Advice-giving in the English lingua franca classroom

Melody Hallenbeck Nadeau

University at Albany, State University of New York, ED 114, 1400 Washington Avenue, Albany, NY 12222, USA

E-mail: melody.nadeau@gmail.com

1.   Introduction

This paper reports on a research project that examined advice giving in the English lingua franca (ELF) classroom. Considering that the body of literature on ELF and pragmatic research contains a relatively small number of works that are based on naturally occurring classroom interactions (e.g. Mauranen 2003, 2006) this study was undertaken with a view to addressing some questions in this underrepresented area of research. The context involves classes made up of students and lecturers from a number of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds who are learning American English from other nonnative speakers.

It has been suggested (e.g. DeCapua and Dunham 2007; Matsumura 2004) that there are important pragmatic differences between the ways in which advice is given by native speakers and nonnative speakers of American English. Responding to the need for further research to clarify the possible reasons for these differences, this paper explores the effects of proficiency and gender on the advice-giving behaviour of intermediate and advanced nonnative speakers of English. Research questions include the following:

- Does advice given by ELF speakers carry the illocutionary force of commands as opposed to the common native speaker practice of offering suggestions?
- Is there a difference between illocutionary force and level of empathy in advice given by male and female students?
- Finally, is the student's proficiency reflected in his/her advice-giving behaviour, and, if so, in what way?

The results of this study show that there are not only differences in the forms of advice employed by interlocutors with differing levels of proficiency, but that there are also slight gender differences and that teacher modeling may have an effect on which available form of advice-giving a student employs in classroom discourse.

2.   Literature review

Since the 15th century, when traders along the Mediterranean coast exchanged goods with various other linguistic and ethnic groups, the need for a common language in which to conduct business transactions has been documented. A combination of Latin-based languages including Italian, Spanish, and French, mixed with elements of Greek, Turkish, Arabic and Persian to create the pidgin tongue first called "lingua franca" (Meierkord and Knapp 2002:9). Simply put, a lingua franca is a language that is not the mother tongue of any of the participants in a given conversation, where the participants do not otherwise share a common language, and where the language is used for specific purposes such as business, government, or education.

The English language has been spoken for centuries, first as the tongue of Britain and her colonies, later also as a means of creating solidarity in former colonies containing many tribal regions, each with its own mother tongue, and then as a communicative tool for business and education. In his seminal work on the spread of World English, Kachru (1985) proposed his three-circle model of World English, categorising each country in which English is commonly spoken as an "Inner Circle", an "Outer Circle" or an "Expanding Circle" country. Countries in which English is the primary mother tongue form part of the Inner Circle; countries which were formerly colonies of the inner circle countries form part of the Outer Circle; and countries in which English is not used in government but is taught extensively as a school subject form part of the Expanding Circle. As a natural language, English is dynamic, fluctuating in use within and between the various nations so that it can be difficult to determine which "circle" a given country belongs to at a given time. According to Kachru (p.c. March 2007), nothing is really set in stone when one attempts to make a complete list of countries in the Outer or Expanding circles. As nations develop English for their own use and local dialects develop, new "Englishes" emerge. Nevertheless, regardless of the dialect spoken or the political popularity of English in a given country, the fact remains that if a nation wishes to participate in global enterprises such as international finance, multi-national corporations, and international trading companies, its citizens must be able to use at least some English within and outside of its borders. For example, Firth (1996:242-250) examines ELF communication between partners in a Danish import/export business and their international vendors, who invariably use English as their language of business. As Mauranen (2003:513) asserts, "[t]he English language has established itself as the global lingua franca." In some cases, nations that were once Outer Circle countries with English as a second language can now be seen as Inner Circle countries with English as an institutionalized additional language. The latter are defined by Kachru (1996:908-909) as nations where most citizens speak English with "native-like" proficiency.

Different scholars have slightly different definitions of "English as a lingua franca" (ELF). For example, Firth (1996:240) defines ELF as "a 'contact language' between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture, and for whom English is the chosen *foreign* language of communication." House (1999:74), in contrast, defines ELF as "interaction(s) between members of two or more different lingua cultures in English, for none of whom English is the mother tongue". Seidlhofer (2004:211) cites both Firth's and House's definitions, asserting that "these definitions could be said to capture ELF in its purest form". The important point, for the purposes of this study, is that ELF

communication "in its purest form" does not include participants who are native speakers of English.

