It occurred with similarly high frequencies in all remaining situations (4 percent) except for situation 1 (Unsuitable Jacket) where it occurred only

3 times (2 percent). Overall, the choice of ‘direct criticism’ seemed to depend firstly on whether the speaker was involved in a business-related or a personal matter. In situation 7 (Unpunctuality), for example, the speaker might have felt obliged to speak his or her mind because the unpunctuality of his or her subordinate was deemed unacceptable in a working environment and might affect other co-workers. The speaker might have also felt less hesitant to explicitly indicate the problem or express his or her disapproval because he or she held a higher power status than the unpunctual co-worker. In comparison, situation 1 was concerned with a personal choice, which the speaker might have felt less obliged to speak about. The choice of ‘direct criticism’ also seemed to depend on whether the speaker’s opinion on the matter had been sought. This seemed especially the case for situations involving personal matters. Comparing situation 1 (Unsuitable Jacket) and situation 2 (Asking about Jacket), for instance, ‘direct criticism’ was more preferable in the latter where the speaker’s opinion had been consulted (4 percent) than in the former where this did not happen (2 percent). In the following example, the speaker was straightforward about the problem with his friend’s choice of clothing only after his comment had been insisted upon for a few times, but he opted out in situation 1 where his opinion was not asked for:

- (7) NS (participant) to NS (interlocutor)
 I: Do you think I should wear this jacket to the party?
 P: I don’t know.
 P: Do you like my jacket?
 I: I don’t know. It’s alright.
 P: Do you think it goes with these pants?
 I: I’m not really too sure, it just doesn’t match. ←

Similar to ‘direct criticism,’ ‘requests for change’ also seemed to be more preferable in business-related than in personal situations (see table 4 below). More specifically, this strategy occurred most frequently in situation 8 (Excuse for Unpunctuality) (10 percent), immediately followed by situation 7 (Unpunctuality) (6 percent), and situation 6 (Asking about Plan) (5 percent). It occurred much less frequently in situations 3 (Salty Soup) and 4 (Asking about Soup) (3 percent), and least frequently in situations 1 (Unsuitable Jacket) (2 percent), and 2 (Asking about Jacket) (2 percent) (see table 4). Again, perhaps requesting someone’s improvement in a business-related matter was considered less imposing and thus more appropriate than requesting their improvement in a personal choice or non-work related area, especially when the speaker held a

<i>n</i> = 10		Direct criticism	Requests for change	Hints	Opting out
Situation 1	f	3/193	3/193	5/193	5/193
Unsuitable Jacket	%	2.0	2.0	3.0	3.0
(-P/-D)					
Situation 2	f	8/193	4/193	7/193	2/193
Asking about Jacket	%	4.0	2.0	4.0	1.0
(-P/-D)					
Situation 3	f	8/193	6/193	0/193	3/193
Salty Soup	%	4.0	3.0	0.0	2.0
(-P/+D)					
Situation 4	f	10/193	6/193	2/193	0/193
Asking about Soup	%	5.0	3.0	1.0	0.0
(-P/+D)					
Situation 5	f	8/193	5/193	10/193	2/193
Bad Plan	%	4.0	3.0	5.0	1.0
(+P/-D)					
Situation 6	f	9/193	9/193	6/193	0/193
Asking about Plan	%	5.0	5.0	3.0	0.0
(+P/-D)					
Situation 7	f	14/193	11/193	5/193	2/193
Unpunctuality	%	7.0	6.0	3.0	1.0
(+P/+D)					
Situation 8	f	8/193	20/193	12/193	0/193
Excuse for Unpunctuality	%	4.0	10.0	6.0	0.0
(+P/+D)					

Table 4: Choice of strategy type according to situations.

higher power status (e.g., situations 7 and 8) or when the speaker's opinion was consulted (e.g., situation 6).

