



A Study on the Speech Act of Suggestions in the English Textbooks for the Senior High Schools in China

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Abstract

This paper tries to investigate the presentation of the linguistic forms used to perform the speech act of suggestions in a set of English textbooks used in China. The aims of the research are to see whether there is enough knowledge input of the speech act of suggestions and whether they are suitable for the improvement of language learners' communicative competence. The research discovers that some linguistic forms are overemphasized while some frequently-used sentence patterns are neglected. Besides, many sentences in the selected textbooks are decontextualized and little explicit explanations or background information are provided to explain the functions and usage scenario of the linguistic forms. English textbook should try to provide enough language input of the speech act of suggestions for its users and the presentation of the speech of act of suggestions should be meaningful and diverse.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

Speech Act of Suggestions, Linguistic Forms, Communicative Competence, English Textbooks

1. Introduction

As an influential language in the world, English has long been widely used in the international communication and other important fields as science, entertainment and academic research. English is learned and used by a larger number of people all over the world. It is undeniable that English has gained the dominant

place in multiple industries. Besides, China nowadays attaches great importance to the English education and regards English as an important tool to promote Chinese culture and to tell the China's story to the world. However, the English teaching in China has long focused on the linguistic knowledge and formal structure of language while neglecting the teaching of pragmatic knowledge, which might be a hinder to the improvement of communicative competence in English (Jin, 2015) [1]. Therefore, how to master this language and use it skillfully in the international communication and cultural exchange is an important and pressing question.

Hymes (1972) [2] first uses the term, communicative competence, to describe the ability and skills that language speakers and listeners need to acquire in order to gain effective and successful communication under different social and cultural conditions. Communicative competence plays a key role in language learners' language level. However, the teaching of English in China has long focused on the grammar, vocabularies and other linguistic knowledge, which might be a hinder to the improvement of students' communicative competence in English. Besides, Thomas (1983) [3] holds a view that if language learners commit grammatical mistakes, the listeners will only think that the speaker's language level is low. If he or she makes pragmatic errors, the listeners might feel offended and think that the speaker is a little bit impolite and rude. Therefore, finding effective and efficient methods to improve language learners' communicative competence is of paramount importance.

Textbook is one of the most important learning resources for language learning and it is the primary tool for language learners to master a new language. Huang (2019) [4] thinks that textbook is a significant factor influencing effective language learning. She reckons that many English language textbooks do not meet the needs of learners. As for the students at school, school textbooks nearly become the sole source for their English learning. Textbooks play a key role in providing students with language input. Therefore, a well-designed textbook is critical for students and English educators should shoulder the responsibility to select and evaluate English textbooks from diverse perspectives.

This paper investigates a set of English textbooks used in the high schools in China with the aims to see whether there is enough language input of the speech act of suggestions and whether they are suitable for the improvement of language learners' communicative competence. This set of textbooks is widely used in many places and is well-accepted by many English teachers and educators in China. Besides, the students in high school have already learned English for some years, which means that their language level probably have reached a certain level. Thus, it might be a good time for them to learn more pragmatic knowledge in order to improve their communicative competence. Therefore, the investigation on the presentation of the speech act of suggestions in this set of textbooks is of practical significance. There are seven books in this set of textbooks. The research adapts the taxonomy of linguistic suggestion realization strategies proposed by Alicia Martínez-Flor (2005) [5]. The theoretical frame-

work will be discussed in detail in the following part.

2. Theoretical Framework

Searle (1969) [6] defined the speech act of suggestions as an instruction that the speaker believes it will benefit the hearer and the hearer can choose to do it or not freely. Although the suggestion is for the benefit of the addressee, the speech act of suggestions is regarded as a face-threatening act and is thought as intrusion into the hearer's personal space (Brown & Levinson, 1987) [7]. DeCapua and Huber (1995) [8] believes that making suggestions is perhaps one of the most ubiquitous speech acts, which is often an integral part of daily conversational interaction and happens in many different types of social situations. This makes it necessary for students to learn how to make suggestions appropriately. Therefore, investigating the English textbooks from the perspective of the speech act of suggestions is meaningful.