The fact that English is used in academic settings worldwide is well documented, and is considered a pragmatic necessity today, not only in higher education but also in other fields related to the global economy. Kayman (2004:1) opens his discussion of English as a global language by defining English as "the international language of business, the language the world's citizens communicate in." As such, it is necessary to ensure that students who wish to become global citizens must also speak the global language; therefore, English – whether the standard form or some specially modified ELF form – is no longer an optional area of study (see Seidlhofer 2004; Mauranen 2003). In fact, there are so many nonnative speakers of English that 80% of all English speakers worldwide – about one billion individuals – have mother tongues other than English (Pickering 2006:219). Crystal's much-cited *English as a Global Language* (2003:6-7) puts the total of native speakers of English (those living in Inner Circle countries) at 400 million, and speakers of ESL (English as a second language) and EFL (English as a foreign language) (i.e., those living in Outer Circle and Expanding Circle countries) at 1.5 billion. These numbers yield a nonnative speaker/native speaker ratio of approximately 3:1, as opposed to Pickering's 4:1. Nevertheless, the importance of learning English as a prerequisite to participation in the international economy is obvious regardless of which statistic is cited.

At both primary and secondary levels, English is taught in numerous African countries as a common denominator among dozens of indigenous languages – mostly within the same country. With the current push toward bilingual education in Botswana and Tanzania, as discussed in Arthur (2001:352-355), the importance of English education has been noted; this is apparently due to the educational success in neighboring countries such as Zimbabwe. However, Arthur's data show that although primary public school teachers claim to use English only, in reality there is a great deal of codeswitching, for various reasons which include ensuring students' comprehension. One teacher was quoted as saying "Teachers who insist on using English only end up talking to themselves, with very little student input" (Arthur 2001:354). Because of the dominance of national languages in public schools – for example, Setswana in Botswana and Kiswahili in Tanzania (Arthur 2001:350) – private schools, where English dominates, are perceived as providing an education which is superior to that provided by typical public schools, and this causes a great deal of friction. The political struggle in situations such as those in Botswana and Tanzania cannot erase the fact that English education is a vital asset to prepare students for future participation in the global society.

At university level, ELF instruction takes place in innumerable Expanding Circle and Outer Circle settings, as well as in numerous Inner Circle nations where nonnative professors often teach Outer or Expanding Circle students (House 2002, 2003; Kecskes 2007; Mauranen 2006). This second condition is unique, inasmuch as the majority of primary and secondary English education happens within the learner's native country, within the context of EFL. In Inner Circle university settings where English is taught by native-speaking instructors, an ESL environment exists. However, when the class is led by an instructor whose mother tongue is not English, an ELF space is created.

Classrooms, conferences and other academic encounters are very interesting areas for ELF study, and it is these situations that I have found most intriguing – if somewhat sparse – in the literature. DeCapua and Dunham (2007) contrast the advice-giving practices of English language learners and university students who are considered proficient in English. For the purposes of their study, DeCapua and Dunham (2007:322) define English language learners as those students enrolled in ESL classes. By comparison, they define proficient speakers of English as those who have been residents of the United States for at least five years and are not currently enrolled in ESL classes at their university. DeCapua and Dunham collected data using a discourse completion test, which asked students to respond in writing to manufactured requests for advice such as those that might be found in typical "Dear Abby" advice columns.

Although native speaker responses rarely included the form *should (not)* + base verb or VP, DeCapua and Dunham (2007:330) included one such native speaker example in their findings: *If you tell him that you really care about your job and want to do your best for the company he **should** appreciate this.*

Their findings indicate that, in contrast to native speakers, nonnative speakers show a strong tendency for the use of this form, as well as a high occurrence of imperatives, and, less frequently, alternatives (giving advisees more than one option). Nonnative speakers' examples include the following: (i) *I think you **should sit** with your children…* (*should* +base verb); (ii) ***Kick them out!*** *It's simple…* (imperative form); and (iii) *… **or you could** be a little nice and try to talk to them first…* (alternative) (DeCapua and Dunham 2007:332).

