

## Imperatives or “I’d like” Statements: Suggestions in Instructors’ Written Feedback for ESL Student Writers

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Little research has been conducted to investigate highly advanced ESL learners’ written production of suggestions when addressing interlocutors of lower social power. The present study fills this gap by examining non-native speaking (NNS) composition instructors’ pragmatic choices of suggestions as compared to those made by their native speaking (NS) counterparts when providing written feedback to international undergraduate students on their first draft of an academic paper at an American university. Both groups offered more direct than indirect suggestions, and the highly advanced NNS instructors had a higher percentage of indirect suggestions than their NS counterparts. The two groups favored different syntactic structures for making suggestions: “I would like” structures for the NS group and imperatives for the NNS group. This study has practical implications for the training of International Teaching Assistants (ITAs) and non-native speaking faculty members who are novice composition instructors.

*Keywords:* NEST, NNEST, NNS, NS, pragmatics, suggestions; written feedback

**I** was surprised to see this student comment in the anonymous course survey for an introductory composition class I taught: “You always provided good feedback on my writing; however, sometimes I felt a little intimidated by the long list of ‘orders’ you gave at the end of my drafts.” Before receiving this comment, I had never expected my suggestions to be taken as “orders” by my students, nor had I been aware that I might actually prefer to use simple and straightforward expressions, such as bare imperatives when giving suggestions in my written comments on students’ writing. This student’s comment not only caused me to reflect on my own commenting practice, but it also stimulated my research interest in examining the nature of suggestions in composition instructors’ comments.

Suggestion is a common and important communicative act in daily life. It is a type of directive “in which the speaker’s purpose is to get the hearer to commit him/herself to some future course of action” that the speaker believes will benefit the hearer (Searle, 1976; as cited in Martínez-Flor, 2005, p. 168). At the same time, however, a speech suggestion is a Face Threatening Act (FTA) in English speaking cultures because the content of certain suggestions or the very act of offering suggestions can hurt recipients’ feelings, threaten their public self-image, or conflict with their desire for freedom of decision and action (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For example, despite being well intentioned, suggestions about fashion or parenting may be taken as veiled criticisms. Thus, a suggestion such as “You would look thinner if you wear dresses with simple designs” might be perceived by the recipient that she should improve her taste in dresses and that she should probably lose some weight as well. Likewise, in American culture, providing uncalled-for parenting tips may offend the recipient rather than facilitate group solidarity, as is the case in some other cultures.

Suggestions can take different forms based on situational factors, including the power relationship (P) and social distance (D) between the suggestion provider and recipient, and the size of imposition (R) caused by the offering of the suggestion (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Power differentials result from differences in social rank, institutional position, socio-economic status, and other factors. Social distance is

conceptualized as the closeness in relationship between the suggestion provider and recipient. The degree of imposition increases when a suggestion potentially causes damage to the recipient's public self-image or seriously obstructs the recipient's freedom of action. For example, imagine that two students are conversing in the hallway and one notices that his friend's breath smells terrible; he thus suggests that his friend buy some gum at the vending machine nearby. In this situation, the interlocutors are power equals with a small social distance between each other. A high degree of imposition is involved, however, because the suggestion relates to the recipient's personal habits and can be profoundly face threatening.

A language learner's ability to effectively assess socio-situational variables (i.e., P, D, R) and to use correct linguistic forms to produce appropriate suggestions constitutes an essential component of pragmatic competence. A number of Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP)<sup>1</sup> studies, however, have found that ESL learners have difficulty formulating appropriate suggestions or that their suggestions display different politeness strategies and linguistic forms from those used by native English speakers (Banerjee & Carrell, 1988; Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990, 1993; Martínez-Flor, 2003). These characteristics of ESL production of suggestions may be caused by the following reasons: (a) In some studies, learners were supposed to complete potentially embarrassing tasks (e.g., making suggestions related to the hearer's personal habits); and (b) in some other studies, learners needed to perform speech acts incongruent with their institutional status (e.g., making suggestions to faculty advisors in authentic academic advising sessions).

In contrast, there has been little research to date that investigates real-life ESL production of suggestions addressing recipients of lower socio-institutional status. The present study explores this under-examined aspect of ESL suggestions through a comparison of the suggestions made by highly proficient non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) with the suggestions made by native English speaking teachers (NESTs) when both groups address recipients of a less powerful socio-institutional position. The study is situated in a real-life context, i.e., an introductory composition course for international undergraduate students at a large public university in the U.S. midwest.

