

Suggesting a Suggestion: Insights into Strategies from Maranao ESL Learners

Annie Mae C. Berowa, Henelsie B. Mendoza

Abstract. This study aimed to discover the suggestion strategies employed by Maranao ESL learners toward Maranao and non-Maranao addressees. Furthermore, it tried to investigate the similarities and differences of the suggestion strategies employed by the participants based on the ethnic affiliations of the target recipients, as well as the various considerations in performing suggestion speech act that may influence the choice of addressee. The data were collected through written Discourse Completion Task (DCT) and through semi-structured one-on-one interview. The data were described and analyzed based on Martinez-Flor's (2005) coding scheme of suggestion strategies. The results show that generally, Maranao participants employ indirect suggestion strategies irrespective of their interlocutor's ethnic identity. Additionally, participants utilize the same suggestion strategy regardless of the ethnic affiliation of the target recipient through the use of preliminary expression "please do not be offended" which is found to be a strategy type that is not captured under Martinez-Flor (2005) coding system. Furthermore, the study revealed that cultural and linguistic factors, as well as the level of perceived acceptance of the suggestion and the level of intimacy with the addressee, are important considerations in performing suggestion and in the choice of addressee of the participants.

Keywords-Speech act, suggestion strategies, Maranao, maratabat, non-Maranao

I. INTRODUCTION

Raising pragmatic awareness is as important in intercultural communication. Successful cross-cultural communication, however, starts with efficient and effective communication achieved not only through familiarization of forms and functions but also with the understanding of why certain forms are culturally preferred over others. Thus, it is fundamental to recognize the rules governing the act of speaking (Hymes, 1972 as cited in Sadeghi & Zarei, 2013). These rules are composed of different speech acts such as invitation, suggestion, compliment and compliment response, refusal, and apologies among others.

One of the most important speech acts that can make or break interpersonal relationships is the act of giving suggestion which can be viewed as a source of insight to see ideas better. However, providing suggestion is not easy task as no one would probably want to be told on what to do. Such speech act is even considered an invasion of the addressee's private space that requires acceptable and careful communication patterns to

engage in an efficient conversation and to reduce the possibility of offense toward the addressee (Farnia, Sohrabie & Sattar, 2014)

Banerjee and Carrell in 1988 (as cited in Gu, 2014) described suggestion as a directive speech act since the speaker's intention of an utterance is for the addressee to recognize it as a directive to do something that will be beneficial to the hearer. Brown and Levinson (1987) expressed that suggestion is considered as a face threatening act (FTA) as the speaker seems to interfere the world of the addressee by doing an act that involves what the addressee must do. Suggestions are therefore perceived as an imposition on the part of the addressee by offending their negative face (Banerjee & Carrell, 1988 as cited in Gu, 2014). It must be emphasized that the speaker needs to soften or mitigate the imposition that this act creates to lessen the offense it can make on the part of the hearer by using specific suggestion strategies (Martinez-Flor, 2005).

The concept of suggestion as a speech act and the concerns that surround in performing such act is very important among Maranaos in Muslim Mindanao who put so much value on their *maratabat*. The Maranaos, which means "people of the lake", largely, settle in the region surrounding the basin of Lake Lanao who are adherents of Islam. *Maratabat* is equivalent to honor, dignity, rank, self-esteem, reputation and face (Saber, Mauyag & Warriner, 1960). When this Maranao *maratabat* is reinforced positively, it results to harmonious relationships. However, if it is transgressed because of insult or defamation, it can provoke a Maranao to kill. A Maranao is ready to face the person who inflicted insult to defend that ruined *maratabat*. In a high context culture as exhibited in the Maranao culture, Allami and Naeimi (2010) claim that implicit strategies than explicit ones are preferred to preserve the concept of face or "Maratabat".

With the notion of pride the Maranao people strongly uphold, it will be interesting to discover how Maranaos give suggestions to their fellow Maranaos considering that the act is face-threatening. And to provide a point of comparison, it will also be worthy to explore how the Maranaos suggest toward non-Maranao interlocutors. This study will not only add to the existing literature that investigated the suggestion strategies employed in the different contexts around the globe but also provide another dimension, the ethnic/cultural aspect, in performing such act. Specifically, this study tried to answer the following questions.

