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| Title | Learning to communicate in a globalized world: To what extent do school textbooks facilitate the development of intercultural pragmatic competence? |
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| Source | <i>RELC Journal</i> , 42(1), 17-30 |
| Published by | SAGE Publications |

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Nguyen, T. T. M. (2011). Learning to communicate in a globalized world: To what extent do school textbooks facilitate the development of intercultural pragmatic competence? *RELC Journal*, 42(1), 17-30. doi: 10.1177/0033688210390265

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0033688210390265>

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This is the final draft of Nguyen, T.T.M. (2011). Learning to communicate in a globalized world: To what extent do school textbooks facilitate the development of intercultural pragmatic competence? [RELC Journal](#) 42 (1), 17-30. It may contain minor errors.

Learning to communicate in a globalized world: To what extent do school textbooks facilitate the development of intercultural pragmatic competence?

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Abstract

Although a key component in English language teaching programs, English textbooks have been criticized for not offering classroom learners adequate opportunity for learning authentic language (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Grant and Starks, 2001; Wong, 2002; Vellenga, 2004). This is because instead of making use of language samples that native speakers actually produce, many textbooks have drawn on native speakers' intuition about language use, which might not always be reliable (Wolfson, 1989a). This article reports on the finding of a study which aims to analyze and evaluate the pragmatic content of a recently developed series of textbooks intended for use in

Vietnam's upper-secondary schools. Specifically, the article examines how speech acts are linguistically presented in the textbooks and whether adequate contextual and meta-pragmatic information is provided to facilitate the learning of these speech acts. The article also draws implications regarding the writing of ESL/EFL materials for developing intercultural communicative competence in the context of English as a Global Language.

Keywords

Pragmatic competence, speech acts, textbook evaluation, EFL learners, English as a Global Language, intercultural communication

Introduction

Pragmatic competence is the knowledge that enables a speaker to express his/ her meanings and intentions via speech acts (e.g. requests, invitations, disagreements and so on) appropriately within a particular social and cultural context of communication. This knowledge involves both having linguistic means for expressing speech acts and understanding the socio-cultural constraints on the use of these means (Canale, 1983). Pragmatic competence is essential for effective communication and constitutes one of the core components of one's 'communicative competence' (see Canale and Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Bachman, 1990; and Bachman and Palmer, 1996).

Previous research into intercultural communication has shown that performing speech acts in a second language (L2) can be a challenging task for many L2 learners due to the inherent differences that exist between their first language (L1) and culture and the target language (TL) and culture (see Kasper and Rose, 2002). Very often, these differences have caused miscommunication (Thomas, 1983). Unfortunately, unlike grammatical errors, learners' difficulties in L2 pragmatics appear to be much less tolerated by native speakers (NS) and are often attributed to rudeness (Boxer and Pickering, 1995). These findings suggest a need for more emphasis on pragmatics in the L2 classroom (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005). In particular, language pedagogy needs to allow L2 learners to explore the socio-cultural norms of the NS community and the various ways they constrain the language use by this community (see Rose and Kasper,

2001). While the call is for an increase in L2 pragmatics instruction, it also emphasizes that this instruction should respect learners' own culture and language, and allow for their subjectivity and social claims (see Kasper, 1997). This is because the goal of L2 learning might not necessarily be to achieve a native-like pragmatic competence. Perhaps L2 learners only target at becoming competent L2 users while maintaining their cultural identity (Siegal, 1996; Hinkel, 1996; Ellis, 2008). In other words, they learn a L2 as a tool for communication rather than as a language for identification as do they when they learn their L1 (House, 2003).

While raising learners' awareness of NS socio-cultural norms is crucial, this is not a simple task when it comes to the English language, where the NS community is certainly not a homogenous group (see Kachru, 1989, 1999) and where New English varieties increasingly come into being (Yano, 2001; Graddol, 2006). With the vast and fast growing number of English L2 speakers, NS norms might become less relevant as fewer interactions would involve an NS (Graddol, 2006). A pedagogical approach employing only a single NS model would therefore be unlikely to cater to learners' communication needs in a wider diversity of contexts and reflect this recent global development of English (McKay, 2002, 2003). If the goal of English Language Teaching (ELT) pedagogy is to train English speakers who will be communicating in a globalized world, pragmatic competence needs to be redefined by a broader set of knowledge and abilities than the knowledge of the target culture norms alone. It needs

to be seen as the capacity of individuals to be aware of the differences that exist between their own system of beliefs and values and that of their interlocutors and the capacity to negotiate these differences so that common understanding is achieved and solidarity is established (see Brumfit, 2003; Crawford, 2006; Nunn, 2007 for a similar discussion). This competence can be achieved only by a pedagogy that advocates cultural and linguistic diversity and that respects learner individuality and system of beliefs and values.