Regarding 'hints,' table 4 shows that this strategy occurred most frequently in situation 8 (Excuse for Unpunctuality) (6.0 percent) and situation 5 (Bad Plan) (5 percent), followed by situations 2 (Asking about Jacket) (4 percent). It was almost absent in situation 4 (Asking about Soup) (1 percent) and completely absent in situation 3 (Salty Soup) (0 percent) where the participants seemed to prefer 'direct criticism.' While the higher frequency of occurrence of 'hints' in situation 5 (Bad Plan) and situation 2 (Asking about Jacket) came as no surprise, as criticizing in these two situations might be tricky, it was striking for situation 8 (Excuse for Unpunctuality).

Situation 5 involved a subordinate criticizing a long-time boss for the latter's bad planning. The subordinate was not asked to comment on the planning, but he or she might feel obliged to do so because he or she believed this bad

planning might cause loss to the company. Most probably, ‘hinting’ was a preferable strategy in this situation because it seemed effective in helping the speaker to save face as well as to attend to his or her boss’ face-need. In situation 2 the speaker did not deal with a higher status interlocutor but instead dealt with a sensitive issue where perhaps ‘hints’ could allow him or her to avoid appearing assertive.

The high frequency of occurrence of ‘hints’ in situation 8 seemed misleading at first because this situation seemed more straightforward than situations 2 and 5. It was about a boss criticizing a new subordinate for often coming late to work after the latter offers an excuse. However, a closer examination of data shows that in all instances what was categorized as ‘hinting’ in fact consisted of ‘light sarcasm,’ and so the use of ‘hinting’ in this case could possibly be more face-threatening than face-saving as might have been assumed initially:

- (8) NNS (participant) to NS (interlocutor):
- I: Good morning. Sorry I’m late. My car broke down again.
 P: Good morning. Also today something happened to you? ←
 I: Yes, my car broke down.
 P: Always problem in the morning? ←
 I: Yes, my car is the real problem.
 P: You know this problem is very serious for us?
 I: Yes.
 P: You have to keep our rule, especially your own time. It’s easy for your life.
 I: I’m sorry.
 P: If this habit keeps [if you continue with this habit], then we don’t need someone who is always late for work. So remember that, if you do it again, I don’t want to see you again.

Finally, table 4 shows that participants seemed to opt out most frequently when they were dealing with personal matters (e.g., situations 1 and 2) or where their opinions were not consulted or prompted (e.g., situations 3, 5 and 7). On the other hand, they did not tend to opt out when responding to business-related situations, especially where their opinions were invited or prompted (e.g., situations 6 and 8). Situation 1 (Unsuitable Jacket) led to the highest frequency of opting out (3 percent), most probably because the speaker was dealing with a sensitive matter. Interestingly enough, when responding to the question: ‘Would you normally say something in situation 1?’ on the RP card, three participants scored fairly high, suggesting they would definitely say something. Yet, in fact, as the conversations went on, one finally opted out after a number of failed

steers (conversation 9) while the other two deliberately delayed going on record until they were pressed to give opinions by their interlocutor (conversations 10 and 11):

(9) NNS (participant) to NS (interlocutor):

I: Do you think I should wear this jacket to the party?

P: Yeah, your [your jacket] is great

I: You like it?

P: Yeah

I: Cool then. OK, let's ...

P: Is your [your jacket a] new one? ←

I: Yes, very new

P: Where did you buy it? ←

I: Earlier today

P: Ah hmm oh great ←

I: Shall we go?

P: Hmm OK. ←

(10) NS (participant) to NS (interlocutor):

I: Do you think I should wear this jacket to the party?

P: I don't know ←

I: Do you like my jacket?

P: I don't know, it's all right ←

I: Do you think it goes with these pants?

P: I'm not really sure, it just doesn't match ←

(11) NS (participant) to NS (interlocutor):

I: Do you think I should wear this jacket to the party?

P: Ah it's a lovely jacket and if you want to wear it, that's the one to wear. ←

I: Excellent. Do you think it matches my trousers?

