

# **Business Communication in Less Commonly Taught Languages: Teaching Suggestions through Discourse Analysis\***

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## **Abstract**

The knowledge generated by studies in discourse analysis is rarely brought into the teaching of business communication in a foreign language. Instead of presenting learners with “samples” of language after which they will pattern their production, foreign language instructors may invite learners to analyze the interplay between text and context in their own and in others’ discourses. Therefore, the teaching of communicative functions (such as requesting, apologizing, suggesting, etc.) in foreign languages should go beyond the presentation, production and practice of textual forms: learners should be actively involved in doing discourse analysis in order to be able to make principled decisions when formulating suggestions in the workplace. In the case of less commonly taught languages, this approach is especially important, since textbooks and other teaching materials are not likely to include analysis and/or focused applications of communicative functions. The recommendations included in this article contribute to fulfill this need in the teaching of LCTLs.

**Keywords:** discourse analysis, suggestions, foreign language, workplace

In spite of the vast body of knowledge generated by discourse analysts in the past decades, there has been little discussion on potential applications of the analysis of discourse in the teaching of business communication in general and in the business foreign language class in particular. Although the knowledge generated by theoretical and empirical studies in discourse analysis has generally been interpreted as part of teachers' or teacher trainers' professional expertise, rare are the studies which call for students' engagement in some form of discourse analysis as part of their learning process.

This work will follow the latter track by arguing that discourse analysis should be integrated in the LCTL curriculum, especially when it focuses on specific purposes such as business communication. This integration, we argue, is key to raising learners' awareness about the repertoire of linguistic choices in communication and, most fundamentally, about the interactional consequences of particular choices. After making the case for this type of integration, we locate and examine the communicative function we will discuss in this article, namely suggestions. Next, we provide recommendations as to how discourse analysis can be applied to the teaching of suggestions in business communication in LCTLs. We close this article with a brief discussion of how our recommendations may address a common need in LCTLs.

### **Discourse Analysis and Language Teaching**

Many definitions have been given to *discourse*, but in this work we adopt G. Cook's (2001, p. 4) view that discourse "is text and context together," and that context involves several features, such as the situation; participants' roles, intentions, knowledge, relationships, etc; the function of the text; and the co-text, i.e. the text preceding or following the text in focus. It follows that discourse analysis should move beyond the analysis of the text proper and incorporate both textual and contextual features.

Early studies drawing on the notion of speech acts (such as Hymes, 1986, and Duranti, 1989) and on verbal politeness (such as Brown & Levinson, 1987, and Meier, 1997) already point out that the form of an utterance depends on situational and contextual features, not only on the speaker's intentions. Furthermore, examining speech acts from a discourse analysis perspective allows us to look at the contributions of all participants in the interaction, thus focusing on sequences (rather than isolated utterances) that may comprise a communicative act.

This work draws on the latter perspective and locates it within the context of critical language awareness (Fairclough, 1995; Santos, 2007; Wallace, 1992). In other words, we assume that, in order to become competent language users, learners need to go beyond the text and to become analysts of the interplay between text and context in their own and in others' discourses. Central to this approach is the reflection of existing power relations in instances of language use, and the investigation of how those relations influence and are influenced by language choices. In order to enable learners to engage in such reflection, "language" has to be much more than a model of linguistic structure: it has, rather, to become a topic of conversation and a focus of inquiry.

Admittedly, the approach we advocate in this work is not widely adopted in language teaching and learning. In mainstream L2 pedagogy, language learners tend to be presented with "samples" of discourse and from this presentation they are usually asked to produce and practice the language in focus. Following this perspective, the teaching of communicative functions (such as requesting, apologizing, thanking, suggesting and so on) in foreign language classrooms is oftentimes limited to practicing textual forms related to the function in question (usually through the use of roleplays).

As Milleret (2007) points out, integrating communicative functions into the LCTL curriculum prepares learners "to demonstrate real communicative competence" (p. 41). However, in

order to be successful, this integration has to go beyond the mere practice of textual forms related to the function in question. As Jiang (2006) explains, lists of forms, drills and dialogues found in foreign language textbooks and/or practiced in the classroom hardly mirror real language use. Moreover, as we argue in this paper, this commonly practiced approach is limited in that it does not provide learners with opportunities to reflect on the dynamism and complexity involved in the configuration of diverse contextual features linked with the text. Therefore, we propose alternatives that may allow for recognition, reflection, and practice/production of communicative functions.