The textbook is 'the visible heart of any ELT program' (Sheldon, 1988: 237). In an English as a foreign language (EFL) context it may even constitute the main and perhaps only source of language input that learners receive and the basis for language practice that occurs both inside and outside the classroom (Richards, 2005). However, previous appraisals of commercially produced textbooks have pointed out that many textbooks tend to offer classroom learners little opportunity for learning L2 pragmatics (see Pearson, 1986; Myers-Scotton and Bernstein, 1988; Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan, and Reynold, 1991; Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Grant and Starks, 2001; Wong, 2002; Vellenga, 2004). This is firstly because many textbooks either do not present or they present speech acts unrealistically. Boxer and Pickering (1995), for example, found that textbooks generally do not contain indirect complaints (i.e. complaining about oneself or someone/ something that is not present in the conversation) as a solidarity-establishing strategy. Bouton (1996) pointed out that the

textbook that he investigated taught invitations that rarely occurred in published native speaker's (NS) corpora. What is more, textbooks sometimes stress one semantic formula over others or provide misleading information. Han (1992), for example, found that the Korean English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in her study frequently resorted to the formulaic "thank you" as a compliment response because they learned from Korean ELT material that this was the only correct way to respond to a compliment. The reason for the unrealistic description of speech acts in many textbooks is these textbooks are based largely on NS intuition about how speech acts are linguistically expressed instead of making use of authentic speech samples (Boxer and Pickering, 1985). As research has shown, in contrast to intuition about language forms or grammar, NS intuition about language use is generally unreliable (Wolfson, 1989a) and therefore cannot adequately inform instructional materials (Boxer and Pickering, 1995).

Further, what also adds to the difficulty in learning how to communicate intentions via textbooks is many textbooks seem unhelpful in teaching appropriate rules of using different speech acts. In order to use a speech act appropriately, learners need to know not only linguistic resources to express it but also the rules of use. However, previous research has indicated that textbooks generally provide insufficient information regarding when and for what purpose it is appropriate to make use of a speech act and which expressions would be appropriate in a particular situation (i.e. meta-pragmatic

information) (Crandall and Basturkmen, 2004). Teacher's manuals, unfortunately, rarely supplement this information (Vellenga, 2004). It is owing to these potential problems that textbooks should be carefully evaluated before being used for a language program. Textbook evaluation helps the managerial and teaching staff select the most appropriate materials available for a particular course. It also helps to identify the strengths and weaknesses of a particular textbook that is already in use. This is to inform teachers in the process of textbook adaptation and decision-making for the next course (Ellis, 1997).

Given that L2 learners need to be taught how to use speech acts appropriately for successful real-world communication (Bardovi-Harlig and Taylor, 2003), the present study investigates the opportunity for learning pragmatics via a currently developed set of textbooks intended for upper-secondary school students in Vietnam, with a view to proposing implications for both textbook developers and teachers who will be using these textbooks as well as for those in similar teaching contexts. The study is part of a larger textbook evaluation project funded by RECL Singapore, which aims to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the above-mentioned set of textbooks and to inform teachers in the process of textbook adaptation and decision-making (see Nguyen, 2007a). Drawing on the existing body of cross-cultural and intercultural pragmatics research, this study will look specifically at (1) the range and distribution of the speech acts included in these textbooks, (2) the linguistic presentations of these speech acts and

the kind of contextual and meta-pragmatic information accompanying them, and (3) the extent to which these presentations consider English use in the globalized context as discussed earlier.

The analysis and evaluation of the pragmatic contents of the textbooks

The textbook set analyzed in this study include three textbooks *English 10*, *English 11*, and *English 12* (each accompanied by a students' workbook and teacher's manual), intended for Vietnamese Grade 10 (aged 16), Grade 11 (aged 17), and Grade 12 (aged 18) students, who have been studying English for at least three years by the time they reach upper-secondary school (starting in Grade 10). The book claimed to adopt a theme-based syllabus and to follow a "learner-centered approach and communicative approach with task-based teaching being the central teaching method" (*English 10 Teacher's Manual*: 12). The following sections analyze and discuss the books together with their accompanying materials with respect to (1) the range and distribution of the speech acts included, (2) the linguistic presentations of these speech acts, and (3) the type of contextual and meta-pragmatic information accompanying these presentations.

