

The Factors affecting the Speech Act of Advice-giving among Chinese-speaking EFL learners

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1. Introduction

People seek for advice about personal stuff or even turn to professional help sometimes. Advice-giving or receiving happen around us every day. Giving advice is not only a way to obtain suggestions, but it is also a basic approach to maintaining relationships. Providing advice involves the concept of politeness, which might influence the relationship between an advice-giver and an advice-receiver. Example (1) shows the excerpt from a role-play in my English class. In the role-play, student A played the role of a senior acquaintance, while student B a younger generation.

(1) Student A (as a senior acquaintance): This dress doesn't fit me. What can I do?

Student B (as a younger generation): You should go to a gym and lose some weights. Since student A is a senior acquaintance of student B, it was considered impolite to talk in this way in Chinese culture (Hinkel, 1994 & 1997). Did student B say so because of his low proficiency level or because of his lack of politeness? Since advice-giving can be found anywhere in our daily lives, the reasons causing such conversation are thus significant not only in pragmatic level but also in pedagogical perspective.

The examples above echoed to the definition of the speech act of advice. As one of the crucial researchers of speech acts, Searle (1967) defined the speech act of advice as "Advising you is not try to get you to do something in the sense that requesting is. Advice is more like telling you what is best for you." Since giving advice is a crucial element in humans' interaction, the functions and application of giving advice are thus discussed fully in pragmatics. In addition, the acquisition of pragmatic skills has long been an intriguing issue to many researchers (cf. Owen, 1983; Trosborg, 1987). Previous studies have examined Chinese and Jordanian adult ESL learners' performance on giving advice. However, little is known about how Taiwanese teenagers develop their use of giving advice in English. Since giving advice is inevitable in our daily conversations, the concept of making advice is vital from an

educational perspective. The patterns of giving advice are taught in high schools of Taiwan; therefore, it is believed that students have obtained the concept of giving advice in English. As a result, the present study aims to examine the factors affecting Chinese teenagers' advice-giving and probe into their employment of different types in giving advice.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Speech Act of Advice

As a subfield of pragmatics, speech act is one of the most common issues investigated in the linguistics field. Named as the father of speech act theory, Austin (1962) brought up the issue that words could be used not only to present information but also to carry out actions. To further examine speech acts, Austin proposed three types of act that can be showed when producing a speech act, including locutionary act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act. Among the three dimensions of speech act, the illocutionary act is more complicated, Austin further categorized illocutionary acts into five classes, including verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives, and expositives. However, Austin's rough taxonomy was criticized for not being consistent. Therefore, Searle, the disciple of Austin, further developed his work and identified the five types of illocutionary acts as showed in Table 2-1, which also referred to as speech acts.

Table 2-1. Searle's Classification of Illocutionary Acts

Class of Illocutionary Acts	Illocutionary point	Examples
Representative	commit a speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition	reciting a creed
Directive	cause the hearer to take a particular action	requests, commands, and advice
Commissive	commit a speaker to some future action	promises and oaths
Expressive	express the speaker's attitudes and emotions towards the proposition	congratulations, excuses, and thanks
Declaration	change the reality in accord with the proposition of the declaration	baptisms

In Searle's classification of speech acts, giving advice is a type of directive speech act. Directives have a directive illocutionary point that entails an obligation (strong or weak) that the speaker puts on the hearer. In a directive, the responsibility is on the hearer, while in a commissive, it is the responsibility of a speaker. In other words, in directive, the hearer will carry out the action expressed in the propositional content. The preparatory condition for directives is that the hearer can carry out that action expressed in the propositional content and the sincerity condition is that the speaker desires or wants the hearer to carry it out. On Searle's view, to perform a speech act is to obey certain conventional rules that are constitutive of that type of act. Searle developed the original Austinian felicity conditions into a new classification of four basic categories, i.e. (i) propositional content, (ii) preparatory condition, (iii) sincerity condition and (iv) essential condition. Table 2-2 shows Searle's felicity condition for advising.

Table 2-2. Searle's Felicity Condition for Advising (1969: 67)

(A: future act; H: hearer; S: speaker)

Felicity condition	Definition in advising
Propositional content	Future act A of H.
Preparatory condition	1. S has some reason to believe A will benefit H. 2. It is not obvious to both S and H that H will do A in the normal course of events.
Sincerity condition	S believes A will benefit H.
Essential condition	Counts as an undertaking to the effect that A is in H's best interest.