While the approach advocated here would work well with any foreign language, it is particularly relevant for LCTLs because of the general unavailability of materials that address speech acts. Commonly taught languages such as Spanish count with many different resources, from websites to varied textbooks (a quick search in any publisher's website can reveal the array of materials to choose from). The same does not happen with LCTLs. Therefore, it is important that practitioners in these languages have access to various ideas that can help improve their teaching and their students' learning experience.

### **Suggestions in the Workplace**

We focus on suggestions because these are commonly produced (yet relatively underexplored) communicative functions in the workplace, and also because there are potential difficulties surrounding (i) the definition, (ii) the production, and (iii) the identification of this speech act, all of which will have an impact on the teaching of suggestions in business communication. We will explore each of these three aspects in turn.

Regarding definitions, several studies on suggestions (e.g. Banerjee & Carrell, 1988; Jiang, 2006; Koike, 1995) draw on Searle's (1969) definition of this speech act as "directives that the speaker believes will benefit the hearer" (p. 13). This definition may be problematic when applied to naturally-occurring interac-

tions, where the lines between speaker and hearer may become blurred (as when two or more people talk at the same time, or when one completes another one's utterance) or when we consider that a speaker (in its canonical interpretation) may not be the author of the ideas being expressed (Goffman, 1981). In the workplace, the definition above gains an extra degree of complexity, given that the beneficiary of a suggestion may not be the hearer (even if we define who the "hearer" is), but rather his/her superiors, or the institution, or productivity. From that perspective, we define a suggestion as an idea or action plan that is put forward by one or more interactant. In addition to the points made above, this definition contemplates the facts that communicative acts "are not usually performed directly" Koester (2002, p. 167) and that they "unfold within a conversational sequence." (ibid.)

Below we provide an example of a naturally-occurring suggestion translated from Portuguese. The example is taken from a business meeting at a language school in Brazil (Santos & Silva, 2008b), when 6 co-workers are trying to make a decision about a video to be shown during an event.

(1)

K: because he told me that he thought it was an interesting idea to have the video showing / in the room

H: / in the room

F: he said the same thing, that it will be showing

J: but I think there has to be someone in that room

H: there have to be a few students also, K.

J: someone who has seen it and can...

K: we can also ask a student to do that

As seen in the unfolding discussion above, a suggestion may be jointly constructed by different participants over several turns. First, participant K reports on someone else's suggestion about showing a movie, which is supported by participant H in

an overlapped turn. Participant F confirms that suggestion, and participant J complements it by offering a new element: someone in the room. Then, H offers further complementation by proposing that students be included, and J expands the proposition about who should be in the room (someone familiar with the video). Finally, K builds on the suggestion, adding that a student can be asked to show the video.

The fact that a suggestion may be created over several turns poses a few challenges to the study of how this communicative act is produced—and, therefore, to how it should be taught. To complicate matters, LCTL textbooks may not even highlight this speech act, and teachers/students may need to develop their own materials, as described in Santos & Silva (2008a).

Problems with defining suggestions, together with the complex demands involved in producing suggestions, are likely to have an impact on how interactants perceive this communicative act. After all, the perception of suggestions may also be related to the (un)successful production of this act. Koike (1995) investigated the perception of suggestions by learners of Spanish and found that more advanced learners were more successful in identifying suggestions than less advanced ones. Perception of suggestions and other communicative acts may be intrinsically related to sensitivity to mitigation. H. Cook (2001) looked at perception by learners of Japanese of more or less polite speech, noting that foreign language learners may underestimate the relevance of mitigating devices. Although these studies were not located in the context of business communication, they highlight potential difficulties that foreign language learners may face when involved in suggestion making in the workplace. In this scenario, how suggestions are produced and/or perceived may affect both productivity and social relations among co-workers.

### **Teaching How to Make Suggestions in the Workplace**

All the points above lead us to the importance of raising LCTL learners' awareness about the complexity of suggestion

making in the workplace, especially regarding contextual features such as the relationship between participants and the setting. Roleplays and simulations may provide learners with opportunities to produce and practice suggestions, but they will not necessarily raise learners' awareness of the various linguistic options available for the production of this speech act in the target language, nor will they sensitize learners to the potential consequences of particular linguistic choices. That said, roleplays, when followed by relevant comments by the teacher and/or by peers, might help call learners' attention to the form that certain speech acts take in a particular culture. However, comments would have to include an analysis of why a certain communicative act does not meet its felicity conditions (preferably done by the group of peers, and including the roleplay participants, so they have a chance to think critically about the interaction). Furthermore, in order to take full advantage of roleplays, learners would have to replay them in order to try out different linguistic options, each one analyzed by the teacher and the group. Of course, availability of one or two native speakers of the target language that may be willing to take part in said roleplays may help learners realize more quickly what kind of language to use in different situations.