### **Suggestions in Composition Instructor Discourse and Writing Tutorials**

The growth of college writing programs across the country has offered a new opportunity to study directives and, in particular, suggestions—i.e., to view suggestions as essential components of the institutional discourse that occurs on a day-to-day basis in these writing programs (e.g., Liu & Zhao, 2007; Mackiewicz, 2005; Thonus, 1999). The suggestions that have been studied in the context of college writing programs were mostly delivered orally, during institutional encounters such as teacher-student conferences or writing tutorials. In most of these studies, discourse analyses were performed on the transcriptions of the speech interactions.

Thonus (1999) investigated the factors that influence tutors' dominance over academic writing tutorials (i.e., how tutors usually control the discussions about student texts). She examined the frequency and types of suggestions that the tutors made, as well as whether and what mitigation strategies (e.g., words, phrases, even deliberate hesitation and specific tones) were used to soften the suggestions and reduce possible threat to the tutees' self-image and autonomy. After comparing the 16 tutorials, in which two male and two female tutors interacted with male and female L1 and L2 English tutees, she found that tutors' institutionally conferred status was more determinant of their dominance behavior than their own or the tutees' gender and tutees' native language. The types of suggestions that tutors made during the course of the writing tutorials include indirect suggestions, interrogatives, first person modal, second person modal, and imperatives. There were mitigated and unmitigated suggestions of each type. For

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<sup>1</sup>Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) is a field of study at the intersection of pragmatics and Second Language Acquisition (SLA), and it deals with "non-native speakers' use and acquisition of linguistic action patterns" in the target language (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993, p. 3).

example, a mitigated indirect suggestion in the data was “I think<sup>2</sup> that by talking about this as a screen version, that will help to make a transition between this and that”; and an unmitigated indirect suggestion was: “And, no quotes for titles of a movie or books, no quotes” (p. 235).

Liu and Zhao (2007) were more concerned about classifying composition instructors’ suggestions into two broad categories—direct or indirect suggestions—and analyzing whether and how the two groups of instructors (three highly proficient NNESTs and three NESTs) differ in terms of directness/indirectness. The authors compared the linguistic forms of suggestions used by the two groups of instructors in instructor-student conferences. In addition to a linguistic analysis of the suggestions that the two groups produced, the authors also interviewed the three NNESTs (all Chinese) individually about their perceptions of the differences between direct and indirect suggestions. No clear-cut differences were found in the suggestion forms used by the NNESTs and NESTs, possibly due to the small number of participants, individual variation in teaching practices, the high English proficiency of the NNESTs, and similar training that both groups had received. Overall, both groups tended to make more direct than indirect suggestions to their students.

Mackiewicz (2005) focused on the frequency with which writing tutors used one particular type of suggestions—hints (a.k.a. non-conventionally indirect suggestions)—in their tutorials with engineering students. An example of a hint in her study was “Headings help readers understand the organization” (p. 368). Mackiewicz found that hints accounted for 25% of the 424 suggestions that the 12 writing tutors provided to the 12 engineering students in 13 tutorials about students’ drafts. She maintained that the indirectness embodied in hints can lead to greater degrees of politeness than the other types of suggestions (i.e., direct suggestions or conventionally indirect suggestions<sup>3</sup>). In addition, the clarity of the pragmatic force remained uncompromised, thanks to the contextual information shared between tutors and tutees.

These studies, the last two in particular, have practical implications for training writing tutors and instructors in terms of providing indirect but clear suggestions to help ensure harmonious and effective academic coaching. Non-native speaking tutors or instructors, however, were only studied in Liu and Zhao (2007). As an increasing number of qualified international teaching assistants and faculty members teach introductory composition or work as writing tutors, there arises a need for research on non-native speaking instructors’ and tutors’ institutional discourse in order to identify potential problems and to help them improve their teaching and tutoring practices.

Furthermore, these discussions about writing tutors’ or instructors’ production of suggestions centered almost exclusively on suggestions in oral communication. Based on a belief that politeness considerations are equally important in written communication, the present study investigates whether highly advanced non-native speaking instructors realize the speech act of suggestion in the same ways as their native speaking counterparts. Specifically, it investigates whether the two groups employ similar linguistic strategies to make written suggestions on students’ essays. This study of composition instructors’ written suggestions will have important implications for pedagogy as well as teacher training, since a purpose of the study is to raise teachers’ awareness of the linguistic choices they make every day, maybe subconsciously, to offer suggestions to students on their writing.