The term felicity conditions refer to the conditions that must be in place and the criteria that must be satisfied for a speech act to achieve its purpose. The most fundamental component of an advice is the propositional content delivering from an advice giver to an advice receiver. The propositional content of advising describes some future problem or choice the hearer is confronting and is usually an utterance or a statement to accomplish a future action. As for preparatory conditions, it refers to whether the authority of the speaker and the circumstances of the speech act are appropriate to its being performed successfully. In the case of directives, it refers to that the hearer can carry out the action expressed in the propositional content. Moreover, the speaker has reason to believe that choosing one way or another can affect the

interests of the hearer. The advice is beneficial to the hearer not to the speaker; otherwise, the advice would be defective. Next, the sincerity condition is related to whether the speech act is being performed seriously and sincerely by the speaker. In other words, the advice-giver desires or wants the hearer to carry the advice out, and the speaker should honestly believe that the hearer will benefit from knowing in advance about means to solve the problem or make the best choice. Last but not least, the essential condition involves whether a speaker intends that an utterance be acted upon by the addressee. That is, the action of telling the hearer how to proceed by offering the hearer a way to solve the problem or make the best choice.

Previous studies on the speech act of advice further categorize advice into three types, as presented in Table 2-2. And how a person employs these types of advice depends on politeness, which is discussed in Section 2.2.

2.2 Politeness and related factors

According to Searle's (1967) classification of the illocutionary force, advice belongs to the category of directives, which consists in the fact that they are attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something. Researchers have done many studies so as to carefully define and examine Searle's condition of advice (Hinkel, 1997; Kuo, 1996; Locher, 2006; Matsumura, 2001; Vanderveken, 1991).

As stated in previous studies, participants adopted different strategies in giving advice (Al-Shboul et al., 2012; Al-Shboul & Zarie, 2013; Hinkel, 1994; Hinkel, 1997; Kuo, 1996; Matsumura, 2001). For example, advice is considered direct if the advice contains modal "should". In addition to direct advice, participants might use hedged and indirect advice. The former includes phrases such as "need to," while the latter covers neither explicit advice nor clear suggestions. Indirect advice is usually associated with politeness (Leech, 1983). Leech (1983) stated that indirect Illocutions "increase the degree of optionality" and "the more indirect an illocution is, the more diminished and tentative its force tends to be" (p.108). In contrast to indirect strategy, direct strategies are often viewed as impolite because "they lack a concern with face" (Blum-Kulka, 1987:131). It is widely believed that different strategies would be adopted when talking to different people (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Hinkel, 1997). The examples of different types of advice were presented in Table 2-3.

Table 2-3. Different Types of Advice

Strategy	Definitions	Examples
Direct advice	Advice contains the use of “ <i>should</i> .” (Altman 1990; Hermeren 1978; Huebler 1983)	You <i>should</i> study more to improve your grades. This course is not easy.
Hedged advice	Advice contains softeners and hedging devices such as <i>need to</i> , <i>it’s better</i> , <i>it’s a good idea</i> , <i>maybe</i> , <i>I think</i> , and questions. (Coates 1983; Hermeren 1978; Hurbler 1983; Quirk et al. 1985).	<i>Maybe</i> , you <i>need to</i> study more. This course is not easy.
Indirect advice	The advisor’s intention is not explicitly made in the comments. It’s not easy for the hearer to directly tell the advisor’s particular intent. (Bach & Harnish 1979, Levinson 1993, and Shimanoff 1977)	This course is not easy. I have to study a lot for it

In the studies of speech acts, it was social factors such as age, gender, and social relationships that influence the use of the different types of advice above. Previous studies have examined adult EFL learners’ performance on giving advice and have found that social factors indeed had much impact on participants’ performance in giving advice.

Severity is one of the crucial factors that appeared in the studies on speech acts. Brown and Levinson (1987) stated severity as a factor influencing the choice of the strategies regarding face-threatening acts. Rees-Miller (2000) used severity as a starting point to examine how disagreement was expressed in academic context. In addition, in Chang (2005), participants’ apology strategies were justified based on the severity of offense. Nevertheless, though the effect of severity has been under discussion in a number of studies regarding speech acts, it has never been involved in studies of advice-giving. Therefore, severity is included in the present study so as to see if it also has a noteworthy impact on the speech act of advice-giving.