Range and distribution of speech acts

Firstly, findings indicate that the textbooks under inquiry and their accompanying materials tended to cover a good variety of speech acts. Table 1 shows a total number of 27 speech acts that were taught and practiced in the three books and their

accompanying workbooks, ranging from basic conversational skills such as ‘opening and closing a conversation’ to more challenging ones such as expressing ‘agreements’ and ‘disagreement’, ‘requesting’, ‘apologizing’ and so on. Among the three books, *English 10* presented more speech acts (20/27) than both *English 11* (15/27) and *English 12* (8/27). The fact that some of the speech acts recurred across the three books suggested that learners were given opportunities to practice and revise them over the years.

Table 1: Range of speech acts presented in *English 10*, *English 11*, and *English 12*.

| | English 10 | | English 11 | | English 12 | |
|--|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| | <i>SB</i> | <i>WB</i> | <i>SB</i> | <i>WB</i> | <i>SB</i> | <i>WB</i> |
| 1. Accepting invitations | | x | | x | | |
| 2. Accepting suggestions | | x | | x | | |
| 3. Advising | | x | | | | |
| 4. Agreeing | x | x | x | | x | |
| 5. Asking for advice | | x | | | | |
| 6. Asking opinions | x | x | x | x | | |
| 7. Apologizing | | x | | | | |
| 8. Closing a conversation | x | | | | | |
| 9. Comforting | | | | x | | |
| 10. Complaining | | x | | x | | |
| 11. Complimenting | | x | | | x | |
| 12. Declining invitations/ suggestions | | | | x | | |
| 13. Disagreeing | x | | x | | x | |
| 14. Exclaiming | | x | | | | |
| 15. Expressing regrets | x | | | | | |
| 16. Giving opinions | x | x | x | x | x | |
| 17. Inviting | | x | | x | | |
| 18. Opening a conversation | x | x | | x | | |
| 19. Persuading | | | x | | | |
| 20. Predicting | | | | | x | |
| 21. Responding to bad news | x | | | | | |

| | | | | | | |
|------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|----------|---|---|---|
| 22. Requesting | | x | x | x | | |
| 23. Responding to requests | | | x | | | |
| 24. Suggesting | x | x | x | x | | |
| 25. Responding to thanks | | | | | | x |
| 26. Responding to compliments | | | | | x | |
| 27. Thanking | | x | | | | x |
| Total number of speech acts | 20 | 15 | 8 | | | |

(SB: Student's book, WB = Workbook)

However, when looking more closely at both groups of recurring and non-recurring speech acts, it seemed that their distribution across the books was neither patterned nor soundly justified. For instance, one would wonder what would make 'opening a conversation' more challenging than 'closing a conversation' or 'responding to bad news' and 'persuading' such that the former speech act was practiced at all three grade levels while the latter ones were not. Similarly, it was surprising to find that 'advising' and 'apologizing' were not 'recycled' in higher grade levels, although they were found considerably challenging even for L2 learners with fairly advanced grammatical competence (see Cohen, Olshtain, and Rosenstein, 1986; Nguyen, 2005, 2007b). Also, there did not seem to be any sound reasons why such a highly formulaic speech act as 'responding to thanks' was introduced much later than some other speech acts whose realizations might require a higher degree of linguistic complexity and pragmatic sophistication, for example 'advising', 'suggesting', 'complaining', 'disagreeing', 'declining an invitation/ suggestion', 'requesting' and 'responding to requests' (see Ellis, 2008 for a review of relevant studies) (Table 1).

Presentations of contextual and meta-pragmatic information

When looking at the contextual presentations of the different speech acts, the findings also seemed to suggest an inadequate treatment. The textbooks showed two typical ways of presenting speech acts, i.e. using dialogues (Example 1) and using lists of useful expressions (Example 2), as illustrated below.

Example 1

Task 1. Practice reading these dialogues, paying attention to how people give and respond to compliments in each situation.