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<sup>2</sup>“I think” is the mitigation device or hedge used to weaken the force of the suggestion.

<sup>3</sup>Conventionally indirect suggestions mainly consist of these types: a) Formulas: Why not/Why don’t you . . .? How about . . .?/What about . . .? If I were you, I would . . .; b) You could . . . (“could” was used not in the sense of ability or permission); c) Yes-no question: e.g., Have you thought of ...?

## Methodology

### Participating Instructors and Commentary Data<sup>4</sup>

Instructors' written comments were collected during the fall semesters in 2008 and 2009. With permission from the Institutional Review Board, request emails were sent to all instructors of the 10–12<sup>5</sup> international sections of the introductory composition course. Students' first drafts of an assignment were solicited together with instructors' written comments. Four native speaking (NS) and four non-native speaking (NNS) instructors responded, but only two in each group were able to contribute at least 10 students' writing samples with instructor comments on them. This low rate of participation was partly due to the fact that unless students had electronically submitted their drafts, it was very difficult to re-collect writing samples from students that had instructors' handwritten comments on them.

The four instructors, all female, who contributed their students' writing samples were doctoral students in the Second Language Studies/ESL program at the university. They had all received mentoring in teaching Introductory Composition for one year and mentoring in teaching ESL writing for an additional semester. In addition, they had all taught mainstream composition for at least one year prior to teaching an international section.

The two NNS instructors, originally from Russia and Taiwan respectively, had each met the English proficiency requirements for graduate admission to the English department with scores above 600 on the paper-based TOEFL and 5 or above on the Test of Written English (TWE). They also met the university's oral English proficiency requirements for International Teaching Assistants (ITAs). Before participating in this study, the Taiwanese instructor had taught mainstream composition for two semesters and the international version for two other semesters; the Russian instructor had taught the mainstream for five semesters and ESL writing for two semesters.

The international version of the introductory composition course had used a multi-draft sequenced writing approach for about 10 years. Three drafts were required of each of five writing assignments: Writer's Autobiography, Personal Narrative, Literature Review, Interview Report, and Argumentative Essay. The latter four assignments made up a sequenced writing project centered on a topic of students' own choice. Of the five assignments, the Writer's Autobiography was chosen for this study because, unlike the other four, it elicited writing on a common topic (i.e., the students' own history of writing) from all students across class sections.

Terminal comments (i.e., instructors' comments at the end of an essay) on students' first drafts of the Writer's Autobiography were examined because, unlike the second or third draft, the first draft could elicit a block of "end" comments with suggestions embedded in them. Comments on the first draft normally addressed global issues, including content, idea expression, and the overall structure. The second draft, however, received comments on micro-level concerns, such as vocabulary use, grammar, and conventions. The third draft only received summative evaluation.

## Data Analysis

Ten students' first drafts of the Writer's Autobiography were randomly selected from a collection of 10-15 compositions contributed by each participating instructor, i.e., NS1, NS2, NNS1, and NNS2. The terminal

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<sup>4</sup>All background information presented in this section about the introductory composition course, including its international sections, is based on my insider experience as an instructor of international sections of the introductory composition course as well as my communication with the course scheduling deputy of the department and the director of the ESL writing program.

<sup>5</sup>There were 10 sections in fall 2008 and 12 sections in fall 2009, with each section typically consisting of one instructor and 15 international students, most of whom were from China and South Korea. There were four native and six non-native speaking instructors in fall 2008, and three native and nine non-native instructors in fall 2009. Seven of these instructors worked in both terms.

comments were extracted and compiled into a file. For reliability, these commentary data were double coded. The other independent researcher (besides me) is a native speaker of American English. Both researchers are Ph.D. candidates in the Second Language Studies/ESL program at the university. They independently identified incidents of suggestions and classified them into syntactic categories based on a synthesis of the typologies used in Jiang (2006) and Liu and Zhao (2007). Of the 125 occurrences of suggestions, the two researchers agreed on 114 (91%) in terms of whether certain linguistic expressions counted as suggestions and what type of suggestion they were.

Table 1.