Additionally, DeCapua and Dunham (2007:332) argue that while nonnative speakers tend to respond in a formulaic manner and use the imperative form more often, native speakers offer more alternatives and their speech includes expressions of empathy, as in *That sounds like an **uncomfortable situation** for you and your husband.*

The present study focused on actual classroom discourse as an alternative to this type of manufactured survey, with the goal of recording naturally occurring speech and gleaning advice-giving practices from less structured interactions between students and teachers.

3.   Methodology

Data were collected by video and audio recording in classrooms of ten to fifteen intermediate and advanced English students attending adult ESL classes, taught by graduate students of TESOL who were also nonnative speakers of English. Prior to the classes, I had met with the teachers and requested that they ask students to present various problems to their classmates, such as difficulties in adjusting to some aspect of US life and culture or communicating in English. Teachers were also given the option to develop their own questions that would elicit advice-giving between students. I encouraged teachers to give their own advice only after students had responded to the initial speaker, thus minimizing any potential effects of modeling. Since my presence in the room had the potential to disturb the true ELF condition by native-speaker involvement, I did not participate in classes at all, but set up the recording devices and then sat silently as an observer in the back of the classroom during the class

sessions. Students had given permission for such observation and knew that I was there, but ignored me once the classes began.

Observations were made of six teachers in seven different class sessions, of which three included intermediate-level students and four included advanced level students. The teachers included two men (one native Turkish speaker and one native Russian speaker) and four women (one native German speaker, one native Cantonese Chinese speaker, and two native Mandarin Chinese speakers). The students were a mix of men and women, and included native speakers of Armenian, Cantonese, Finnish, German, Japanese, Korean, Lebanese, Mandarin, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, Thai and Turkish. Students and teachers were of diverse ages, all over eighteen years old. Because the class was an inexpensive, non-credit bearing evening course, there was a great deal of absenteeism resulting in fluctuation in class members from session to session; however, the students who actively participated in the class and gave the most input for this set of data were rarely absent. Thus, the group of students represented by the data included here could be said to form the core of their classroom communities.

4.   Results and discussion

Each teacher had a different method of eliciting advice from his or her students, providing an interesting opportunity to assess the effects of modeling various forms and of students' responses at the intermediate and advanced proficiency levels. In addition to the *should/shouldn't* forms, which occurred most often, students also used the forms *can/can't* + VP, imperatives, and alternative suggestions. Contrary to DeCapua and Dunham's (2007) findings, the ELF students in this study actually did show a great deal of empathy, especially in the setting discussed in Example 2 below.

4.1   The intermediate class
At the intermediate level, there was not a prominent difference between male and female students' advice forms or levels of empathy. Thus there is no marked gender-related difference in choice of form for giving advice.

Intermediate level teacher Emral[1] modeled *should/shouldn't*, following a standard native speaker form as seen above, almost exclusively in his questions, using the word *should* in ten of the fourteen questions he posed in asking advice from his students. Emral also acted as the questioner in each exchange, instead of allowing students to advise each other. This combination of teacher as model and discussion leader provided the most formulaic results of the study. In Example 1, Emral asks students to advise him on appropriate behaviour in their countries on various national holidays.

> **Example 1**
> **Emral**: *What **should I do**? I don't know what a piñata is. I'm Turkish, I have no idea what a piñata is.*
> **Maria (F)**: *You can go at the party…you can sing a song*
>
> **Emral:** *Let's say as a class, we go to Lebanon. It's Ramadan. What **should** we **do**?*

Akram (M): *You don't eat anything…the people **should don't eat** for thirty days, and* ***should don't eat*** *for the holiday.*

Emral: *What **should** we **do***? *What do you recommend?*
Penny (F): *You should … in Thailand, you should … all Thai people have the holiday … for the king's birthday … we have to sing a song. Sing a song for my king.*

As seen in the example, students responded to Emral's questions with either *should* or *can* forms, regardless of whether they were men or women. Even when student responses (such as Akram's *Should don't eat)* fell short of the exact "native-like" grammatical form modeled by Emral, an attempt was made to base responses on the teacher's formulaic examples. In the cases of imperative illocutionary force - Akram's *you don't eat* and Penny's *we have to sing* - both sentences also included the *should* form, which had a softening effect on their imperative usage.