In what follows we list further recommendations on how to teach LCTL learners to become familiar with key issues in discourse in order to be able to understand the impact of both contextual and textual issues on suggestion making in the workplace (in the target language environment). In this process, learners are likely to become more aware of how language works and therefore to be able to make principled decisions in their production and perception of this speech act. This awareness, we argue, should lead to more efficient L2 communicators in the workplace. We use examples from our own research and teaching practice in an LCTL to illustrate and justify our claims. These examples were part of a collaborative effort involving three Portuguese language classes, two at an American university

and one at a British college for adult education. Each class corresponded to a different proficiency level, from lower intermediate to advanced. For details about the project and its participants, see Santos & Silva (2008a).

### **Making Learners Aware of the Effects of Contextual Features on Discourse**

From a discursal perspective, the way a suggestion is formulated (i.e., the linguistic form it takes) varies according to contextual features such as the setting (where people are talking), the type of language (spoken, written, formal, informal), and interactants' roles (friends/strangers, employer/employee, etc).

In order to raise awareness about characteristics of suggestions in relation to the features listed above, learners can participate in a brainstorming exercise, during which they offer several types of participants in an interaction, of places where interactions can happen, and of types of language that can be used. Below is an example of what one pair of learners have produced for this exercise. The example has been translated from Portuguese. Note that, although relatively simple, this exercise serves as a springboard to more elaborate ones. It has been used with adult learners, who reportedly appreciated "starting from scratch," as it were, in their process of attending to different contextual and linguistic features in the target language.

Table 1  
Possible Contextual Features of Interactions

Participants	Setting	Type of language
employee and boss; mother and son; friends; doctor and nurse; strangers	Car; Work; Shop; Movie theater; Gas station	Written or spoken; Formal or informal; Literary



After proposing different contextual features, learners can present various combinations of those features (e.g., friends at the movies, informal; strangers at the shop, formal; employee and boss at work, formal) and produce suggestions in the target language according to the distinct combinations. Working in pairs or in groups, learners can discuss and negotiate what form a suggestion would take given a particular combination of contextual features. They should also justify their choices. This discussion needs to highlight the fact that the linguistic form of a communicative act depends on the very features that they have offered: who talks to whom, where, and using what type of language. The result of their discussion should be dialogues that take place following the combinations proposed and that contain at least one suggestion that obeys constraints imposed by particular contextual features. In order to call attention to the characteristics of the language used in the workplace, learners should produce (in the target language, of course) at least one dialogue that occurs in a place of business and one which does not. Awareness of the differences between these two types of interaction will help learners assess the impact of contextual features on communication at work, especially regarding the role of power relations in the workplace. Below we give two examples produced by learners, again translated from Portuguese:

(2)

Friends at the movies

Maria: João, what movie do you want to see?

João: I don't know, but I think the one with Eddie Murphy would be good.

Maria: Well, let's buy the tickets and then we can buy popcorn and soda.

João: OK! You get the soda and I'll get the tickets.

(3)

Boss and employee

- Boss: António! Did you already serve that table?  
 António: No, sir. There are a lot of people and I can't serve all of them.  
 Boss: You need to serve them more quickly!  
 António: Maybe you could hire more servers so we could do it more quickly.  
 Boss: Don't worry about that now and get to work!

With this exercise, learners start to realize that the linguistic form a suggestion takes is related to the contextual features discussed, as seen in the examples above: while the suggestions made by two friends in (2) do not require many hedges, an employee's suggestion to his boss (in (3)) uses these forms consistently ("maybe," "could") as well as a further mitigator in the form of a justification ("so we could do it more quickly").

Also worth noting in these examples is the fact that, in both scenarios, these learners opt for suggestions that are implicit (i.e., don't use a performative verb such as *suggest*; see Austin, 1975) and direct (i.e., contain declaratives; see Parker & Riley, 2005). However, in example (2) we find an implied suggestion, i.e., one that does not express directly the action that is required of the interlocutor. In example (3), which involves more asymmetrical power relations, learners used an expressed suggestion—a suggestion that expresses its propositional content (Parker & Riley, 2005). This difference may have an impact on the outcome of these suggestions: in (2), Maria signals agreement by complementing the suggestion in her turn; in (3), António's suggestion is not so successful and it generates an abrupt response by his boss. Had the employee used indirect and implied suggestions (such as "We don't have enough servers around" or "Wouldn't it be better to have more servers on busy days?"), the interactional consequences might have been different.