*Scale of Directness for the Linguistic Forms of the Suggestions in the Present Study*

	Rank	Level	Syntactic Categories	Examples from the Present Study
Group A Direct Suggestions	1	0.1	Imperatives	Focus your revisions on phrasing.
	2	0.2	Declaratives with modals/semi-modals/verbs of necessity ("you" as the agent): must, should, need to, have to, be supposed to, need	You need to break your text into paragraphs. You are supposed to talk about your "writing" history.
	3	0.3	Explicit performatives	My <i>advice</i> for the second draft is to work on the introduction.
	4	0.4	"Would like" statements (with speaker subject)	I'd like you to focus on clarifying certain ideas.
	5	0.5	Hedged performatives	I would <i>suggest</i> that you work more on the transitions.
Group B Indirect Suggestions (Level 1)	6	1.1	1.1.1 Declaratives with modals of uncertainty ("you" as the agent): can, may	You can keep some of the details you've included, but only as they relate to writing.
			1.1.2 Declaratives with modals of higher uncertainty ("you" as the agent): could, might	You might try to develop the conclusion fully from there.
	7	1.2	Pseudo cleft structures	What you might try to do is to develop that idea fully . . .
	8	1.3	Interrogatives with modals/semi-modals ("you" as the agent)	Can you make it more interesting in the beginning?
	9	1.4	Let's—inclusive imperatives	Let's work on a thesis statement.
	10	1.5	Statements with inclusive "we"	We'll talk about it more during the conference.
Group C Indirect Suggestions (Level 2)	11	2.1	Conditionals	It might also help if you read closely the samples of students' essays . . .
	12	2.2	Modals/semi-modals/verbs with agents other than "you"	This sentence should convey the central idea . . .
	13	2.3	Yes-no questions	Do these ideas support the thesis statement, which is "challenging and rewarding"?

Table 1 lists the types of syntactic categories identified in the comments and provides examples from the data collected in this study. All the syntactic categories appeared either in Jiang's (2006) or Liu and Zhao's (2007) typology except for the "would like" structures, which function similarly to the "want" structures in Liu and Zhao (2007). Direct imperatives (e.g., "Focus your revisions on phrasing") were

examined as suggestions in this study following Jiang (2006) and Liu and Zhao (2007), even though they could be categorized as requests in another study due to the blurry boundary between requests and suggestions. In fact, suggestions have been defined as requests for the addressees to do something of benefit to themselves (Geis, 1995). Besides differentiating between modal and semi-modal verbs with "you" as the agent and with other agents, this study also distinguishes modal/semi-modals of necessity (e.g., have to, should, must) from those of uncertainty (e.g., may, can) and higher uncertainty (e.g., might, could).

After identifying and categorizing the incidents of suggestions in the commentary data, the two researchers independently analyzed the levels of directness/indirectness associated with the suggestions according to criteria resulting from a comparison of three scales or typology systems: Blum-Kulka's (1987) directness scale for 9 request strategies in English, Takahashi's (1987) indirectness scale of American English directives, and Martínez-Flor's (2010) classification of suggestion strategies into direct, conventionalized, and indirect forms. The two researchers' rankings of the syntactic categories were compared and synthesized (see the results for Table 1). Three directness/indirectness groups were identified for the suggestions in this study rather than two as in Liu and Zhao (2007) because it is believed that directness and indirectness comprise a continuum rather than a dichotomy. Group A in Table 1 contains direct suggestions in which the instructor used direct strategies and forms with the most literal pragmatic force to state clearly what she wanted the student to do. Group B consists of Level 1 indirect suggestions, which are not as direct as the suggestions in Group A, but still allow the student to understand the instructor's intention through the presence of illocutionary force<sup>6</sup> indicators, many of which are conventionalized forms, e.g., "Can you" (as compared to "Are you able to"). Finally, Group C contains Level 2 indirect suggestions that are even more indirect than the structures in Group B because the instructor's true intention of making a suggestion was not clearly stated and needed to be inferred by the student. The most prominent of all Level 2 indirect suggestions in the present data are statements or questions with an impersonal subject, e.g., "it" and "this sentence."