In data collection, the author found that many speech acts of suggestions presented in the textbooks belong to the *inclusive-we* suggestions, which can imply benefits for both the speaker and the hearer (Martínez-Flor, 2005) [5]. *It's a beautiful day. We should make the most of it.* (Book 1, pp. 112). This suggestion is for both the speaker and the hearer's benefits. These speech acts of suggestions appear quite frequently in the selected textbooks. Therefore, the author also includes this type of suggestions when collecting data.

This paper will adopt Martínez-Flor's (2005) [5] classification of the speech act of suggestions. In Martínez-Flor's paper, a comprehensive and detailed taxonomy of suggestion linguistic realization strategies was proposed. She divided the speech act of suggestions into three categories, which are direct suggestions, conventionalized forms, indirect suggestions respectively. The direct suggestions contain the four strategies, *Performative verb*, *Noun of suggestion*, *Imperative* and *Negative imperative*. The conventionalized forms include *Specific formula (interrogative forms)*, *Possibility/Probability*, *Should*, *Need* and *Conditional*. The indirect suggestions contain *Impersonal* and *Hints*. However, some strategies presented in the textbooks are not included in Martínez-Flor's classification. Therefore, based on Jiang's (2006) [9] research, the author adds some linguistic forms into Martínez-Flor's classification to form a more comprehensive classification. Besides, some changes on the classification of the strategies are made based on Jiang's (2006) [9] research in order to better categorize them. The theoretical framework is showed in **Table 1**.

3. Research Procedures

This research adopts both quantitative and qualitative research methods to investigate and analyze the presentation of the speech act of suggestions in the selected English textbooks. Based on the taxonomy above, the samples, which are the sentences from the selected English textbooks used to perform the speech act of suggestions, are collected and recorded manually by the author. Some simple

Table 1. Taxonomy of linguistic suggestion realization strategies.

Type	Strategies	Linguistic Forms	
Direct	Performative verb	I suggest...	
		I advise... I recommend...	
	Noun of suggestion	My suggestion...	
		My advice ...	
Imperative	Try using ...		
	Try to...		
	Let's...		
	Negative imperative	Don't try to...	
Conventionalized Forms	Specific formulae (interrogative forms)	Why don't you...?	
		How about...?	
		What about...?	
		Why not...?	
		Have you thought about...?	
	Modals and semi-modals	We/You must...	
We/You have to...			
We/You need to...			
We/You should...			
We/You shouldn't...			
We/You can...			
We/You could...			
We/You may...			
We/You might...			
We/You had better...			
	Conditional	If I were you, I would...	
Indirect	Impersonal	One thing (that you can do) would be...	
		Here's one possibility...	
There are a number of options that you...			
It would be helpful if you...			
It might be better to...			
A good idea would be			
It would be nice if...			
		Hints	I've heard that...

calculations are done with the help of the calculator. The detailed research procedures are as follows. Firstly, based on Martínez-Flor's (2005) [5] and Jiang's (2006) [9] researches and the content of the selected English textbooks, the author puts forward a comprehensive taxonomy of the linguistic suggestion realization strategies. Secondly, the author conducts a comprehensive study of the seven textbooks involved and collects the data needed for the research. Then the collected data is classified according to the theoretical framework and the frequency of each type is recorded manually. After that, the collected data is analyzed carefully and thoroughly and some tables are presented for better illustrations. Finally, the conclusion is drawn and some pedagogical implications are provided based on the results of the research.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. The Presentations of the Speech Act of Suggestions in the Selected Textbooks

Based on the definition of the speech act of suggestions, the author collected the data in the textbooks. The data are collected and recorded manually. The number and frequency of the speech act of suggestions in each book are showed in **Table 2**.

Table 2. The frequencies of the speech acts of suggestions presented in the selected English textbooks.