Ping, a female intermediate teacher, did not model any form initially; she first asked students to advise each other on any problems they might be having adjusting to daily life in a new country. The same intermediate level students as those cited above produced a great deal of discussion among themselves, and the common thread of their conversation was empathy. As indicated in Example 2, besides giving advice student responses often included alignment with the initial speaker's problem through the use of phrases that indicated familiarity with the problem under discussion. The first respondent not only indicates that she has experienced the struggle of looking for an apartment, but also offers her (more experienced) sister's potential assistance.

Example 2
Ping: *I want to ask you if any of you have problems about your daily life and I hope one of you can make … some suggestions to his or her problem.*
Rosa (F): *I want to find an apartment.*
Osette (F): ***We had looked for an apartment*** *for my sister…**maybe she can look for apartment for you.***
Minye (F): *three years ago, **I come here—I look for apartment** very similar to my country … I found it by internet, online.*

Minye (F): *I'm afraid of call…phone. 'Hello?'*
Ping: *Why?*
Minye (F): *Is very hard for me. I mean, I can't understand by phone.*
Hu (M): ***Me too.***
Penny (F): *Yes, I been scared of, I had to say, slowly … can you hang up and call me and leave a message? That makes easy for me.*
Ping: ***I also have such kind of a problem when I just came here*** *and … they speak really fast ... so I just try to pick the key points, and I ask her, 'Do you mean…' and she says, 'Yes, that is what I mean' or 'No, I mean…' Then you can get what you really want to know.*

It can be seen from this example that non-native speakers produce empathy, giving advice in the "native-like" manner of telling their peers what they would do or would have done in

similar situations. Phrases such as *we looked* and *I look* in the case of apartment hunting troubles indicated that the other speakers had experienced similar problems as the student requesting advice. Replies like *me too* and *I also* clearly indicate identification with the advice-seeker on the part of respondents in the telephone troubles sequence. Teacher Ping allowed her students to explore the full range of class opinions, not giving her own advice until all who wished to speak had done so.

Sulee, another female teacher who taught the intermediate students, did not ask for advice. Like Emral, she led the discussion directly, employing a great deal more "teacher talk" than Ping had. In Sulee's class, students responded to her queries about the best way to find a job by listing imperative forms and cause-and-effect statements.

> **Example 3**
> **Sulee:** *How do people usually find jobs? How do they search for jobs?*
> **Akram (M):** *First, language. Then experience second. You need a green card or-- visa. You have to speak public. You have to talk perfect English. School - take more school. If there's experience then they wouldn't mind. If you don't have experience, then they don't want you.*
> **Sulee:** *Any other opinion?*
> **Rosa (F):** *You need good English, or no work. In New York, you must have Social Security card … I had my green card and my passport, and they - 'no, no, you must have this card.'*

Under Sulee's guidance, the students spoke in a matter-of-fact manner, employing imperatives like *must* and listing various requirements with no softening forms such as *should* or *can,* and, perhaps because the questions were posed as impersonal queries instead of pleas for help, there was no empathy evidenced in their speech.

4.2 The advanced class
The advice forms used by the advanced level students were much more varied, and less dependent on teacher modeling, than those used by the intermediate level students. The first teacher, Shelly, modeled the *should* form nearly as much as Emral had at the intermediate level but she received a broad spectrum of replies.

> **Example 4**
> **Shelly:** *What should I do to prepare for a job interview? I should bring my resume and cover letter, right?*
> **Beate (F):** *I think it would be good when you come for a job, that you know a little bit about your job, and that you know a little bit about the factory or the building…*
> **Jeni (F):** *You should know good questions, any questions they might ask for the interview.*
> **Shelly:** *Ok, thank you. Any suggestions over here?*
> **Nick (M):** *Be punctual. Make sure you are there on time. Just a few minutes before.*
> **Shelly:** *What kind of clothes should I wear?*
> **Beate (F):** *A good outfit, good clothes … Not too sexy. I think nicely, not too formal.*

These responses were typical of the level of conversation in the advanced class. Students participated in lively discussion in most classes, each offering his or her perspective on a variety of topics, using individual advice strategies including suggestions, imperatives and the *should* form. Interestingly, the most direct imperative forms observed were Nick's assertions above: *Be punctual. Make sure you are there on time.* Another male student, José, also stands out as a speaker who used the imperative form, illustrated in Example 5. Teacher Anna has asked the advanced students what they would do to have fun in Albania, and then follows up with a question about their country similar to that posed by Emral in Example 1 above.