## Results

### Frequency of Suggestions

Because the data were collected from real-world teaching activities instead of controlled quasi-experimental settings, the length of terminal comments and the number of suggestions in them vary significantly from instructor to instructor. Thus, it was more useful to calculate the percentage of sentences with suggestions for each instructor as well as for each group, NS or NNS. Table 2 lists the total number of suggestions and the percentage of sentences with suggestions for each participating instructor and for each group. The two non-native English speaking instructors wrote much longer terminal comments on their 10 students' first drafts of the Writer's Autobiography assignment than the two American English speaking instructors. Percentage-wise, NNS2 made significantly more suggestions than any of her counterparts. More than 2/3 of her sentences contained a suggestion; nevertheless, for each of the other three instructors, only about 1/3 of their sentences contained a suggestion. The NNS group's average is 58% more than the mean percentage for the NS group.

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<sup>6</sup>Illocutionary force is the message deliverer's intention in conveying a certain message.

Table 2.

*Comment Length and Number of Suggestions for Individual Instructor*

<b>Participating Instructor</b>	<b>Total # of Words in End Comments</b>	<b>Total # of Sentences</b>	<b>Total # of Suggestions</b>	<b>Percentage of Sentences with Suggestions</b>
NS1	554	35	12	34.3
NS2	369	36	10	27.8
NNS1	1514	128	46	35.9
NNS2	1096	82	57	69.5
American English group average (NSG)	461.5≈462	35.5≈36	11	31.0
Non-English group average (NNSG)	1305	105	51.5≈52	49.0

**Most and Least Favorite Syntactic Structures for Making Suggestions**

In addition to the frequency of suggestions, instructors' written terminal feedback was also analyzed in regard to which syntactic structures were used by each instructor to make suggestions and which syntactic categories were preferred by each group of instructors. Tables 3 and 4 show the distribution of suggestion syntactic structures in each group.

Table 3.

*Syntactic Structures of American English Participants' Suggestions*

<b>Syntactic Structures</b>	<b>Frequency</b>		
	<b>NS1 (12 total)</b>	<b>NS2 (10 total)</b>	<b>Total (22 total)</b>
Imperatives	0 (0%)	1 (10%)	1 (4.5%)
Semi-modals/verbs of necessity (e.g., you need to, you need)	0 (0%)	2 (20%)	2 (9.1%)
Explicit performatives	0 (0%)	1 (10%)	1 (4.5%)
"Would like" with speaker subject	9 (75%)	3 (30%)	12 (54.6%)
Modals of uncertainty (e.g., you can)	0 (0%)	3 (30%)	3 (13.7%)
Modals of higher uncertainty (you could)	1 (8.3%)	0 (0%)	1 (4.5%)
Inclusive imperatives—Let's	2 (16.7%)	0 (0%)	2 (9.1%)

Table 4.  
*Syntactic Structures of Non-Native English Speaking Participants' Suggestions*

Syntactic Structures	Frequency		
	NNS1 (46 total)	NNS2 (57 total)	Total (103)
Imperatives	8 (17.4%)	35 (61.4%)	43 (41.7%)
Declaratives with modals/semi-modals/verbs of necessity—addressee subject (e.g., you need to)	1 (2.2%)	3 (5.2%)	4 (3.9%)
Explicit performatives	9 (19.5%)	0 (0%)	9 (8.7%)
"Would like" with speaker subject	0 (0%)	1 (1.8%)	1 (1.0%)
Hedged performatives	1 (2.2%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.0%)
Declaratives with modals of uncertainty—addressee subject (e.g., you may)	0 (0%)	1 (1.8%)	1 (1.0%)
Declaratives with modals of higher uncertainty—addressee subject (e.g., you might)	17 (36.9%)	0 (0%)	17 (16.5%)
Pseudo cleft structures	1 (2.2%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.0%)
Interrogatives with modals of uncertainty (Can you)	2 (4.3%)	0 (0%)	2 (1.9%)
Statements with inclusive "we"	0 (0%)	3 (5.2%)	3 (2.9%)
Conditionals	2 (4.3%)	1 (1.8%)	3 (2.9%)
Modals/semi-modals/verbs of necessity with other agents	3 (6.5%)	8 (14.0%)	11 (10.7%)
Modals of uncertainty with other agents	1 (2.2%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.0%)
Modals of higher uncertainty with other agents	1 (2.2%)	1 (1.8%)	2 (1.9%)
Yes-no questions	0 (0%)	4 (7.0%)	4 (3.9%)

It appears that the "would like" structures with a speaker subject, i.e., "I would like," was most preferred (54.6%) by the American English speaking instructors, followed by declaratives with modals of uncertainty/higher uncertainty, e.g., "you can" or "you could" (a combined<sup>7</sup> 18.2%). In comparison, the top two syntactic structures favored by the non-native speaking participants were imperatives (41.7%) and declaratives with modals of uncertainty/higher uncertainty, e.g., "you may" and "you might" (a combined 17.5%). It is noteworthy that the "I would like" structures and the imperatives received the highest frequency in their group—not just because one instructor used that category more than 60% of the time, but also because they both ranked among the top three most frequently used structures by the other instructor in their group.