1. What are the suggestion strategies employed by Maranao ESL learners toward Maranao and non-Maranao addressees?
2. What are the similarities and differences of the suggestion strategies employed by the participants toward interlocutors of different ethnic affiliations?

Annie Mae C. Berowa is a graduate student at De La Salle University, Manila (email: annie_berowa@dlsu.edu.ph).

Henelsie B. Mendoza is a graduate student at De La Salle University, Manila (henelsie_mendoza@dlsu.edu.ph).

3. What are the factors identified by the Maranao participants that influence their preferred addressees?

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

The study employed a qualitative research approach to be participated by 30 Maranao students. During the conduct of the study, the researchers explained first the objectives of the investigation and the scenarios on the DCT questionnaire to the participants. And then, the researchers distributed the DCT questionnaire to the participants who were given 90 minutes, which is equivalent to the usual class hour, to accomplish the DCT task. After accomplishing the DCT, the researcher conducted a one-on-one interview.

B. Research Setting and Participants

This study was conducted in the Mindanao State University, Main Campus in the Islamic City of Marawi, Lanao del Sur which is the home of the Maranao people. The participants of this study were the Maranao students who are taking the Job Enabling English Proficiency (JEEP) Program of the university to make sure that the respondents have sufficient proficiency in English to accomplish the written and interview tasks. Briefly, the Job Enabling English Proficiency or JEEP was launched in June 2009. JEEP is a new project established by GEM (Growth with Equity in Mindanao), a USAID-funded program which has been active in Mindanao for over 13 years, working in infrastructure development, business development, governance, and workforce preparation. The aim of JEEP is to help Mindanao graduates secure and retain jobs in highly-favored sectors which require proficiency in English, such as international nursing and allied health, call center and other Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO) employment in these areas. The researchers randomly chose the 30 participants for this study.

C. Instruments

The data were collected through written Discourse Completion Task (DCT). The DCT is a written questionnaire that contains a number of hypothetical scenarios or situations used to elicit a certain speech act (Yuan, 2002). Respondents are required to supply, in writing, what they would say in real life if similar situations happen to them. The questionnaire provided (10) situations where the participants are said to be in a situation in which the act of suggesting is called for. The answers were then described and analyzed as to the suggestion strategies employed toward Maranao and non-Maranao addressees. For the researcher to discover the issues faced by the participants in giving suggestions, the researchers conducted a one-on-one interview through the use of interview question guide.

D. Methods of Data Analysis

The data were described and analyzed based on Martinez-Flor's (2005) coding scheme of suggestion strategies since it is used by all the related literature cited on this present study. Moreover, the theories of speech acts and politeness were utilized to provide discussion and analysis of the results.

III. RESULTS

The results are presented in two sections: the first section presents the results of the written DCT and the second part will discuss the results of the structured interview.

1. Suggestion strategies by Maranao ESL learners toward Maranao and non-Maranao addressees

The responses elicited from written DCT were transcribed and analyzed using the taxonomy proposed by Martinez-Flor (2005) for the speech act of suggestion. Most of the respondents used indirect types (48.15%) in giving suggestions regardless of their interlocutor's cultural identity. In the study of directness by Blum-Kulka (1989) on the role of conventionality of indirectness, the preference of Maranao respondents can be both categorized as "suggestory formula" or declarative or interrogative statement taken as an illocutionary force to mean a suggestion and "hint" where the illocutionary force can be inferred from the context of the utterance. The societal context in understanding the given suggestion has to be mutually understood by both the speaker and addressee in order to derive what exactly the speaker wants the hearer to do. Given that suggesting is a face threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1987), mitigation strategies have to be employed to soften the impact of the speaker's imposition. The findings also support prior studies (Gu, 2014; Aufa, 2014; Bu, 2011) where the indirect strategy is deemed to be "more" appropriate especially in communicating cross-culturally. Making learners understand explicitly how suggestions are better realized in a given speech context (Li, 2010; Jiang, 2006; Martinez-Flor, 2005) have been one of the primary objectives of the previous researches.