Phil: *You really have a beautiful blouse, Barbara, I've never seen such a perfect thing on you.*

Barbara: *Thank you, Phil. That's a nice compliment.*

Peter: *Your hairstyle is terrific, Cindy!*
Thanks, Peter. I think I've finally found a style that looks decent and is easy to handle.

Tom: *I thought your tennis game was a lot better today, Tony.*

Tony: *You've got to be kidding! I thought it was terrible!*

(English 12 student's book: 32-33)

Example 2

Task 1. Study the expressions and practice saying them aloud.

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Giving your opinion | <i>I think .../ I believe .../ In my opinion, .../ From my point of view, .../ As I see it, ...</i> |
| Strongly agreeing | <i>I quite agree/ I agree with you completely/ Absolutely!/ That's right!</i> |
| Partly agreeing | <i>Well, I see your point but .../ I don't quite agree/ To a certain extent, yes, but ...</i> |

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Disagreeing | <i>I don't agree/ I'm afraid, I disagree/ That's wrong /That's not true!</i> |
| Strongly disagreeing | <i>What nonsense!// What rubbish!// I completely disagree!</i> |

(English 12 student's book: 153)

Regardless of the way they were presented, however, a majority of speech acts were taught and practiced out of context (see above examples). That is, there was no explicit information about the relationship between the speakers, for example, how close they feel to one another, or how likely can one impose wants on the other. Nor was there a description of the contextual variables that might help to judge the degree of imposition of the speech acts involved (see Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987). In some other cases, the relationship between the speakers could be inferred from their roles (e.g. customer and salesperson, father and son, patient and doctor). Nevertheless, the textbooks seemed to offer little attempt, either explicit or implicit, to draw students' attention to this variable and its effects on the speech produced. Unfortunately, the teacher's manuals also did not provide guidance on how to present these speech acts more communicatively.

Findings also seemed to suggest an inadequate amount of meta-pragmatic information which was included for each speech act. Meta-pragmatic information is about when, where, and to whom it is appropriate to perform a particular speech act and what expression would or would not be appropriate in a particular context of culture and context of situation. Unfortunately, out of the 27 speech acts that were taught,

meta-pragmatic information was available only for ‘agreements’ and ‘disagreements’ as seen in Example 2 above. Nonetheless, this information seemed to benefit only Grade 12 students because it was provided only in *English 12* but not in the lower grade textbooks *English 10* and *English 11*. Also, the information was only minimal in the sense that it was concerning only the relative degree of directness, for example saying ‘*I agree with you completely*’ shows a strong agreement while saying ‘*I completely disagree*’ indicates a strong disagreement. No other explanation was given regarding when, where, and to whom each of these expressions might be used. Other important and potentially face-damaging speech acts such as ‘advising’, ‘suggesting’, ‘complaining’, ‘requesting’, and ‘declining an invitation or offer’ (Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987) were also not presented with any essential meta-pragmatic information. Nevertheless, informal talks with teachers revealed they rarely supplemented this information.

Providing contextual clues and meta-pragmatic information on politeness or norms of appropriateness is essential for learners to understand differential socio-cultural constraints on the use of speech acts in different cultures. As Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) have pointed out, a consideration of such contextual clues as the degree of social distance between speakers (D), their relative power status (P), and the degree of imposition of the speech act involved (R) helps one in deciding how to go about achieving politeness in performing this speech act. Further, as shown in previous cross-

cultural and intercultural pragmatics research, these D, P, and R factors might exert differential effects in different cultures (see Ellis, 2008; Nguyen, 2005, 2007b for a review) and a lack of awareness of these variations would cause difficulties in intercultural communication. For example, Beebe and Takahashi (1989) found that Japanese speakers tended to use a status-congruent speech style when disagreeing with or chastising lower-status interlocutors whereas higher-status American English interlocutors tried to avoid displaying an overt power difference. As a consequence, a Japanese NS might inadvertently present himself/ herself as an untactful or even rude interlocutor, should s/he ‘transfer’ his/ her L1 conversational style when involved in oppositional talks with a lower-status American interlocutor.