Textbooks	Book 1	Book 2	Book 3	Book 4	Book 5	Book 6	Book 7	Total
Total number	62	46	61	25	29	14	40	277
Percentage	22.38%	16.60%	22.02%	9.02%	10.46%	5.05%	14.44%	100%

Table 2 shows that the total number of the presentation of the speech act of suggestions in the textbooks is 277. Among them, Book 1 has the highest number of the speech act of suggestions (62 frequencies), accounting for 22.38% of all the selected textbooks. Book 3 has the second highest number of the speech act of suggestions (61 frequencies), accounting for 22.02% all the selected textbooks. Book 2 has the third highest number of the speech act of suggestions (46 frequencies), which accounts for 16.60% of all the selected textbooks. Book 7 have the fourth highest number of the speech act of suggestions (40 frequencies), which accounts for 14.44% of all the selected textbooks. Book 5 has the fifth highest number of the speech act of suggestions (29 frequencies), which accounts for 10.46% of all the selected textbooks. Book 4 has the sixth highest number of the speech act of suggestions (25 frequencies), accounting for 9.02% of all the selected textbooks. Book 6 have the lowest number of the speech act of suggestions (14 frequencies), which account for 5.05% of all the selected textbooks. The data in the textbooks indicate that the frequency of the presentation of the speech act of suggestions in the textbooks fluctuates to a greater or less

extent. Students can surely get some input of pragmatic knowledge about the speech act of suggestions from the textbooks, which can help students understand the speech act of suggestions and improve their communicative competence to a certain degree.

As we can see from **Table 2**, the Book 1 has the highest number of the speech act of suggestions (62 frequencies). It is because that the language goal of the Unit 4 in the Book 1 is making suggestions. Although this unit aims to teach students how to use less direct language to make suggestions, the linguistic forms presented are mostly direct speech acts. As we mentioned above, the speech act of suggestions is always regarded as a face-threatening act, which might hurt the face of the listener. Therefore, students need to learn how to use less direct linguistic forms to perform the speech act of suggestions. Book 3 has the second highest number of the speech act of suggestions. The Unit 2 and Unit 4 are both about making recommendations. The Unit 2 is about the recommendation of “a person of the year” and the Unit 4 is about the recommendation of “a local artist”.

Krashen (1985) [10] believed that the comprehensible input is the only way to acquire language. He held the view that there should be enough language input during the process of language learning. Besides, Krashen (1985) [10] also put forward another theory, “*i + 1 Hypothesis*”. The “*i*” represents the learner’s current language level, and “*I*” represents the language knowledge level which is slightly higher than the learner’s current language level. To advance from the current level to a higher level, learners must have language input which is a little bit beyond the learner’s current level, and that part of language input must be comprehensible and meaningful. Although, Krashen’s opinions on the importance of linguistic input in the process of language learning are a little bit radical, the critical role of language input in language learning is undeniable. Ellis (2015) [11] held a similar view that the input frequency is viewed as one of the main factors that determine language acquisition. Therefore, it is hard for students to improve their pragmatic competence without enough input of pragmatic knowledge. Besides, as for students at school, school textbooks are almost the sole source of language input. Therefore, whether school textbooks can provide sufficient language knowledge plays a decisive role in improving students’ pragmatic competence. Vellenga (2004) [12] believed that the textbooks occupied the central place in the teaching curriculum and syllabus in most classrooms. The quality and quantity of the language knowledge in the textbooks is critical. Swain (1985) [13] put forward the output hypothesis. Swain (1985) [13] believed that comprehensible input played an important role in the process of language acquisition, but it was difficult to comprehensively improve the L2 level of language learners by relying solely on input. Output is also required if the target language is to be used accurately and fluently. Therefore, without sufficient language input, it is hard for students to produce output. Adequate input of pragmatic knowledge is key to the improvement of students’ pragmatic competence, so textbooks should provide sufficient pragmatic knowledge.

Table 3. The presentations of the speech act of suggestions in terms of the linguistic realization strategies in the selected English textbooks.