P: I think it clashes, definitely. ←

In order to examine whether the situational variations discussed above affected NS or NNS performance to a greater extent, a Chi square test for relatedness was also run for each group separately. Results showed that while the NS group varied their strategy choices considerably according to context ($\chi^2 = 45.797$ at $p = .001$), the NNS group made a much less clear distinction ($\chi^2 = 21.593$, *n.s.* at $p > .05$). Looking at the two groups' reasons for opting out of certain situations, some differences were also found. For example, the learners who indicated their opting out of situation 1 (Unsuitable Jacket) or situation 2 (Asking

about Jacket) by scoring these situations below 3 on a 5-point scale (see 3.2 and 3.3) commented that they did not want to hurt their friend's feelings and destroy their relationship with this person. The NS participants, on the other hand, commented that they thought that it was not their business and that in New Zealand culture everyone could dress the way he or she liked, and it would be fine as long as this person thought his or her jacket matched his or her trousers. Apparently, it seemed that in these situations, while the NS respondents tended to place a greater emphasis on non-interference, the learners tended to assign more importance to solidarity.

5 Summary and conclusion

This exploratory study investigates how a group of NSs and NNSs of New Zealand English perform criticism via eight RP situations with a view to addressing the need for attention to less easily defined speech acts in ILP research. Firstly, findings show that the speech act of criticizing can be highly complex in nature and might not be best described in terms of a single act. Rather, it can be made up of multiple components, none of which seems to play the role of a head act, as is usually found with the case of more clearly defined acts such as requesting or greeting. Similar to the case of apologizing reported in Olshain & Cohen (1983) and complaining reported in Hartley (1996), perhaps criticizing should be better described as a set of speech acts, i.e., a range of strategies, any combination of which could help to perform it. Findings also indicate that performing the type of criticism examined in this study can be quite different from performing the less 'biting' type, such as critiquing peers' written assignments at school, which is investigated in Nguyen (2005a, 2005b, 2008a, 2008b). It is much more varied in terms of topics of criticism as well as interlocutor role relationships, and thus requires a much wider range of realization strategies. 'Hints' and 'sarcasms,' for example, were almost absent in Nguyen (*ibid.*) but occurred with quite high frequency in the present study. However, the observed differences might also result from the employment of different methods for data collection in the studies compared. Nguyen (*ibid.*) made use of naturally occurring discourse, whereas the present study employed RP data. Obviously, further research should be continued to understand how this neglected speech act set is performed in various social domains and role relationships.

Like many other ILP studies (see Kasper & Rose 2002; Ellis 2008 for a comprehensive review), the present study also reveals salient differences between the learners and the NSs in their pragmatic strategies. For example, unlike the NSs who made quite regular use of all strategies, the learners relied predomi-

nantly on ‘direct criticism’ and ‘requests for change.’ The learners also opted out for different reasons than the NSs in those situations where both groups found criticizing inappropriate, and varied their pragmatic choices less considerably according to context. Furthermore, where learners used the same strategy as the NSs, they differed greatly in their choice of linguistic resources for expressing their meanings and mitigating devices. These findings are not surprising given the complexity of the speech act of criticizing. As Murphy & Neu (2006) have pointed out, even NSs need to pre-plan how to perform challenging acts; thus, it can be expected that learners might experience considerable difficulty. Given that learner difficulty in the pragmatic area is often perceived by NSs as rudeness rather than a lack of competence in the L2 (Thomas 1983; Boxer 1993), instruction at the pragmatic level is no doubt necessary and desirable. The question, however, is how much pedagogical intervention is optimal, because unlike the area of grammar, pragmatics is closely related to the issue of culture and identity. While the above findings might reflect learners’ non-target pragmatic competence, it would be unreasonable to equate every pragmatic feature in their criticism that is different from the NS use with a pragmatic failure. Nor would it be reasonable to expect them to adopt the NS pragmatic norms, especially if these conflict with their own systems of values and beliefs (see Kasper & Rose 2002; Lo Castro 2003). Thus, L2 pragmatics teaching, while giving learners knowledge to make an informed choice, should also allow for their subjectivity and social claims, as long as this does not interfere with successful communication (see Thomas 1983).

Finally, despite some interesting insights, the findings of the present study are still exploratory and should be treated with caution due to the fact that the study involves only a small sample size and does not employ retrospective methods to gain an emic understanding of the informants’ pragmatic decision-making. These limitations should definitely be addressed in future studies in order to generate more conclusive findings.