When it comes to “complimenting”, previous research has shown that although this speech act tends to serve as an important social strategy for building social relationships and solidarity (Wolfson and Manes, 1980), not knowing the rules for using it in the interlocutor’s culture could possibly cause embarrassment or even offense (Billmyer, 1990). For example, Holmes and Brown (1987) demonstrated how a non-native speaking student’s compliment on his female NS teacher’s dress had failed because of his unawareness of restrictions on compliments by males to females and by lower-status to higher-status interlocutors in the target culture. Similarly, ‘responding to compliments’ can also cause problems in intercultural communication since different cultures tend to accept different types of responses (Wolfson, 1989b). While bluntly

refuting a compliment in American English could present oneself as rude or uncooperative (Wolfson, 1989b), too hastily accepting it in Chinese could otherwise suggest an inflated ego (Rose, 2001). For many English NSs, 'responding to compliments' requires relatively sophisticated pragmatic skills because of the conflicting conversational principles involved (Herbert, 1989). On the one hand, speakers need to 'maximize agreement' between themselves; on the other, they also need to 'minimize self-praise' (see Leech, 1983). It could thus be easily anticipated that this speech act may present even more challenge to NNS speakers, both because of their lower linguistic competence and less sophisticated pragmatic abilities, and because of the potentially conflicting beliefs and values between their own cultures and the target cultures. Obviously, in light of these studies, learning speech acts without opportunities to uncover relevant contextual information and differential operations of politeness in different cultures would cause L2 learners considerable difficulty adjusting themselves to unpredictable intercultural interactions. This might be even more the case for EFL learners in an input-poor learning environment such as Vietnam where English instruction is restricted to only a few class hours a week and is rarely supported by any frequent exposure to English use outside the classroom.

Linguistic presentations of speech acts

An analysis of the linguistic presentations of the speech acts in *English 10*, *English 11*, and *English 12* tended to indicate that not all of these presentations seemed to match

what previous research has found about speech act use in both naturalistic and clinically elicited discourse. For example, all the three books presented rather 'bald' disagreements such as '*No. That's not a good idea*' (*English 10* student's book: 67), '*I don't think that's a good idea*' (*English 11* student's book: 157), '*I don't quite agree*', '*I don't agree*', '*I'm afraid, I disagree*', '*I completely disagree*', '*That's wrong*', '*That's not true!*', '*What nonsense!*', '*What rubbish!*' (*English 12* student's book: 153). These expressions were completely absent in both Australian English and Vietnamese data reported in Nguyen (2005, 2007b). In this set of data, 'disagreements' were normally prefaced with 'token agreements', followed by the conjunction 'but' to signal contrastive ideas (see Table 2). This is because oppositional talks might cause offense to the parties involved and thus need to be delivered in a less explicit manner to reduce the potential face-threat. Pearson (1986) reported similar findings about the preference for 'downgraded' disagreements by American English NSs and the mismatch between what is presented in ESL textbooks and NS authentic speech samples. Thus, as argued further by Pearson, by presenting non-representative NS disagreements, textbooks might mislead learners to falsely believe that English NSs tend to disagree more frequently and more directly than is the case, and that it is appropriate to use these unmitigated forms to express oppositional ideas, which might consequently cause learners to be perceived as impolite.

Table 2: Some frequently occurring expressions of disagreements reported in Nguyen (2005, 2007b).

| English disagreements | Vietnamese disagreements |
|--------------------------------|--|
| <i>Yes, but ...</i> | <i>Không, tớ nghĩ là (No, I think ...)</i> |
| <i>It's true but ...</i> | <i>Ừ nhưng mà ... (Yes, but)</i> |
| <i>Well, maybe but ...</i> | <i>Nhưng mà ... (But)</i> |
| <i>But ...</i> | <i>Nhưng mà tớ nghĩ là ... (But I think)</i> |
| <i>But I think ...</i> | <i>Theo tớ thì ... (I think ...)</i> |
| <i>Well, my feeling is ...</i> | |
| <i>I think ...</i> | |

Another case that also attracted comments was the linguistic representation of ‘compliment responses’ found in *English 12* (pp. 32-33). Five major pragmatic strategies for responding to compliments were presented, including ‘compliment upgrade’ (*‘Thanks, Peter. I think I’ve finally found a style that looks decent and is easy to handle’*), ‘return of compliment’ (*‘Thank you, Phil. That’s a nice compliment’*), ‘comment history’ (*‘I’m glad you like it. I bought it at a shop near my house a few days ago’*), ‘disagreement token’ (*‘You’ve got to be kidding!’*), and ‘compliment downgrade’ (*‘I thought it was terrible!’*) (*English 12* student’s book: 33). Except for ‘disagreement token’ and ‘compliment downgrade’, the remaining pragmatic strategies tended to occur with somewhat high frequencies in compliment responses by equal status NSs of certain varieties of English, e.g. American English, Australian English, and New Zealand English (Holmes 1986; Miles 1994; Tran 2004). However, these strategies appeared to hardly reflect the pragmatic choice by equal status Vietnamese NSs, who