Type	Strategies	Numbers (Frequencies)	Total numbers (Frequencies)
Direct	Performative verb	17 (6.13%)	62 (22.38%)
	Noun of suggestion	2 (0.72%)	
	Imperative	43 (15.52%)	
	Negative imperative	0 (0%)	
Conventionalized Forms	Specific formulae (interrogative forms)	28 (10.10%)	203 (73.28%)
	Modals and semi-modals	175 (63.17%)	
	Conditional	0 (0%)	
Indirect	Impersonal	12 (4.33%)	12(4.33%)
	Hints	0 (0%)	

Table 3 shows that in terms of the types of the speech act of suggestions, the textbook clearly prefers the conventionalized forms, with a number of 203, accounting for 73.28% of all of the speech act of suggestions presented in this set of textbooks. Besides, the direct speech act of suggestions has the second highest frequency, which is 62, accounting for 22.38%. In contrast, the indirect speech act of suggestions only appears 12 times in the whole set of textbooks, which accounts for 4.33%. As we mentioned before, although people who makes suggestions always have good intentions of benefiting the hearer, the speech act of suggestions is regarded to some extent face-threatening (Brown & Levinson, 1987) [7]. Matsumura (2001) [14] pointed out that some ESL learners always used direct speech acts in giving advices and suggestions even though indirectness would have been expected by native speakers in specific speech settings. When making suggestions, speakers should seek for more indirect language forms for avoiding hurting the hearer's face and mitigating the imposition. Jiang (2006) [9] also pointed that many English learners have difficulty formulating sociolinguistically appropriate suggestions. He found that the English leaners' suggestions were usually direct, unmitigated and less polite than the native speakers. Therefore, in order to be polite and less obtrusive in making suggestions, language learners should learn how to use the indirect speech act of suggestions, which is critical in the communication with the native speakers. In some specific settings, indirectness maybe more appropriate and polite than directness. All these make it necessary that students should have more language input in terms of the indirect speech act of suggestions and there should be more content in the textbooks about the indirect language forms for making suggestions.

Furthermore, among all the strategies presented in the selected English textbooks, the strategy of *modals and semi-modals* has the highest frequency (175), accounting for 63.17% in all the selected textbooks. The strategy of *imperative*

has the second highest frequency (43), accounting for 15.52% in all the selected textbooks. The strategy of *specific formulae (interrogative forms)* appears 28 times, which accounts for 10.10%. The strategy of *Performative verb* has fourth highest frequency (17), accounting for 6.13% in all the selected textbooks. Then the strategy of *impersonal* appears 12 times, accounting for 4.33% in the whole set of textbooks. The strategy of *noun of suggestion* only appears 2 times, accounting for 0.72% in the selected textbooks. The strategies of *negative imperative, conditional* and *hints* never appears in the whole set of textbooks.

From the data, we can see that the frequencies of the strategy of *modals and semi-modals* are already more than half the total. This strategy belongs to the category of *conventionalized forms*, which is a little bit direct. Gu (2014) [15] pointed out that some Chinese learners overuse the obligation modals like *should*, while underuse less impositive modals like *might*. This indicates their failure to recognize the degree of forcefulness of modal verbs and their insensitivity to register differences (Gu, 2014) [15]. Therefore, the over-presentation of these two forms might cause students to use these two types too often regardless of the context. Besides, some social factors such as age, sex, culture, situation, relationship and status of the interlocutors, might affect the choice of the linguistic patterns in order to communicate appropriately (Trosborg, 1995) [16]. Therefore, students need to learn various linguistic forms when they make suggestions to the hearer in different context. This means that the English textbooks should not overemphasize some certain linguistic structures and the teaching materials should provide enough and various language input for the users. Learning to use the right and appropriate language forms in different situations should be a key part in language learning and it also plays a crucial role in improving students' communicative competence.