> **Example 5**
> **Anna:** *What if I visit your country? What should I see?*
> **Gina (F):** *Mainly you have to go to Mexico city.*
> **Linda (F):** *You can see beauty, art there.*
> **Inga (F):** *You should go to the summer house.*
> **Shayla (F):** *If you go to visit in Thailand you should see the temple.*
> **José (M):** *You have to go to the city, you have to see it.*
> **Kang (M):** *If you go to China then you can eat everything … for many money you can see everything, the Great Wall…*

Again, in this example of the advanced learners' replies, there is a larger variety of responses than in any of the intermediate students' replies. While "learners of English are generally taught to associate *should* + VP with advice" (DeCapua and Dunham 2007:335), the ability to exhibit individualism in conversational style is evidence of the higher level of proficiency in this class. Additionally, it should be noted that there was a difference between the male and female respondents in examples 4 and 5, where none of the male students followed the teacher's lead in adopting the *should* form in their responses, and two of the three male utterances in the advanced sessions showed stronger illocutionary force than those of female students responding to the same questions.

4.3   Use of suggestions

While DeCapua and Dunham (2007) found that the use of alternatives, or what might be called suggestions (as opposed to imperatives), was an advice form primarily employed by native speakers of English, this study found several instances of suggestions at both the intermediate and advanced levels of proficiency. These had the conditional form *if …, then…*, where students first suggested a condition to be met by the person asking for advice, and then offered a suggested action based on this condition. Example 6a is taken from discussions involving the intermediate-level teacher Emral, while 6b involves advanced-level teacher Anna.

> **Example 6a**
> **Emral:** *I have no idea what a piñata is. So from the very beginning.*
> **Maria (F):** *Well, for example, **if** your friend has a kid, (then) you can go at the party.*

> **Example 6b**
> **Anna:** *What if I visit your country … what should I see?*
> **Shayla (F):** ***If** you go to visit Thailand, (then) you should see the temple.*

> **Kang (M):** *If you go to China, (then) you can eat everything … for many money you can see everything …*

At both levels, students tended to use more suggestions than imperatives in offering advice. In addition to this example, the use of empathy in Example 2 above also indirectly includes a suggestion: by telling the student asking for advice what the respondent, or someone he or she knows, has done in a similar situation, the implied suggestion is that the advisee could do the same.

5.   Conclusion

The most obvious limitation of this study is the size of the data set. As a small pilot study, it can only give an exploratory indication of forms of advice used by nonnative speakers of English. This can be compared to earlier research by Kecskes (2007) and DeCapua and Dunham (2007). However, naturally occurring classroom interactions such as those reported here, while difficult to manage and control, are extremely valuable as authentic examples of communication between various levels of ELF speakers on different topics. This allows an indication of the ways in which speakers give advice when confronted with "real-world" situations. While it has been reported that in giving advice nonnative speakers use imperative forms more frequently than forms that constitute suggestions or that display empathy, the data here show that suggestions are regularly utilized, and that empathic speech is common in interaction with peers (more so than in interaction with their teachers). Perhaps the real issue is not the lack of empathy sometimes noted when English is used as a lingua franca; rather the challenge is to find common cultural ground between speaker and hearer. Additionally, this study shows that ELF speakers make suggestions to both their teachers and their peers, but that they use the teacher-prescribed *should* + VP form most often in student-teacher interaction. This may, indeed, be a result of modeling, especially at a lower level of proficiency. Students at the advanced level have more communicative options in their repertoire of English vocabulary and pragmatic forms; therefore, we see greater variety in their responses. Finally, differences between men and women do not seem significant, except at the advanced level, and again the sample is quite small and may thus reflect the behaviour of only the individual students observed here.

Directions for future research include using a larger sample size and instructing teachers to uniformly allow students to advise one another before the teacher interacts with them. Additionally, future research should compare the true ELF classroom, where students and teachers are nonnative speakers, with the ESL classroom, observing the same students interacting with native speaker teachers.

Note
1.   To ensure participants' privacy, all names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

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