seem inclined to reject rather than to accept compliments (Tran, 2004). As argued earlier, the goal of L2 learning is not necessarily to achieve the native-like competence. This is because learners do not always desire to totally converge with NS rules of speaking (Kasper, 1997). On the contrary, they may only attempt at becoming competent L2 users while maintaining their own cultural identity. In fact, Giles, Coupland, and Coupland's (1991) have also pointed out that in many situations successful communication means optimal rather than total convergence. On these grounds, therefore, it is argued that L2 teaching needs to allow for students' subjectivity and social claims instead of imposing NS models on them at the expense of their own systems of beliefs and values. Therefore, besides offering NS authentic input, L2 pragmatics instruction should also allow learners the opportunity to develop awareness of their own L1 pragmatic norms and the freedom to make their choices in light of their knowledge of both L1 and TL pragmatics (Thomas, 1983). In the case of 'compliment responses' as shown above, it would have been helpful if the learners had been guided to 'unpack' the L1-L2 differences and reflect on the extent to which they would feel comfortable to use the TL norms. Unfortunately, such an emphasis was absent in both the textbook and the teacher's manual.

'Declining invitations/ suggestions' was another speech act whose linguistic presentation was found problematic when compared against the findings of previous speech act research. 'Invitation declination' was introduced in *English 11* workbook

via a jumbled dialogue (see Example 3 below). As students reconstructed this dialogue, they also learned how to express their acceptance or rejection of an invitation. As can be seen, alongside with realization strategies that were often found in proficient speakers' data such as 'regret' (*'What a pity!'*), 'alternative' (*'What about ...?'*), 'Excuse' (*'But I am not very good at athletics'*), the dialogue also included those strategies that were hardly ever observed in authentic discourse, for example, 'direct declination' (*'No. I don't like the Quiz'*) and criticism (*'It's so boring'*) (see Beebe and Cummings, 1996). As Gass and Houck (2009: 2) have indicated, declining someone's invitation or suggestion is inherently face-threatening and thus requires skillful 'face-saving maneuvers to accommodate the noncompliant nature of the act'. Learning abrupt refusals, therefore, is unlikely to help one acquire the necessary social skills to participate successfully in social negotiations and maintain solidarity relationships with other community members.

Example 3

C. Speaking: Rearrange the following sentences of the conversation between Nam and Lan. Number the sentences in order. Number 1 has been done for you as an example.

- Nam: *What a pity! What about the Poetry Reciting Competition?*
- Lan: *It's so boring. Why don't we go to the Athletics Meeting*
- (1) Nam: *Which competition are you going to take part in this afternoon?*
- Lan: *I haven't decided. There is a General Knowledge Quiz that might be interesting. Shall we go there?*
- Nam: *No, I don't like the Quiz. What do you think of the Art Competition?*
- Lan: *Yes. It's a great idea. We'll have a good chance to practice our*

English.

Nam: *It sounds OK. But I am not very good at athletics. Would you like to go to the English Song Contest?*

Lan: *Oh, it's good fun. But I find it quite hard to paint or draw.*

Nam: *And people must love you because you have a sweet voice.*

Lan: *I hope so.*

(English 10 workbook: 44-45)

Finally, the presentation of ‘suggestions’ in *English 10* and *English 11* also seemed to display an unsatisfactory fit with what has been found previously about the NS use of this speech act. In both textbooks, ‘suggestions’ were expressed entirely only by means of the semantic formula ‘*You/ we should*’ without any linguistic devices to help modify its illocutionary force (see Example 4). It is noteworthy that this expression may have reflected an influence of Vietnamese pragmatics. As reported in Nguyen (2005, 2007b), this expression was frequently used by Vietnamese EFL learners when giving suggestions to their peers in peer-feedback sessions of their writing classes, whereas it was extremely scarcely used by Australian English NSs, who appeared to prefer a more indirect conversational style. The learners’ suggestions were also rarely ‘downgraded’ by means of linguistic devices such as ‘hedges’ (e.g. ‘*sort of*’), ‘downtoners’ (e.g. ‘*perhaps*’, ‘*probably*’, ‘*maybe*’), ‘past tense with present time reference’ (e.g. ‘*could have done*’), or ‘embedded structures’ (e.g. ‘*if we could do this*’), which were found abundant in the NS suggestions. Nguyen (2005, 2007b) attributed these different styles of verbal interaction to the different perceptions of politeness in the Vietnamese and Australian cultures. The Vietnamese culture tends to emphasize