What's more, we can see from **Table 3** that there is not any presentation of the *conditionals* and *hints* in all the selected textbooks. However, the *conditionals* are often regarded as an indirect way of making suggestions, showing the politeness of the speaker (Jiang, 2006) [9]. By using the subjunctive mood, the suggestions might be more polite and appropriate. What's more, the use of *hints* is deemed as the most indirect type of speech act that can be employed in order to make a suggestion (Martínez-Flor, 2005) [5]. When a speaker does not want to express his or her intention directly, the speaker can resort to the strategies of *hints* in order to be less direct and impositive (Trosborg, 1995) [16]. Therefore, the lack of the types of *conditionals* and *hints* might be a demerit of this set of textbooks, which might be detrimental to the improvement of students' communicative competence. Mastering the ability to use the indirect speech act of suggestions should be a key part in language learning and teachers should pay more attention on this part to help students improve their communicative competence and avoid pragmatic failures in the communication with the native speakers.

In summary, in order to improve English learners' communicative compe-

tence, the English teaching materials should provide enough and various language input. The English textbooks should not overemphasize some certain linguistic forms while neglect other language structures. Students need to master different sentence patterns used in different situations. In terms of making suggestions to the addressee, students should be able to select the right and appropriate sentence patterns according to the social factors such as age, sex, culture, situation, relationship and status of the interlocutors. Besides, being a face-threatening act, the speech act of suggestions should be mitigated and less direct in order to be polite. Therefore, students should have more input of the pragmatic knowledge about the indirect speech act of suggestions. In this way, students can be polite and their suggestions can be less imposing for the listener. Apparently, this set of textbooks failed to provide enough and various input of the knowledge of the indirect speech act of suggestions. Further, we will discuss the linguistic forms of the speech act of suggestions presented in the selected textbooks.

4.2. The Linguistic Characteristics of the Speech Act of Suggestions

In this section, the linguistic forms of the speech act of suggestions presented in the selected English textbooks will be explored. **Table 4** shows the linguistic forms in the selected English textbooks used to perform the speech act of suggestions.

Table 4. The presentations of the speech act of suggestions in terms of the linguistic forms in the selected English textbooks.

Type	Strategies	Linguistic Forms	Numbers (Frequencies)
Direct	Performative verb	I suggest...	8 (2.88%)
		I advise...	0 (0%)
	Noun of suggestion	I recommend...	9 (3.24%)
		My advice ...	2 (0.72%)
	Imperative	Try using ...	1 (0.36%)
		Try to...	25 (9.02%)
Negative imperative	Let's...	17 (6.13)	
	Don't try to...	0 (0%)	
Conventionalized Forms	Specific formulae (interrogative forms)	Why don't you...?	7 (2.52%)
		How about...?	13 (4.69%)
		What about...?	4 (1.44%)
		Why not...?	2 (0.72%)
		Have you thought about...?	2 (0.72%)

Continued

	Modals and semi-modals	We/You must...	13 (4.69%)
		We/You have to...	9 (3.24%)
		We/You need to...	20 (7.22%)
		We/You should...	49 (17.68%)
		We/You shouldn't...	4 (1.44%)
		We/You can...	36 (12.99%)
		We/You could...	14 (5.05%)
		We/You may...	20 (7.22%)
		We/You might...	3 (1.08%)
		We/You had better...	7 (2.52%)
	Conditional	If I were you, I would...	0 (0%)
Indirect	Impersonal	One thing (that you can do) would be...	0 (0%)
		Here's one possibility...	0 (0%)
		There are a number of options that you...	0 (0%)
		It would be helpful if you...	1 (0.36%)
		It might be better to...	2 (0.72%)
		A good idea would be	9 (3.24%)
		It would be nice if...	0 (0%)
	Hints	I've heard that...	0 (0%)