Ever since Brown and Levinson (1987) brought up the idea of face-threatening act (FTA), the factors that influence the assessment of the seriousness of an FTA have been under heated discussion. Among the factors influencing the assessment of the seriousness of an FTA, the

social distance between the speaker and the hearer is the one that will be examined in the present study. Previous studies have studied on the social distance of higher interlocutors and equal interlocutors and have showed that social distance has a powerful impact on the speech act of advice-giving (Al-Shboul et al., 2012; Al-Shboul and Zarie, 2013; Hinkel 1994, 1997; Matsumura, 2001). Among the studies investigated the effect of social distance, only Matsumura (2001) focused on higher, equal, and lower status addressee. However, unlike other studies, Matsumura's observation of Japanese EFL learner was a longitudinal one rather than a quantitative one. The present study thus contains the three different social distances, inclusive of higher, equal, and lower status addressee. In addition to social distance, researches have showed that politeness also has much to do with gender. Social norms have determined what can and what cannot be done by men and women respectively, and different gender often applied different strategies in performing speech acts (Hinkel, 1997; Kuo, 1996). Therefore, it is inevitable to include gender factor in the present study.

Taiwan, as a country that emphasize on English learning, has added the knowledge of giving advice in its English textbook for high school students. Since EFL learners in Taiwan has certain exposure to the idea of giving advice, it is reasonable to investigate whether EFL learners also have the same tendency in their learning of English. Thus, the present study aimed to examine Chinese high school students' perception of the speech act of advice in English and the strategies they take when facing different events and interlocutors. Moreover, we are interested in the effect of highlighting serious consequences in the events. The addressee's social status, the participants' gender, and proficiency levels are the primary factors investigated in the present study.

2.3 Previous Empirical Studies of Advice-giving

In this section, four previous empirical studies of L2 learners' understanding of advice-giving are reviewed. Researches had not been done to examine the acquisition of how the types of advice in advice-giving vary among English learners from different L1s until the last two decades. Kuo (1996) conducted a discourse analysis of giving advice among college students. In her study, gender factor was the primary issue affecting both the occurrence of advice-giving as well as the form and style of the speech act. In Hinkel (1997), two

measurements – Multiple Choice Questionnaire (MCQ) and Discourse Completion Task (DCT) were developed to further explored how different types of advice in advice-giving varied between native speakers and Chinese learners. Matsumura (2001) was a study of great value because it provided an important longitudinal study. Also, three different social statuses, including lower, equal, and higher, were compared in the study. Lastly, Al-Shboul et al. (2012) adopted Hinkel (1997)'s module to inspect on Arabic learners' strategies in advice-giving. Table 2-4 shows the summary of the methodology, major findings, and limitation of the previous studies.

Generally speaking, previous studies have had focused on the impact of a single factor, therefore, the present study put emphasize on the factors affecting participants choice in giving advice, and stress on how the factors interplay with one another.

Table 2-4. Major Findings and Limitations of the Previous Studies

	Methodology	Major findings	Limitations
Kuo (1996)	1. Participants: Taiwanese college students 2. Tool: Recorded conversation	1. Female gave advice more and used various forms advice. 2. Male preferred direct advice. 3. Factors affecting the types of giving advice: gender	1. Participants: unknown background 2. Task: recorded conversation 3. Factors not included: social status and severity
Hinkel (1997)	1. Participants: Taiwanese and American graduate students 2. Tool: DCT and MCQ	1. There was a mismatch in the DCT and MCQ. 2. English participants chose more indirect advice. 3. Chinese advisors preferred hedged advice and they were more direct compared with the English counterparts. 4. Factors affecting the types of giving advice: culture, task types, and social status	1. Participants: two groups without further grouping and two tasks with different participants 2. Task: a written DCT 3. Factors not included: gender, proficiency level, and severity
Matsumura (2001)	1. Participants: Japanese and American college students 2. Tool: MCQ	1. Japanese participants preferred indirect and hedged advice to higher status interlocutor and more direct advice to lower and equal interlocutors. 2. Factors affecting the types of giving advice: exposure to L2	1. Participants: two groups without further grouping 2. Task: only MCQ 3. Factors not included: gender, proficiency level, and severity
Al-Shboul et al. (2012)	1. Participants: Jordanian and American graduate students 2. Tool: MCQ	1. Jordanian preferred hedged advice to peer and instructor and they were more direct compared with English counterparts. 2. Factors affecting the types of giving advice: culture and social status	1. Participants: two groups without further grouping and only male participant 2. Task: only MCQ 3. Factors not included: gender, proficiency level, and severity

2.4 Research questions

In order to explore Chinese EFL learners' comprehension and pragmatic knowledge of giving advice, the present study aims to discuss the following research questions:

- 1) Is gender a factor affecting Chinese-speaking learners of English in offering advice speech acts?
- 2) Do Chinese-speaking ESL learners offer different types of advice when facing different social status?
- 3) Will the degree of severity of situations influence Chinese-speaking learners of English in offering advice speech acts?