‘involvement’, by which standard the act of giving suggestions is not necessarily seen as ‘interfering’ or ‘face-threatening’. By contrast, the Australian culture tends to prefer ‘personal space’; thus, the act of trying to change someone’s mind might be perceived as more or less ‘imposing’ and therefore requires more extensive ‘face-work’. While it is by no means suggested that speech acts should be taught based on NS standards at the expense of learners’ cultural values and beliefs, it is believed that learners can benefit enormously from the opportunities to explore NS speech samples and to reflect on the different ways in which politeness is realized in their L1 and the TL. In other words, it is important that instructional materials provide learners sufficient pragmatic information so that they can make informed choices that both fit their systems of values and beliefs and do not break communication.

Example 4

Task 2. Work in groups. Talk about your school problems and offer solutions. Use the suggestions in Task 1.

Example:

A: *Many students cannot buy all the required textbooks. What do you think we should do to help them?*

B: *I think we should ask the school head-master to provide free textbooks for students from low-income families.*

C: *We should collect used textbooks for school libraries.*

(English 11 student’s book: 59)

Conclusion

In sum, this paper has indicated that textbooks do not always constitute an accurate and adequate source of pragmatic information and argued for the need to provide realistic pragmatic models that are necessarily accompanied by adequate explanation of rules of use in order to facilitate learners' development of pragmatic competence in the TL. This task should deserve immediate attention from textbook developers and teachers, particularly those working in the EFL context given that their learners have relatively limited access to authentic input and rely almost only on textbooks for language learning. Unfortunately, however, this has been an overdue task despite that communicative language teaching and its implications for developing 'real-world communication skills' have been around for more than three decades (Burns, 1998).

Another argument that the present study has put forward is the new development in the role of English has urged teachers and textbook writers to reconsider the types of instructional materials that can most effectively prepare learners for communication in a wider and more diverse world. As discussed earlier, if the goal of ELT is to develop fluent speakers of English who are capable of accommodating themselves to a wide variety of cultural perspectives without losing their own sense of self and identity, any decision to include only 'NS norms' in the curriculum is both limited and limiting. The time has come for textbook writers to consider expanding the range and variety of cultural materials to be included in the curriculum. In the case of ELT in Vietnam's

context, where most intercultural communication takes place between the country and her regional neighbors, it might be helpful for textbook writers to also look into different Asian English varieties besides the ‘norms’ coming from the ‘inner circle’ (Cane, personal communication, November 2007).

Instructional materials should also focus on models of proficient English L2 speakers who can effectively communicate with NS interlocutors rather than insist on the NS ‘standards’ (McKay, 2002, 2003) because, as argued earlier, successful communication means optimal rather than total convergence (see Giles et al.,1991). For this purpose, the substantial body of literature on cross-cultural and intercultural pragmatics should be a rich source of data to inform textbook writers. Finally, ESL/EFL instructional materials should also enrich learners’ knowledge of their own language and culture and empower them to use English to express their unique identity as someone who know and can function in more than one language and culture (McKay, 2002, 2003). A pedagogy that respects learners’ individuality and cultural values is not only conducive to their learning but also recognizes the diverse ways people from different cultures communicate and thus paves the way towards better mutual understanding and appreciation among nations.

Acknowledgements

This paper is based on a textbook evaluation project that I conducted in 2007. I am deeply indebted to SEAMEO RELC for sponsoring my project. I am also greatly thankful to Dr. Willy Renyanda, the supervisor of my project, for his excellent insights and thoughtful comments throughout the project. I would also like to especially thank Dr. Graem Cane, Dr. Hayo Reinders, Dr. Lim Beng Soon, Dr. Chan Yue Weng and Dr. Christopher Ward for their constructive feedback on the study.

Funding

This work was supported by SEAMEO RELC (Grant number RELC 2402/A21)

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