Among the indirect types, the impersonal strategy is also used more frequently towards their Maranao (24.62%) and hints are often used towards Non-maranao (44.00%) addressees. The results in the study confirm the findings of Farnia, Sohrabie and Sattar (2014) where most of the Farsi speakers employed hints and impersonal strategies more frequently. This is closely attributed to Allami and Naeimi's (2010) claim that people in high context culture (like the Philippines) used more implicit strategies than explicit ones which proved the importance of the concept of face in the Philippines. Furthermore, Filipinos value healthy interpersonal relationships that is why they avoid being unpleasant to others to avoid any misunderstanding that may harm their relationships (Hunt, Espiritu, Quisimbing & Green, 1982). This is very important especially to Maranao ESL learners who deem "maratabat" or dignity as their face that should not be insulted.

The tendency to be polite can be interpreted as the primary driving force in the respondents' tendency to be implicit in performing the speech act. This can be explained by the Maranao ESL learner's apparent use of external mitigation strategies suggested by Trosborg (1995). It can be observed that the respondents provided more grounder (63.75%) to Non-Maranao addressees. Given that non-Maranaos are not very familiar with the context of the Maranao speakers, more explanation, reasons and justifications for the suggestions are needed to place the speaker's suggestion in proper context and more importantly, to make it as less threatening as possible. It is evident that Maranao ESL learners are aware of the variety of

suggestion realization strategies that they can use to express suggestions in the most unthreatening manner possible.

2. Similarities and differences with regard to suggestion strategies employed by the participants toward interlocutors of different ethnic affiliations

The results generated from the written Discourse Completion Task of this study seem to be reaffirmed by the findings made during the one-on-one interviews that the suggestion strategies employed by the participants are generally the same. Based on the responses made by the interviewees, it appears that in performing the suggestion speech act, the strategies are basically similar and do not suggest any difference with regard to the ethnic membership of their addressees. The Maranao participants provide emphasis on how to lessen the degree of offensiveness that the act of suggesting might create to all their perceived interlocutors. This could be the reason why most of the participants maintained that there is a need to provide a mitigating expression first before giving the actual suggestion.

As expressed during the interview, a participant said that she would give her suggestion either to a Maranao or to a Christian (the term used by Maranaos to refer to all non-Muslims) addressee by telling her intended recipient first not to be offended for she has something to say, and not to take it negatively since there are things which are really prohibited among Maranaos. It was further stressed by the interviewee that she will use the same communicative pattern of suggestion to Christian interlocutors. As the respondent articulated, she would start her suggestion speech act by saying that she is not actually special or she does not feel entitled about something but there are really things which are not allowed among Maranaos.

As reflected through this answer of participant F1, it looks like she is very much concerned about how her interlocutors would feel about the suggestion that she is going to give. That could be the reason why she feels the need to employ a suggestion strategy that includes a lot of preliminary softening statements or expressions that could provide signals of the intention such as *please don't be offended* and *please don't take it negatively*. This case could be interpreted as the conscious effort of the speaker not to cause any offense to the target addressees by providing hedging devices to lessen the possible offense engendered from giving suggestions.

The same concern was confirmed by another interviewee who illustrated the same conscious effort in order to avoid the possible offense in suggesting. The use of preliminary statements as a kind of communicative strategy to accentuate that the speaker does not mean any offense was further highlighted by participant M6 (Male, 6th interviewee) in terms of giving suggestion either to a Maranao and non-Maranao addressee.

In addition to the degree of offense, other participants also expressed that in performing suggestion speech act, it does not really matter whether the addressee is a Maranao or not rather, the strategies are determined by the appropriateness of the suggestion to the situation based on what the receiver is going through as illustrated in the following excerpts.

F2: *Siguro maam yung hindi ka magiging offensive ang dating, kumbaga kung i-a-approach mo siya, alamin mo muna yung*

situation kung na-agrabyado ba siya, alamin mo muna dapat kasi baka yung sinuggest mo ay hindi pala appropriate doon sa pinag-dadaan niya.

(Probably in a way that you will not appear offensive, like you approach him/her and study the situation if he is in the losing end, you have to know first if the suggestion would be an appropriate solution to what he or she is going through.)