The first question focuses on the different types of advice, namely direct, hedge, and indirect advice that participants may apply when facing hearers from different social status. The second question aims to see if participants of different gender choose different types of advice in giving advice. The third question centers on the influence of the degree of severity on giving advice.

3. Methodology

In the present study six participants, three male students and three female students were recruited from Miaoli County Sanyi Senior High School to finish a multiple-choice questionnaire (MCQ). The participants spent less than fifteen minutes doing the comprehension task in a multiple-choice format. After they finished the task, the experimenter asked them to justify their answers, and provided an explanation if they chose not to give advice.

The MCQ included eight events, with or without severe consequence highlighted. There are sixteen test items in the present study, and the distribution of the test items was showed in Table 3-1.

Table 3-1. The experiment design for the present study.

Event	[+severity]	[-severity]
1 Event: Seeing someone working late	6	1
2 Event: Seeing someone wearing not enough clothes	8	14
3 Event: Seeing someone ordering unhealthy food	12	15
4 Event: Seeing someone buying an expensive house	10	2
5 Event: Seeing someone using lighter carelessly	13	5
6 Event: Meeting someone in the repair shop	3	7
7 Event: Driving an unreliable car	4	9
8 Event: Investing in the stock market	16	11

Below shows the examples of the test items. Example (2) shows the event without severe consequence highlighted while example (3) shows the event with severe consequence highlighted and the complete version of the task can be found in Appendix 1.

(2) **Event 2 [-severity]:** Someone is going out. You think the clothes s/he is wearing now are not enough. What do you think would be appropriate to say in this situation?

(3) **Event 2 [+severity]:** Someone is going out. You think the clothes s/he is wearing now are not enough for such cold weather outside. *Since the flu is going around, you are afraid that s/he might catch a severe cold.* What do you think would be appropriate to say in this situation?

In this MCQ, three options including direct advice, indirect advice, and hedged advice were provided based on the previous studies (as showed in Table 2-3.). The direct advice items rely on the use of *should* without hedging. Hedged advice options are constructed to include explicit hedgings such as *need to*, or impersonal constructors like *it's better*, *it's a good idea*, lexical hedging like *maybe*, *I think*, and questions. As for indirect comments, no advice or suggestions are explicitly made in advice. According to Hinkel (1997), the speech act can be understood as having more than one illocutionary force and conversational intent. Examples of direct, hedged, and indirect advice are found in (4) to (6) respectively.

- (4) You should not dress like this. The weather is very cold.
- (5) Why don't you wear more clothes? The weather is very cold.
- (6) I am going to wear more clothes. The weather is very cold.

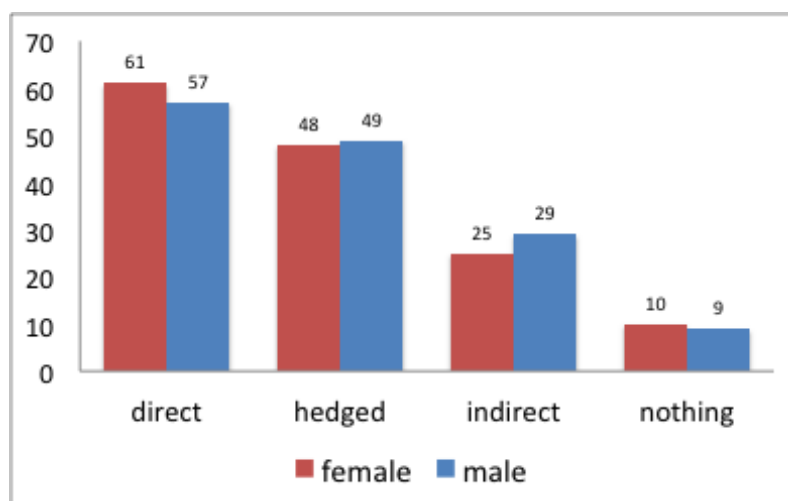
During the research, participants will be asked to choose from the three choices given in each test items after reading the event description. The three selections are given in random order. A fourth option is “nothing” as an explicit choice for opting out. Participants choosing “nothing” will be asked to provide an explanation. Participants can give the same advice option to different interlocutors. In other words, an option can be used repeatedly in the same test item. To be consistent with the previous studies, all references to gender, age, nationality and native language are avoided. Lastly, The result of the MCQ task will also be analyzed by frequency count.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Gender and advice-giving