Bionote

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Appendix A: Description of role play situations

Situation 1: Alison is your good friend and the same age as you. Today you were going to a party together. When you came to pick her up, you saw her wearing a new jacket. You thought her jacket did not match her trousers. There were only you and her in her place.

Situation 2: Alison is your good friend and the same age as you. Today you were going to a party together. When you came to pick her up, you saw her wearing a new jacket. Before you both got out of the house, Alison asked you: ‘Do you think I should wear this jacket to the party?’ You thought her jacket did not match her trousers. There were only you and her in her place.

Situation 3: You are a new university student. Last Friday your class organized a camping picnic for you to mix and to get to know each other better. Now Alison is your new classmate and the same age as you. When you and she were preparing the food for the class, you tasted the soup that she cooked and you thought it was a bit salty. There were only you and her in the cooking area.

Situation 4: You are a new university student. Last Friday your class organized a camping picnic for you to mix and to get to know each other better. Now Alison is your new classmate and the same age as you. When you and she were preparing the food for the class, she asked you to taste the soup that she cooked and asked: ‘What do you think?’ You thought it was a bit salty. There were only you and her in the cooking area.

Situation 5: You work in a company. Now Alison is your boss and is 10 years older than you. At the staff meeting today, she said she was thinking about constructing a new plant in province A. You did not think it was a good idea because province A did not seem a big market for the company’s products. You have been working as her assistant for a long time.

Situation 6: You work in a company. Now Alison is your boss and is 10 years older than you. At the staff meeting today, she said she was thinking about constructing a new plant in province A and turned to you and asked: ‘What do you think?’ You did not think it was a good idea because province A did not seem a big market for the company’s products. You have been working as her assistant for a long time.

Situation 7: You work in an office as a mid rank executive. Now Alison is your new subordinate. She started working here a month ago and is 10 years younger than you. She is hard working and efficient but she is usually very late for work. Every time she has an excuse for this. You feel really annoyed about this.

Situation 8: You work in an office as a mid rank executive. Now Alison is your new subordinate. She started working here a month ago and is 10 years

younger than you. She is hard working and efficient but she is usually very late for work. Every time she has an excuse for this. You feel really annoyed about this. This morning she was half an hour late again and when she passed your desk, she said: ‘Good morning. I’m sorry. Today my car broke down again.’

Appendix B: Sample participants’ role play cards

INSTRUCTION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

You will talk with Alison in the following role-play situations. Take some minutes to read the descriptions of the situations. Try to imagine yourself in the situations and respond to them as you would do in real life.

It is important that you understand these situations completely, so before you start, you are encouraged to ask questions if you find something you do not understand.

When you are ready, please let Alison know. Your role-play conversations will be audio-taped. Please also let Alison know whenever you want to move on to a new situation.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Situation 1:

Imagine that Alison was your good friend and the same age as you. Today you were going to a party together. When you came to pick her up, you saw her wearing a new jacket. You thought her jacket did not match her trousers. There were only you and her in her place.

Question 1: Say to what extent you can agree with this statement:

I think I could imagine myself being in this situation

1 2 3 4 5

Completely disagree

Completely agree

If you circle 1 or 2, go to situation 2

If you circle 3, or 4, or 5, go to Question 2

Question 2: Would you normally say something in this situation?

Circle the score that best fits you.

1 2 3 4 5

Definitely no

Definitely yes

If you circle 1 or 2, go to situation 2.

If you circle 3, or 4, or 5, go to Question 3.

Question 3: If you did say something, what would you say?

Start your role play now. After you finish your role play, go to situation 2.

Situation 2:

Imagine that Alison was your good friend and the same age as you. Today you were going to a party together. When you came to pick her up, you saw her wearing a new jacket. **Before you both got out of the house, Alison asked you: “Do you think I should wear this jacket to the party?”.** You thought her jacket did not match her trousers. There were only you and her in her place.

Question 1: Say to what extent you can agree with this statement:

I think I could imagine myself being in this situation

1 2 3 4 5

Completely disagree

Completely agree

If you circle 1 or 2, go to situation 3.

If you circle 3, or 4, or 5, go to Question 2

Question 2: What would you say in this situation?

Start your role play now. After you finish your role play, go to situation 3.

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