Based on the responses made by participants F2, it seems that the kind of suggestion strategies employed are just the same irrespective of the ethnic affiliation of the addressee because they think that the strategy and the kind of suggestion is determined by its appropriateness to the situation. The aspect of appropriateness to the occasion is something that is considered as a new feature generated in this study that has to be considered in performing suggestion speech act. It can be recalled that the work of Farnia, Sohrabie and Sattar (2014) revealed that the Iranian students employ suggestion strategies depending on the age, gender and the level of intimacy with the addressee. However, the present study shows that the perceived appropriateness of the suggestion determines the strategy in performing such communicative act.

Moreover, some participants who maintained that strategies in giving suggestion are the same and does not depend on the ethnic affiliation of the interlocutor expressed different reasons for having such belief. It was found during the one-on-one interviews that suggestion strategy largely depends on the perceived willingness of the target recipient to listen and the ability to consider the ideas of the speaker so that the suggestion will not just be put into waste. The willingness to listen as a determining factor in employing suggestion strategy was expressed by participant F3 as shown in the following extract.

F3: *Maam, first is kung kailanganniyayung suggestion ko and second if, kung willing siyang maging what if, sinabikolang palayun maam tapos walalang posakanya. Yung, i-coconsider korinpo kung open din posiyasamgasabihinko.*

(Ma'am, first I need to know if he/she really needs my suggestion. And second, if he is willing to be open-minded of what I am going to tell him/her. What if I gave him/her an advice and he/she ignores it. So his/her openness to my suggestion is one of my considerations)

With all these responses as to how similar and different are the strategies employed by the Maranao students toward Maranao and non-Maranao addressees in performing suggestion speech act, it seems that the participants utilize the same strategies without regard to the ethnic membership of the addressees. What was found instead is the shared belief that one must have the conscious effort in employing strategies that would lessen, if not eliminate, the possible offense that the speaker may cause to the target recipient. It is interesting to note that the responses expressed by the Maranao participants generated an answer that is not yet captured by other research endeavors which is the use of preliminary hedging expression that indicates the intention of the speaker is not to inflict insult

or offense like, “*please do not be offended*,” before they would give their actual suggestion.

Thus, it is assumed that the use of the softening device seems to reflect the strong cultural value of face that Maranaos strongly uphold. As illustrated, the Maranao participants tend to be very careful in their choice of language in order to avoid offense, not only to their fellow Maranaos but also to other people who belong to other ethnic affiliations. It could be possible that they have already embraced the societal norm of not inflicting any form of insult to anybody, notwithstanding with the ethnic membership of their addressees, as they have lived in a society where there is a strong sense of face and pride, the *Maratabat*, which should be maintained. Since suggestion speech act is naturally offensive, the common strategy of the participants irrespective of cultural background is to initially convey that they do not intend to insult or to make their target recipients look like they do not know or understand but instead, they just want to suggest in order for their addressee to be better.

The results in terms of the similarities and differences of strategies employed to interlocutors from different ethnic groups illustrates that indeed, suggestion is a directive speech act (Banerjee & Carrell, 1988 as cited in Gu, 2014) and face-threatening (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Thus, there is a need to soften or mitigate the imposition that this act creates to lessen the offense it can make on the part of the hearer by using specific suggestion strategies (Martinez-Flor, 2005). In the case of the Maranao respondents, it looks like the expression “*huwag kang ma-offend ha (don't be offended ha)*” is the common strategy to be employed to all their target addressees to inform from the very start that they do not mean any insult or that they do not want to get into trouble with their interlocutors. The linguistic device appears the intention to lessen the imposition made in the performance of suggestion speech act that may offend the negative face of the addressees. This might be their way of maintaining the *Maratabat* of their target addressees without regard to their ethnic affiliations since the participants already lived that in a society that cultivates the culture of pride.

In addition, the results show that the use of “*please do not be offended*” is another strategy type which could not be classified under Martinez-Flor (2005) coding system. This expression is considered as a mitigating device to soften the linguistic patterns in making suggestions.