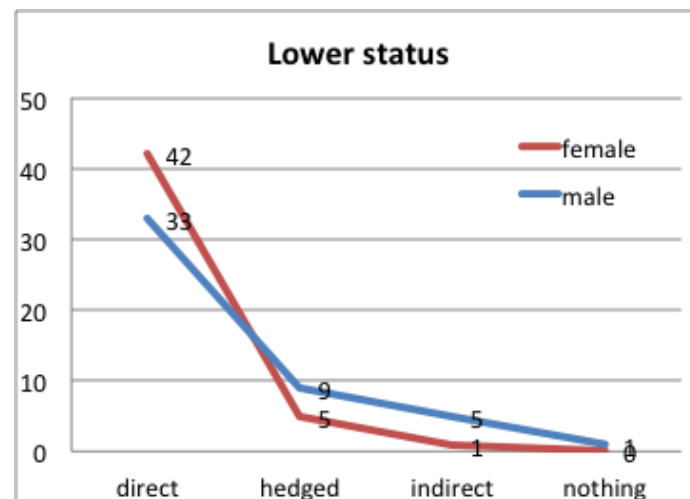
In the field of sociolinguistics, gender factor is one of the most frequent conducted factors in studies. To answer the first research question, the data were further classified based on participants' gender. The result of the interaction between gender and advice types is given in Figure 4-1.

Figure 4-1. The result of the interaction between gender and advice types



As showed in Figure 4-1, female preferred direct advice more than male did. As for hedged and indirect advice, male participants favored them more than female participants. The result matched with Kuo (1996) in that female inclined to use more auxiliary modals “should”. Moreover, as showed in Figure 4-2, female participants chose to give direct advice especially when they were facing lower status interlocutors.

Figure 4-2. The result of the interaction between gender and lower status interlocutors



The reason why females were willing to give more direct advice to lower status hearer might because lower status interlocutors are socially inferior. And it will be less impolite if the advice-giver threatens the advice-receiver’s face.

The result of the present study matched that of Kuo (1996) in that male speakers chose either to avoid giving advice or to give advice more directly. As showed in Figure 4-3 and 4-4, male used more direct advice than female while female used more hedged and indirect advice when facing equal and higher status.

Figure 4-3. The result of the interaction between gender and equal status interlocutors

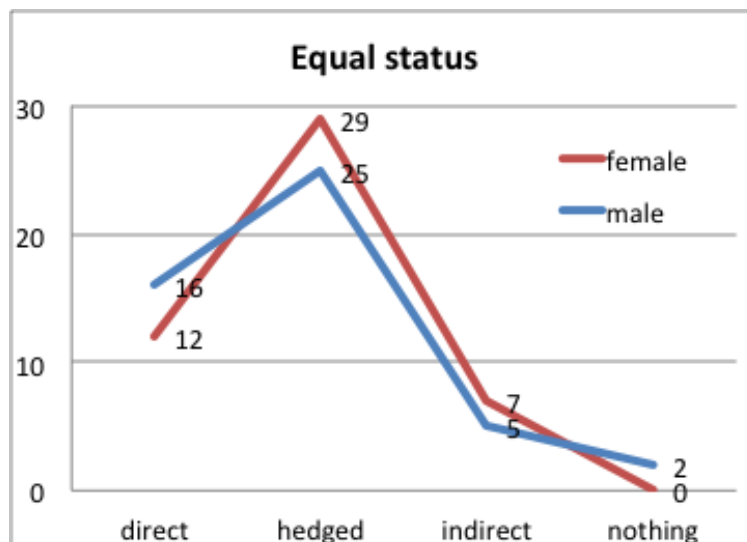
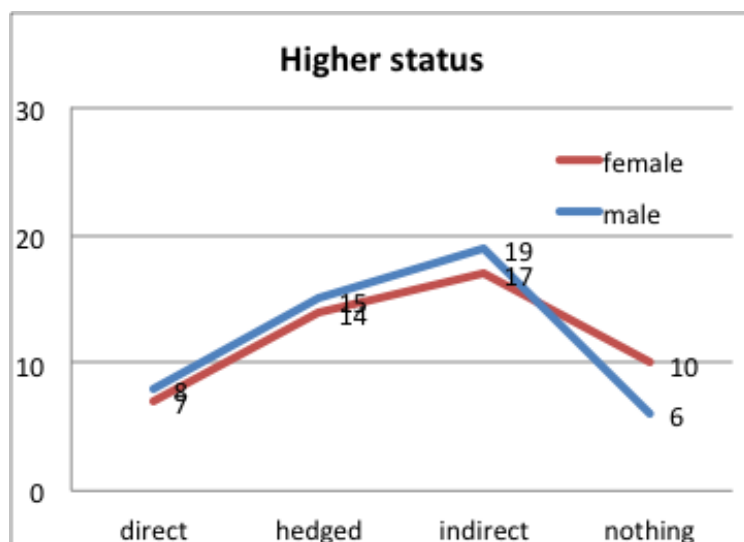