In regard to the least used structures for offering suggestions, the American English speaking instructors used imperatives and explicit performatives (e.g., My *advice* for the second draft) each in only 4.5% of all cases. For the non-native English speaking group, the structures that were least used (each making up only 1% of the group total) included "I would like," hedged performatives<sup>8</sup> (e.g., I *would*

<sup>7</sup>Modals of uncertainty (e.g., you can, you may) and higher uncertainty (e.g., you could, you might) were combined for this analysis on instructors' preferred syntactic structures because there is not much distinction between the two categories anyway except for the fact that modals of higher uncertainty sound a little more tentative and thus might be slightly more polite than modals of uncertainty.

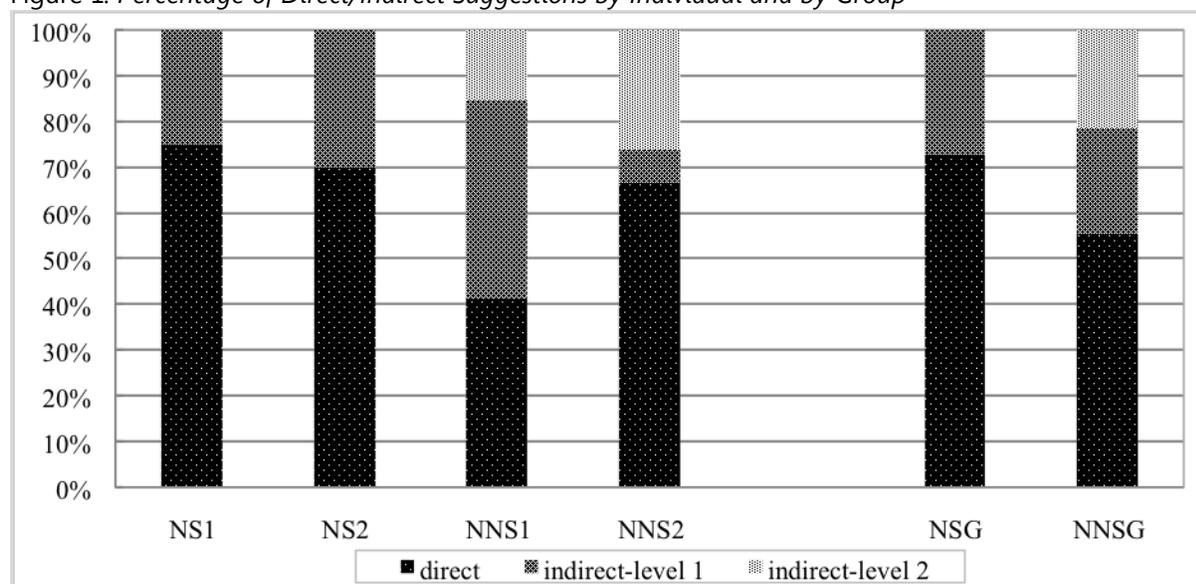
<sup>8</sup>In a hedged performative, the illocutionary force is expressed directly by a performative verb (e.g., suggest, advise, recommend) or noun (e.g., suggestion, advice, recommendation), but an additional illocutionary force can be realized by other devices such as the use of modal verbs or subordinate clauses (Leech, 1983). Here is an English example with a hedged performative for the speech act of suggestion:

suggest that you work more on the transitions), pseudo-cleft<sup>9</sup> structures (e.g., What you might try to do is to develop that idea fully), and modals of uncertainty with other agents (e.g., *It can*).

### Directness/Indirectness of Suggestions

Regarding the directness/indirectness of the linguistic forms for making suggestions, Figure 1 shows the proportion of direct and indirect suggestions offered by individual instructors and by instructor groups. Except for NNS1, the other three instructors provided more direct suggestions than indirect suggestions. The American English speaking group provided a higher percentage of direct suggestions and a lower percentage of indirect suggestions than the non-native speaking group. It is also noteworthy that none of the suggestions made by NESTs fell under the category of Level 2 indirect suggestions, whereas both NNESTs made all three kinds of suggestions—i.e., direct, Level 1 indirect, and Level 2 indirect suggestions. This lends further support to the finding that the American English speaking group in this study made more direct suggestions in their written feedback on students’ essays than the non-native speaking group.