The occurrence of a softening linguistic device in this study in giving suggestion illustrates the participants’ aim to reduce the face threat toward the speaker and the interlocutor. The use of opening statement “*please do not be offended*” looks like a strategy to avoid giving outright suggestion illustrates the importance of face or *Maratabat* among Maranaos. In an attempt to offer a suggestion without hurting or insulting the addressee, the suggestion is accompanied by mitigating strategy.

3. Factors identified by the Maranao participants that influence their preferred addressees.

This investigation further revealed that a number of factors are identified by the Maranao participants that shape their preferences as to whom they would likely give suggestions. There

were five (5) out of eight (8) interviewees who agreed to give suggestions to Maranaos because of cultural standpoint.

Cultural factor

First, it appears that most of the interview respondents prefer to give suggestions to their fellow Maranaos because of cultural consideration. Some of the responses illustrate that participants would like to suggest to someone to whom they share the same cultural values and beliefs as they already know what kind of suggestions are deemed appropriate and acceptable.

The responses illustrate the cultural aspect in the choice of interlocutor when performing suggestion speech act. It was provided that participants prefer to give suggestion to someone who is also Maranao since there are things that she might suggest to non-Maranaos that is not applicable to their culture and can be considered as inappropriate. It was added that it will be safer to provide suggestions to someone who is a Maranao since there is a perceived possibility that the suggestion will be accepted and followed since both the speaker and the hearer share the same cultural background. And because of the same circumstance, the speaker already knows the proper way of suggesting and the proper linguistic choice in performing such speech act.

Linguistic consideration

Another important factor that could define the preference of the Maranao participants as to their desired interlocutor has something to do with the language used in the communicative process. The language used is found to be very important in the act of giving suggestion since the participants believe that it will make their approach easy.

The responses described the preference of the participant in giving suggestion to a fellow-Maranao as it is easier for someone to give suggestion toward somebody who share the same linguistic backgrounds. A participant explained that she prefers someone who is Maranao as she can deliver or talk well in a more comfortable way through the use of their own native language. As expressed, it will be different if she will suggest to a Bisaya speaker with whom she finds difficult to communicate with. In line with this, it seems that one’s language also shapes the preference of an individual’s choice of suggestion addressee. The result shows the basic notion that communicative interaction is easier in a language shared by the speaker and the listener as they both understand the linguistic rules and appropriate linguistic codes. As it seems, one is more effective in giving suggestions through their own language.

Perceived level of acceptance

The study also found that the level of perceived acceptance of suggestion determines the preferred target recipient of the participants. As shown during the interviews, some of the responses put emphasis on the hearer’s possibility of accepting the suggestion. In this case, some of the interviewees expressed that they prefer non-Maranaos.

It was shown that one of the participants expressed her preference toward non-Maranao addressees when giving suggestion because she feels that they are more respectful compared to Maranaos. As presented on the excerpt, it was expressed that if one gives suggestion to a Maranao, he/she may

respond by questioning the credibility of the one who suggests and would even asks if he/she is perfect. The interviewee continued that it is not about being perfect but a responsibility of a Muslim to tell a fellow Muslim if there is a need to say about something. That is the reason that she prefers non-Maranaos as she believes that they are more respectful about the opinion of others and accepts suggestion from others.

It could be seen that the choice of addressees is also defined by how suggestion will be accepted. It reflects that the speaker does not want also to be offended if her/his suggestion will be questioned or will not be accepted as she wants to maintain her positive face. As explained by Huang (2014), positive face refers to the desire of an individual to be liked and accepted by others. That could be the reason why she prefers someone who would likely welcome and respect her suggestion.

From the interviews, it appears that the participant considers the ability to listen, to respect and to accept suggestion to determine the preference of suggestion interlocutor.

Social distance

Another factor which emerged that determines the preferred addressees in giving suggestion was the level of intimacy or social relationship with the target recipient. The following response illustrates how social distance dictates the preferred suggestion interlocutor. Based on the response, it does not really matter if the addressee is a Maranao or a Christian. The most important factor is the speaker's friendly relationship with the receiver as it would be easy to give suggestion to friends.

The interview data generated from this study validate the findings made by Farnia, Sohrabie and Sattar (2014) that the level of intimacy with the addressee shapes the preferred interlocutor. It could be that since suggestion is face threatening, being friends with the person would lessen the possible offense that it may create as one already knows how to approach the person.