Figure 4-4. The result of the interaction between gender and higher status interlocutors



In Figure 4-3, though male still used hedged advice the most, the number of male choosing more direct advice surpassed that of female. One of the participants said that he was more willing to give direct advice to the equal status addressee is because he thought they were friends and the using of the modal auxiliary “should” would not influence their relationship.

Likewise, when addressing to higher status interlocutors, males did it more boldly than female by offering more direct advice (as showed in Figure 4-4). Female participants seemed

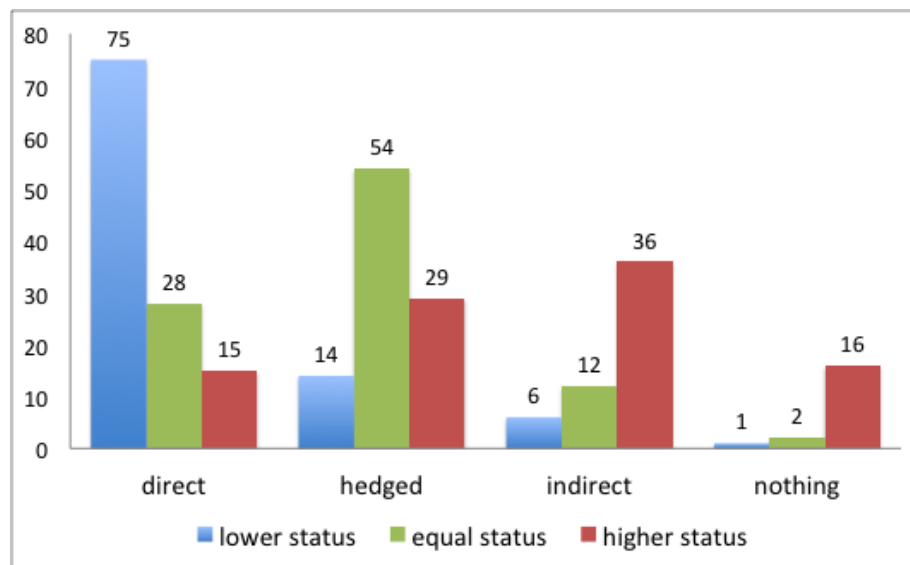
more timidly in giving advice to higher status interlocutors, so they favored hedged and indirect advice more. The number of female opting out was also much higher compared to the situations addressing to lower and equal interlocutors. Female participants also stated that they believed higher social status interlocutors knew what to do even though they did not offer any advice.

To sum up, gender is no doubt a major factor affecting the choice of types of advice. However, there remained differences when facing different social status interlocutors.

4.2 Social distance and advice-giving

In addition to gender factor, the social status of the interlocutors also plays a crucial role in affecting participants' choice of advice.

Figure 4-5. The result of the interaction between social status and advice types



As showed in Figure 4-5, when facing lower status interlocutors, participants chose to give much more direct advice than facing the other two statuses. Participants preferred direct advice followed by hedged and indirect advice when facing lower status hearers.