It may be argued that António's suggestion in example (3) fails because it is not an appropriate reaction to his boss's reproach. While a suggestion may be considered somewhat unusual

as an answer to a reprimand, the response by António's boss might not have been so terse if the suggestion were not an expressed one. Here, once again, it is important to highlight the fact that linguistic behavior depends on many different contextual features, including cultural expectations: the relationship between an employee and his/her boss may be more formal in the target culture than in the native one, regardless of the type of workplace. Thus, learners need to become aware of culture-related features as they develop consciousness of the linguistic characteristics of communicative acts.

Considerations of linguistic features (and how they are affected by cultural traits) can be discussed by the learners as part of their awareness-raising process. We develop this idea in the next recommendation.

### **Having Learners Consider Linguistic Choices and Their Consequences for the Interaction**

Individually or in groups, learners can consider various ways of formulating a speech act and then decide which one they might produce. Also building on the findings from our research into ways of initiating suggestions in the workplace, we have designed a questionnaire (used with adult learners of Portuguese) which includes scenarios like the following:

(4)

Co-workers are discussing possible sponsors for a future event. A less powerful participant suggests that a local restaurant might like to sponsor it. What would you say if you were this participant?

- (a) I propose the following: let's contact Pancho restaurant?
- (b) I suggest we contact Pancho restaurant.
- (c) There's a restaurant nearby that might be interested.

The rationale guiding this question was the absence of performative verbs and high rate of general statements as a means

of initiating suggestions in our data. For this question, most learners chose the nonexplicit suggestion (i.e., option (c)), which mirrors what we found in the naturally-occurring data. However, (a) and (b) were also among the answers, albeit in fewer numbers. A follow-up exercise would encourage learners to discuss and reflect on the reasons guiding their answers. Other questions for exploration include: to what extent is it appropriate for a less powerful participant (P-) to use an explicit suggestion when addressing a more powerful participant (P+)? Would an explicit suggestion by P+ probably be perceived as a suggestion or as an order? Through this discussion, learners may understand better the restrictions posed by certain contextual features, such as participant ranking, and also the communicative implications of different linguistic choices.

### **Making Learners Familiar with Findings from Research**

The analysis of naturally-occurring data yields many findings about speech acts that can and should be used in LCTL classes (Jiang, 2006; Koester, 2002). One way of bringing this type of research into the classroom involves creating expectations about the characteristics of the language used in the workplace (in this case, the language used in order to initiate suggestions). Learners are presented with contextual information about the data: where the interactions occurred, what the communicative goal of the interaction was, how many participants there were, and what their roles in the workplace were. They are also presented with details about the corpus (how many transcribed words it has and how many hours of transcriptions are involved). With this information, learners are asked to hypothesize which linguistic forms they think were used to initiate suggestions in the corpus, and in what frequency. To help learners record their hypotheses, relevant linguistic forms may be provided, as illustrated below (which would be translated and/or adapted to the target language).

Table 2  
Grid for Recording Hypotheses about Linguistic Forms

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
We can ...				
I think we can....				
Would you be able to...				
The ideal thing would be...				
I suggest that...				
Wouldn't it be better..				
Isn't it better...				
I wonder if it isn't better...				
Why don't we....				
Let's...				
What about...				
It is/would be better...				

Learners use the grid above to indicate whether they think these linguistic forms occurred in the situation provided, and in what frequency. Afterwards, they are given the actual results of the naturally-occurring data analysis and are asked to check their hypotheses by comparing them with the results of the analysis. In our classes, we used results from a corpus of about 45,000 words that had been collected, as mentioned above, during business meetings at a language school in Brazil (Santos & Silva, 2008b).

Checking hypotheses may cause surprise in some cases and confirm their intuitions in others. The situation we presented to students involved meetings to plan an event which had never happened before. Therefore, suggestions were particularly productive in these meetings. In our experience, learners were generally surprised to know that, contrary to their expectations, our Portuguese corpus did not include the use of performative verbs for suggestion making (e.g., “I suggest that...”).

In our corpus, indirect suggestions in the form of negatives, especially the form - “why don’t we,” were perceived by many learners to be productive in the data. However, our corpus contained only one indirect suggestion using the form “why don’t we...”. On the other hand, several learners correctly predicted that the Portuguese counterpart of the form “what about...” would rarely, if ever, be uttered in suggestions. Most of our learners also correctly predicted that the present indicative would occur very often in naturally-occurring suggestions in the target language.

Naturally, this type of exercise depends on the existence of corpora in the target language—and access to them. Corpora may not be available for all LCTLs, but it may not be difficult to compile a small corpus such as the one we have used. It goes without saying that, in order to be useful in the teaching and practice of any given speech as a corpus must contain the speech act(s) in question.