From all these responses extracted during the interviews, the present investigation somehow reflects the same results from that of Farnia, Sohrabie and Sattar (2014) that certain considerations are to be taken in giving suggestions. The previous study found age, gender and the level of intimacy with the addressee as factors or considerations that determine the preferred target recipient.

On the other hand, the Maranao participants provided other factors that shape their preference of the target suggestion interlocutor in addition to what are already known. The present study found cultural and linguistic factors as well as the level of perceived acceptance of the suggestion and the level of intimacy with the addressee that influence the preference of the receiver. As already mentioned, the participants expressed that they want to give suggestions to whom they share the same cultural and linguistic backgrounds as they already know the appropriate suggestions to be given to their target receiver. In addition, sharing the same linguistic knowledge was viewed fundamental in giving suggestions for them to express their thoughts better and to provide appropriate linguistic terms in performing such speech act. It appears that even in the factors to be considered in giving suggestion, appropriateness is given importance. This means that Maranao participants are conscious about what is

acceptable from the perspective of their interlocutor. And again, this illustrates their conscious effort of not hurting or offending their interlocutor as they appear give so much value on the sense of pride or face of their addressees. In this case, the concept of culture in determining the weight of offense (Brown, 2015) is very relevant among Maranaos.

Additionally, the level of acceptance on the part of the addressee was seen as an important factor in giving suggestion. This means that the participants would likely give suggestion to someone whom they think would consider or accept their suggestions. The researchers believe that this factor was considered to protect the positive face of the one who gives the suggestion. It looks like the participants do not want to provide suggestion to someone who would likely refuse it as it would also be an insult for them. It is a universal notion in human society that participants in any verbal interaction need to preserve the face of the speaker and of the interlocutor (Huang, 2014). In this case, the participants would also make sure to maintain their positive face by suggesting only to people who would be able to appreciate the act.

IV. CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to explore the speech act realization of suggestions from Maranao ESL learners toward their fellow Maranaos and to non-Maranaos addressees. Furthermore, it tried to look into the similarities and differences of the suggestion strategies employed by the participants toward interlocutors of different ethnic affiliations, and sought to discover the factors identified that may influence the preferred addressees of the Maranao participants. The data were collected through written DCT and through semi-structured interview to expound and elaborate the DCT results. Based on the analysis of the data, the following conclusions are drawn.

Overall, this study concludes that the Maranao ESL learners generally provide conscious effort to lessen the threat brought by giving suggestions notwithstanding the ethnic affiliations of their perceived receiver. This means that the suggestion strategies used by the Maranao participants are not dictated by ethnicity rather, it is defined by the universal notion of preserving the face of the people involved in the communicative interaction. This reflects the strong Maranao cultural value of *maratabat* or the value of face in Maranao society that should be maintained. In the case of the participants for this study, they utilize expressions and strategies to soften the threat brought by the act of suggesting by employing indirect strategies. In addition, the participants also utilize preliminary expressions that would provide signal to their interlocutors that they do not intend to insult before giving the actual suggestion. With this, it will not only preserve the negative face of their addressees but it would also maintain the positive face of the speakers.

Additionally, it is concluded that there is no difference in terms of the strategies used by the participants of this study as they treat every addressee equally. Moreover, their preference of target recipients are not defined by the ethnic membership but by considering the cultural and linguistic factors as well as the perceived acceptance of the suggestion and social relationship with the interlocutors.

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Annie Mae C. Berowa is a graduate student of Doctor of Philosophy in Applied Linguistics at De La Salle University-Manila, Philippines. She received her Master of Arts in English Language Teaching and Bachelor of Secondary Education Major in English from Mindanao State University, Main Campus.

Henelsie B. Mendoza is an instructor in the Faculty of Arts and Languages, Philippine Normal University, Manila, Philippines, where she teaches language education courses in the tertiary level. She is currently pursuing her doctorate degree in Applied Linguistics in De La Salle University-Manila, Philippines. She received her master's degree in English in 2012 and undergraduate degree in Secondary Education major in English from Ateneo de Davao University.