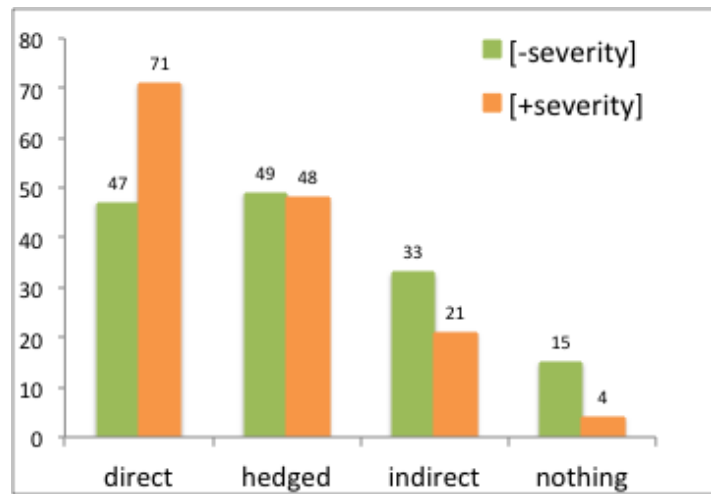
On the other hand, when facing equal status interlocutors, participants favored hedged advice the most compared with the two other types of advice. The result matched with the previous study in that subjects from collective cultures (Chinese as one of them) preferred hedged advice when addressing to equal status interlocutors (Al-Shboul et al., 2012; Hinkel, 1997; and Matsumura, 2001). However, Hinkel (1997) specified that when facing equal status hearers, participants favored hedged advice followed by indirect advice and direct advice. In the present study, participants preferred hedged advice followed by direct advice and indirect advice was least favored. Many participants in the present study viewed equal status as their good friends; this might be a reason why they chose direct advice, since giving direct advice would not affect their relationships.

Finally, when facing higher status interlocutors, participants favored indirect and hedged advice. The result also matched with previous studies (Al-Shboul et al., 2012; Hinkel, 1997; and Matsumura, 2001). However, the motivation for participants of the present study to do so was not the same as in the previous studies. In previous studies, participants chose more indirect advice because giving advice is considered a face-threatening act (Brown and Levinson, 1987). They were afraid that the act of giving advice might threaten the hearers' faces. On the other hand, the reason why participants in the present study offered indirect advice was because they did not want to get involved in the hearers' decision-making. They thought that it was none of their businesses; therefore, they tended to choose implicit advice. This motivation can also explain why there was a large number of participants chose to opt out when facing higher status interlocutors. They either thought it was none of their business or thought the hearer knew what to do without their advice.

4.3Severity and advice-giving

Severity is a crucial factor affecting politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987) and many studies regarding speech acts had included severity in their studies. However, the influence of severity has not yet been investigated in the studies of the speech act of advising. Figure 4-6 showed the result of the interaction between the event severity and advice types.

Figure 4-6. The result of the interaction between event severity and advice types



The result showed that when facing events with severe consequences, participants chose to give more direct advice than facing events without severe consequences. There was a gradient stratification in the frequency of participants choosing different advice types when facing events with severe consequences. Also, there were fewer opting outs when facing events with severe consequences. Kuo (1996) suggested that participants tended to offer advice when the situation is serious. The result of the present study matched with Kuo (1996) in that when facing higher severity situations, participants not only offered more advice but also offered in a more direct way. Some of the participants also claimed that they offered direct advice because they were afraid that the severe consequence mentioned in the descriptions of events would harm the addressee. The phenomena of offering direct advice in events with severe consequences happened in the interactions not only to lower status interlocutors but also to higher status interlocutors (as showed in Figure 4-7 and Figure 4-9). In addition, when facing lower status interlocutors in events with severe consequence, participants had no doubt in giving direct advice (as showed in Figure 4-7). However, as the social distance increased, the number of participants choosing direct advice decreased (as showed in Figure 4-8 and Figure 4-9). In other words, participants favored hedged advice when interacting with equal and higher social status interlocutors in events with severe consequence.