Figure 1. Percentage of Direct/Indirect Suggestions by Individual and by Group



Note: NSG refers to the American English speaking group and NNSG refers to the non-English speaking group.

### Discussion

In terms of the social variables (i.e., power, distance, and imposition) involved in the pragmatic situations in the present study, the suggestion providers (instructors) all had institutionally conferred power over the recipients of their acts (students). As is common in U.S. academic settings, there was not a close relationship between the instructors and their undergraduate students as a result of the power differential. The seriousness of the imposition posed on the suggestion recipients (students) in this study ranged from a minor revision (e.g., breaking up a paragraph) to a large-scale revision (e.g., rewriting the whole paper).

Although both native English speaking instructors made significantly fewer suggestions than their non-

“May I suggest that we move on to the next item on our agenda?” (The use of the modal verb “may” adds an indirect force to “I suggest that we move on to the next item.”).

<sup>9</sup>A pseudo-cleft sentence in English is of this form: WH-relative clause + be + X. A simple example of an English pseudo-cleft sentence is “What she made for dinner today was shrimp salad.”

native speaking counterparts (12 and 10 versus 46 and 57), the percentage of sentences with suggestions did not vary substantially among the instructors except for NNS2, who provided about twice as many suggestions as any other instructor (see Table 2). This may be due to the fact that NNS2 wrote many short and concise sentences containing imperatives. It should be noted that a sentence containing multiple imperative verbs was still counted as one incidence of using imperatives for making suggestions. The following excerpt of an “end” comment by NNS2 illustrates her frequent use of imperatives:

This draft needs a lot of revisions on the essay organization and paragraph development. Start with rereading a paragraph by paragraph and writing down the idea of each para on the margins. Then, turn the idea into the topic sentence. After that, make sure that each para develops the idea announced in the topic sentence. Then, write the thesis statement.

Resembling a list of directions, these comments were very direct and not a bit softened by any conventional politeness formula (e.g., “you could . . .”) or mitigators (i.e., words or phrases that function to weaken the force of a suggestion, e.g., “You could *just* write down the main idea of each paragraph”). The suggestions took very different forms from what Mackiewicz (2005) advised tutors to use—hints. From personal communication with NNS2, it could be inferred that this instructor heavily and predominantly used imperatives because she wanted to convey her message precisely and avoid anything that may sound tentative to a student. The fact that the other three instructors—especially the two native English speakers—did not use imperatives much at all (no more than 4.5% of all instances of suggestions for the NS group) suggests that NNS2 perhaps could alternate between imperatives and syntactic structures that are a little lower on the directness scale (Table 1), for example, “I would like” structures. Compared to imperatives, “I would like” structures could clearly state the instructor’s expectations and would less likely be perceived as “orders.”

While the high frequency of imperative structures in the NNS group and the high frequency of “I would like” structures in the NS group were likely due to certain instructors’ strong preferences, both groups made fairly good use of modals of uncertainty/higher uncertainty with an addressee subject (e.g., “you may,” “you can,” “you might,” or “you could”). Compared to the modals of uncertainty or higher uncertainty, declarative sentences with modals, semi-modals, or verbs of necessity (e.g., “you should,” “you need to”) had significantly less representation in the commentary data (9.1% for the NS group and 3.9% for the NNS group). This may be due to the same reason that Liu and Zhao (2007) inferred in their article: these linguistic forms (e.g., “you should”) “express strong obligation and threaten the negative face of the students” (p. 70). The negative face refers to people’s desire for freedom of choice and action with no interference or intrusion from other people.

Contrary to Liu and Zhao’s (2007) finding, the NESTs in the present study never used modals with agents other than “you,” whereas this type of structure had a combined 13.7% occurrence in the suggestions given by NNESTs. NNESTs’ use of other agents could help them shift the focus away from student writers, and therefore could help to reduce the potential threat to students’ negative face. For example, in the sentence, “The 2nd para and the 3rd para may be combined into one para,” the focus is on two paragraphs in a draft rather than the writer.