This type of exercise serves two purposes: it familiarizes learners with academic research and encourages them to question their assumptions about the language used in the production of certain speech acts. The following recommendation also follows this latter stance.

### **Encouraging Learners to Become Ethnographers of Language**

In order to gain further insight into the ways different people in various settings actually make suggestions, learners should be encouraged to identify and record examples of suggestions. This recommendation is inspired by the anthropological tradition of doing ethnographic work, that is, observing and cataloguing behavior (in this case, linguistic behavior). This work should be accompanied by a process of moving “from the familiar to the unfamiliar” (Heath, 1983, p. 339) through observations and critical analysis of linguistic behavior in settings they frequently participate in. In the case of suggestions in workplace communication, learners could be encouraged to find examples

of suggestions in meetings, in informal conversations with co-workers, in briefings, and so on. When asked to “play the ethnographer,” our learners identified the following (among other utterances) as suggestions in the workplace. Again, examples are translated from Portuguese. It is worth noting that learners who provided these two examples lived in a region where they had access to Portuguese-speaking environments outside of home/school.

(5)

Teller to client: Even if you have an account in another bank, you can open one here just to get higher interest.

(6)

Client to teller: I would like [the money] in 10- and 20-dollar bills.

These examples generated a lot of discussion around whether both these utterances would normally be perceived as suggestions. It was concluded that (5) was in fact intended as a suggestion but that (6) was to be taken as a request. The initial misperception of (6) as a suggestion may have been due to a disregard to constraints imposed by the setting where the interaction occurs: in client-teller interactions, the former is not entitled to make suggestions to the latter but the reverse is possible. Asymmetrical relationships like this one are often the case in business communication and ethnographic observation of these interactions raises language learners' awareness of the constraints imposed by certain contexts.

For LCTL teaching purposes it is also recommended that learners carry out these observations in both the first and the second language, if possible. Several researchers have noted that different languages make use of different linguistic strategies in order to produce a speech act (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Gass & Neu, 1995; Grundy, 1998; Li & Toole, 1998; Ver-

garo, 2004; Yeung, 1997) and learners should become aware of the range of options speakers have at their disposal and how these options may vary from one language to another.

While this type of ethnographic work can yield very positive results, not all LCTL learners would have access to sociolinguistic environments that might allow for such observations. In the absence of a viable target language setting, teachers may perhaps facilitate access to media (such as movies, TV broadcasts, or even appropriate Internet videos) and ask learners to identify/transcribe the communicative act(s) being studied. Although learners would obviously not take part in these interactions, paying specific attention to native speakers (and being able to see the interaction more than once) may be quite helpful in noticing linguistic forms and their correlation with contextual features. Videos in the target language may also serve as a springboard for comparisons with the learners' native language/culture, thus bringing to the fore differences that are found among languages.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In this paper we have argued that learners of business communication in a less commonly taught language need to be given opportunities to consider the linguistic choices available for producing a speech act in the target language and also to reflect on the effects of particular choices when communicating in the business world. We have also claimed that awareness of the interplay between power relations and language use is key to the development of competent language learners in this scenario.

To contemplate those aims, we have recommended a set of procedures for raising learners' awareness regarding the use of suggestions in the workplace. When we utilized these procedures with learners of Portuguese, they demonstrated an increased awareness of both the use and the structure of suggestions. In the beginning of the instructional intervention, learners misidentified suggestions in different textbook dialogues. After taking part in awareness-raising activities, students showed their increased



consciousness of and proficiency in suggestions by producing exercises involving this speech act for the other classes involved in the project (Santos & Silva, 2008a). One of these exercises involved translating suggestions to/from Portuguese and English, which confirms that learners had become more aware not only of the linguistic forms of suggestions in Portuguese, but also of the contrasts between the two languages with regard to that communicative act.

Although we have focused on suggestion making, our approach could be applied to other speech acts as well. Our recommendations address a common need in LCTL teaching: materials development. Naturally-occurring data provide the basis for discussion and analysis of communicative acts, thus filling a void in materials that deal with speech acts. Furthermore, learners are given the opportunity to compare language produced in the classroom with examples from a naturally-occurring LCTL corpus. While large corpora may be expensive to build, a smaller corpus, such as the one described in this paper, would require few resources to collect and transcribe. As we have shown, even a small corpus may be rich in materials to be used in language classes.

Our recommendations may be expanded to include the analysis of textbook language as well, comparing it to LCTL corpora available, thus providing learners with further opportunities to reflect upon the production of suggestions and other communicative acts. This type of expansion would also maximize the use of resources at hand, compensating for the notorious scarcity of pedagogical materials in LCTLs.

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#### Note

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