Figure 4-7. The result of the interaction between severity and lower status interlocutors

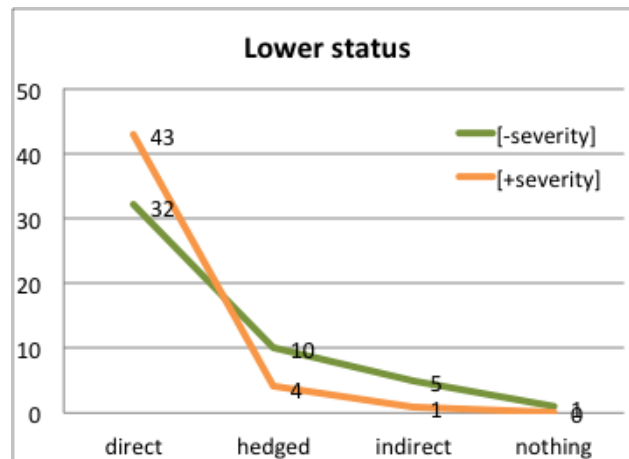
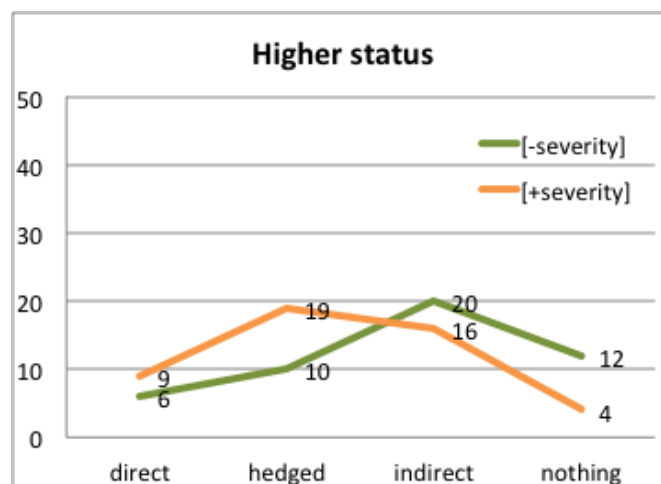


Figure 4-8. The result of the interaction between severity and equal status interlocutors



Figure 4-9. The result of the interaction between severity and higher status interlocutors



On the other hand, participants preferred hedged advice to direct, indirect, and opting outs for the events without severe consequence highlighted. There were also much more indirect advice and opting outs in events without severe consequences than in events with severe consequence. The preference of indirect and hedged advice in events without severe consequence was clearly showed especially when the participants were addressing to equal and higher status interlocutors. As showed in Figure 4-8, when facing equal status interlocutors, the number of choosing hedged advice in events without severe consequence outnumbered that of events with severe consequence. Also, there were more participants choosing indirect advice in events without severe consequence than in events with severe consequence when facing higher status interlocutors. In sum, severity is a crucial factor influencing the choice of the strategies regarding advice-giving (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

5. Conclusion

This section summarized the major finding of the present study, the limitation of the study, and the pedagogical implications.

First of all, the present study showed that gender factor had an impact on participants' choice of advice types. Females favored direct advice while males preferred hedged and indirect advice. However, females' preference of direct advice decreased when the social distance between the interlocutors increased. That is, the female gave lower status interlocutors direct advice the most and they preferred hedged and indirect advice when facing equal and higher social status respectively. On the other hand, males seemed to be bolder in giving advice. They gave direct advice to both equal and higher social status interlocutors.

Secondly, social distance is another remarkable factor influencing participants' choices of advice. When facing lower status interlocutors, the number of participants choosing direct advice outnumbered that of hedged and indirect advice. Participants preferred hedged advice to indirect and direct advice when interacting with equal status interlocutors. When facing higher status interlocutors, there are a lot more indirect advice and opting outs compared with the other two social statuses.

Lastly, severity was proved to have a noteworthy impact on the speech act of advice-giving. There were far more participants choosing direct advice when facing events with severe consequences highlighted. In contrast, when encountering events without severe consequences highlighted, participants favored indirect advice. Also, there were much more opting outs in events without severe consequences.

As for the limitation of the present study, more participants could be recruited. Due to time limit, only six participants were recruited. If more participants had joined in the research, the present study would be more solid. Next, the participants could be further grouped based on their proficiency levels so as to see if learners of higher proficiency level performed like native speakers of English. In addition, more tasks could be included in the study to avoid bias. Another tool frequently used in studies of speech acts is DCT (discourse completion task), which could be included in future studies.

Last but not least, advice-giving happens around us every day. Therefore, it is important to include the idea of politeness in the English classes in Taiwan. Since higher grammatical competence does not guarantee higher pragmatic competence, we, as teachers, should remind the students the way of showing politeness especially in a face-threatening acts like advice-giving.

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