As the percentage figures in Tables 3 and 4 indicate, the NNS instructors in the present study used fewer modals/semi-modals of necessity with an addressee subject (e.g., “you are supposed to”) than their NS counterparts (3.9% vs. 9.1%). This again runs contrary to Liu and Zhao’s (2007) finding that their non-native group preferred to use “must” and “need to.” Liu and Zhao argue that this preference for “must” and “need to” “leaves a general impression that they [the NNESTs in their study] want to be clear and absolute in what the students need to work on to improve their drafts”; such preference for “must” and “need to,” however, also makes the instructors sound “more imposing” (p. 71). The authors further assert that these direct strategies were adopted by the NNESTs mainly to advise students to fix problems with the basic elements of their essays, e.g., a lack of a thesis statement or topic sentences. In the present study, however, modals/semi-modals/verbs of necessity were used in suggestions on things beyond the

basic elements of a student essay. For example, one suggestion that used “need to” focused on paragraphing: “You need to break your text into paragraphs.”

Regarding the directness/indirectness of suggestions, all instructors other than NNS1 tended to make suggestions directly, and the three of them had about the same percentage of direct suggestions (70%). The high proportion of indirect suggestions that NNS1 made could be a result of her reliance on the “you might” structures, which alone accounted for more than a third of all her suggestions. The fact that NNS1 was able to utilize negative politeness strategies<sup>10</sup> and expressions (e.g., “you might want to”) was perhaps attributable to her personality and/or native culture, or it could be because she had better pragmatic awareness than the other instructors.

The bar chart in Figure 1 seems to reflect a general pattern in which the NS group was considerably more direct than the NNS group. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the NNS group’s average percentage of direct suggestions could have been pulled down by the fact that NNS1 was very indirect. At the same time, neither of the NESTs made any Level 2 indirect suggestions, which were the most indirect suggestions in the present study and were used by both NNS instructors. This could be interpreted to mean that the NS instructors in this study were at least not as indirect as the NNS instructors when making suggestions in their written comments on students’ writing.

### Conclusion

This preliminary study investigated suggestions in native and non-native speaking composition instructors’ written feedback on international undergraduate students’ first drafts of the Writer’s Autobiography assignment. The primary finding of the study is that, among the various linguistic resources that the four participating instructors employed to make suggestions, the most preferred syntactic structures were “I would like” statements for the NESTs and imperatives for the NNESTs. The second most preferred structure for both groups was declaratives with modals of uncertainty/higher uncertainty (e.g., “you may,” “you can,” “you might,” or “you could”).

The results, therefore, reveal both similarities and differences between the two groups of instructors in their choice of suggestion forms. The similarities could be due to the high language proficiency of the NNESTs in the study and the same training that all participating instructors had received. The differences in the most preferred syntactic structure were largely due to the commenting practice of a single instructor in each group. For these individual instructors, as well as many other NNS graduate instructors and faculty members not included in this study, the findings may help them reflect on the pedagogic and pragmatic characteristics of their own commenting style.

Other findings from this preliminary study include that the NESTs were more direct than the NNESTs, and that overall, both groups tended to make suggestions directly. This suggests that the previous research finding—that non-native English speakers are more direct than native speakers when offering suggestions—does not hold true for the NESTs and NNESTs in the present study. Despite the number of writing samples collected (40 samples), however, and the length of all the ‘end’ comments combined (3,533 words), this study may have suffered from a small number of participants: two NESTs and two NNESTs. Caution should be exercised when conclusions from this study are applied to similar contexts involving instructors who include suggestions in their written comments on ESL students’ writing.

Nevertheless, this small preliminary study raises two lines of questions that can be addressed in future research: (a) Were the instructors, especially the NNESTs, aware of the pragmatic differences between the various linguistic structures? And (b) how did the ESL students perceive the different forms of suggestions? And by extension, did the differences in linguistic form affect students’ reaction to teachers’ suggestions?

In addition to contributing to a scant body of research on NNESTs’ written production of suggestions in a U.S. college writing program, this study also has practical implications for the training of ITAs and

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<sup>10</sup>Negative politeness strategies are employed to save the recipient’s negative face and to avoid imposition on the recipient.

NNS faculty members who are novice composition instructors. Findings from this study can help raise these teachers' awareness of the importance of politeness considerations in their daily communication in the workplace, including the act of making suggestions in their written feedback on students' compositions.

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