From **Table 4**, we can see that the sentence pattern, *we/you should...*, appears most frequently in the selected English textbooks. Besides, when talking about how to make suggestions, the textbooks present many sentence patterns, which use *modals and semi-modals* to perform the speech act of suggestions. As we mentioned above, the frequencies of the strategy of *modals and semi-modals* are already more than half the total. However, this kind of linguistic form is a little bit direct, which should be used cautiously. Jiang (2006) [9] also found that many English textbooks emphasized the use of *should*, while the use of *have to* and *need to* was comparatively undervalued. Although it is for the benefit of the listener or both the speaker and the listener, performing the speech act of suggestions by using the sentence structures like *we/you should* and *we/you can...*, is a little bit direct, which might be considered impolite and bossy. Therefore, when presenting the knowledge of the speech act of suggestions, the textbooks should provide explicit explanation of functional differences and socio-contextual preferences (Jiang, 2006) [9]. Different linguistic forms might be needed in different contexts. Therefore, in order to communicate with the native speakers appropriately and successfully, language learners must master the abil-

ity to use different language structures under different situations and with different interlocutors. To improve this ability, language learners must have enough and meaningful language input and the English textbooks should contain this kind of pragmatic knowledge.

Performative verbs. The speech act, which contains the *performative verbs*, is always regarded as the direct speech act. For example, saying *I suggest...*, *I advise...* or *I recommend* is viewed as the most direct way to make suggestions. These performative verbs are usually taught at the earlier stage of language learning and they are frequently used by language learners to make suggestions. Their corresponding nouns as *suggestion* and *advice* have quite similar usage and functions. However, performative verbs and their corresponding nouns are used in suggestions more frequently from the higher-status to the lower-status interlocutor (Jiang, 2006) [9]. The speaker may strongly believe the addressee should follow his instructions. By using these linguistic forms, the speaker seems to be more authoritative and the suggestions will sound more forceful. Therefore, speakers should use these sentence patterns prudently.

The imperative sentences are employed to perform the speech act of suggestions quite often. This strategy also appears frequently in the selected textbooks. However, the use of the imperative sentences to make suggestions sometimes can be impolite and pushy (Martínez-Flor, 2005) [5]. The force of the language might be too strong, which can be inappropriate in some situations. Language learners should not use the imperative sentences to make suggestions unless you have a very close relationship with the interlocutors.

Specific formulae (interrogative forms). The *Wh-questions* are also a frequently-used linguistic forms to make suggestions. The speaker uses an interrogative sentence to express his or her intentions less directly. There are some presentations of these sentence structures in the selected textbooks and textbook users can surely get some knowledge input on this aspect.

Conditional. In some certain context, the speaker might be reluctant to give suggestions to the addressee directly for the suggestions can sound pushy and the listener might feel offended. Therefore, the speaker might use the subjunctive mood to indicate his or her advice less directly. It is a useful way to make suggestions to the hearer without hurting the hearer's face. Sadly, there is no presentation of the strategy of *Conditional* in all the selected English textbooks.

As for the indirect speech act of suggestions, this set of English textbooks only contain a small number of the indirect speech act of suggestions. As we mentioned above, the speech act of suggestions is a face-threatening act, which might hurt the listener's face. Therefore, in order to be polite, the speaker should try to use the indirect speech act of suggestions. *Impersonal* and *Hints* are both regarded as the indirect speech acts of suggestions. Language learner should learn to use them to communicate with the native speakers. Apparently, these textbooks cannot provide enough language input on this aspect.

In summary, different linguistic forms may be preferred under different contexts. Therefore, language learners should learn to use different sentence pat-

terns to communicate with different interlocutors under different situations. In order to improve language learner's communicative competence, language learner should have access to enough knowledge input. English textbooks should try to provide enough language input for users and the presentation of the speech of act of suggestions should be diverse. In this way, can students learn to use appropriate and polite language structures when they make suggestions to others.

5. Conclusion

As an important learning resource for language learning, textbooks play a crucial role in language learning process. Besides, making suggestions is a critical ability in the daily communication. Therefore, this paper tries to investigate the presentation of the knowledge of the speech act of suggestions in the English textbooks for the senior high schools in China. The research finds that in the selected textbooks, some linguistic forms are overemphasized while some frequently-used sentence patterns are neglected. In addition, many sentences presented in the selected textbooks are decontextualized and little explicit explanations or background information are provided to explain the functions and usage scenario of the linguistic forms. The author believes that English textbook should try to provide enough language input of the speech act of suggestions for its users and the presentation of the speech of act of suggestions should be meaningful and diverse.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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