

**A Corpus-based Study of the Speech Act of “Comforting”:  
*Naturalness and Appropriateness for English Language Teaching***

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**1. Purposes of this study**

This presentation demonstrates the following:

- (1) the effectiveness of English speech act corpora for CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) in teaching ‘natural’ and ‘appropriate’ expressions in particular contexts;
- (2) lexical features and discourse strategies (i.e. semantic formulae) of the target speech act ‘comforting’, performed by English native speakers.

**2. Significance of developing “pragmatic competence” (cf. Bachman, 1990)**

- The most compelling evidence that instruction in pragmatics is necessary comes from learners whose L2 proficiency is advanced ...
- Turning to production, candidates for pedagogic intervention can be sorted in four groups: (1) choice of communicative acts, (2) the strategies by which an act is realized, (3) its content, and (4) its linguistic form.

Kasper, G. (1997)

**3. Pragmatics & SLA / TEFL**

- Interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993) “a second-generation hybrid of SLA & pragmatics”
- Pragmatics in Language Teaching (Rose & Kasper, 2001):  
*(I)n many second and foreign language teaching contexts, curricula and materials developed in recent years include strong pragmatic components or even adopt a pragmatic approach as their organizing principle.*

**4. Pragmatics & CLT**

Nunan (1991) defines the principles or features of CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) or “Communicative Approach” as follows:

- (1) An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
- (2) The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.

- (3) The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language but also on the Learning Management process.
- (4) An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
- (5) An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom.

## 5. Speech act of "comforting"

- 'Comforting' is supposed to be an FEA (face-enhancing act) for the hearer (H) (cf. Kerbat-Orecchioni, 1997: 14), because the speaker (S) undertakes in this speech act to show sympathy for and soothe H's sad or hurt feelings, to encourage him/her, to show S' s willingness to help H, etc.
- 'Comforting' is also assumed to belong to Searle's EXPRESSIVE (cf. 1979:15) and Leech's CONVIVIAL (cf. 1983:104) because of its FEA nature.
- One notable feature of this speech act, through the analysis of discourse strategies of the data, is that it is a composite of several different sub-speech acts such as 'showing sympathy', 'giving advice', 'encouraging', etc. – to 'comfort' H. (Perlocutionary speech act)

## 6. Research background

This research has been carried out with the support of the **Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research** awarded by **JSPS** (*Japan Society for the Promotion of Scientific Research*) [Subject num.: 18820028].

### *Specification of Date and Informants:*

- This research was carried out in (1) February-March & (2) September 2007 in Missouri, U.S.A. with 161 undergraduate students of the Southeast Missouri State University.

### *Procedure of data collection:*

- Two types of DCTs (discourse completion tests) and the role-play
- DCT 1 requested one group of informants to write what they really said in the past or would say to perform the target English speech acts.
- DCT 2 requested the other group to write up real or imaginary conversations between S and H.
- Both types asked them to record situations that they remembered or could think of when they perform(ed) the speech acts.
- Besides these studies with questionnaires, some informants volunteered for a role-play for the collection of audio-visual data.

## 7. Situation

N	Type	Classification	Num	%
1	A	Accident	2	1.44%
2	B	Breakup	44	31.65%
3	C	Death	46	33.09%
4	D	Difficult situation	17	12.23%
5	E	Failure in test	7	5.04%
6	F	Sickness/Injury	9	6.47%
7	G	Unfavourable event	14	10.07%
		<i>Total</i>	139	

## 8. Lexical strategies - Wordlist

N	Word	Freq.	%	Texts	N	Word	Freq.	%	Texts
1	YOU	201	6.9816	7	23	IF	28	0.9726	6
2	I	121	4.2028	7	24	DON	27	0.9378	7
3	TO	88	3.0566	7	25	IN	27	0.9378	7
4	IT	80	2.7787	7	26	JUST	27	0.9378	7
5	BE	58	2.0146	7	27	NEED	27	0.9378	6
6	'S	55	1.9104	7	28	SO	26	0.9031	7
7	WILL	51	1.7714	7	29	THERE	26	0.9031	7
8	YOUR	45	1.563	7	30	OK	25	0.8684	7
9	SORRY	43	1.4936	7	31	ME	24	0.8336	7
10	A	42	1.4588	7	32	AM	23	0.7989	6
11	'T	41	1.4241	7	33	ANYTHING	23	0.7989	6
12	ARE	40	1.3894	7	34	HERE	23	0.7989	6
13	BETTER	40	1.3894	7	35	THE	21	0.7294	5
14	FOR	38	1.3199	7	36	GET	20	0.6947	5
15	IS	38	1.3199	7	37	THAT	20	0.6947	6
16	OKAY	38	1.3199	7	38	WHAT	20	0.6947	6
17	ABOUT	37	1.2852	7	39	GOING	19	0.66	7
18	'M	37	1.2852	7	40	HEY	19	0.66	4
19	DO	31	1.0768	7	41	HIM	19	0.66	7
20	KNOW	30	1.042	7	42	'LL	18	0.6252	4
21	AND	28	0.9726	6	43	HE	18	0.6252	6
22	CAN	28	0.9726	7	44	OF	18	0.6252	5

9. [Selected] Lexical & grammatical strategies (collocations/chunks/structure)

*ANYTHING*

- 1) Can I do **anything** to help you get feeling better?
- 2) is there **anything** I can do to make you feel better?
- 3) if you need **anything** just let me know.
- 4) If there is **anything** I can do, just let me know.
- 5) Is there **anything** I can do to help?

*BE*

- 1) Its gonna **be** OK everything works out in the long run, I promise.
- 2) I will **be** here for you always when you need to talk or just want to hang out.
- 3) It's gonna **be** alright, I promise.
- 4) You are going to **be** okay.
- 5) but it's going to **be** okay.

*BETTER*

- 1) Things always happen for a reason and maybe you are **better** off this way.
- 2) You can do so much **better**!
- 3) and your grandmother is in a **better** place now.
- 4) You can find a way **better** boyfriend.
- 5) I hope you feel **better**.

*OKAY*

- 1) everything will be **okay**!
- 2) Its **okay**
- 3) Are you **okay**?
- 4) Molly it is **okay** baby
- 5) It's going to be **okay**.

*SORRY*

- 1) I am **sorry** to hear about your dog.
- 2) **Sorry** about your dog.
- 3) I am really **sorry** about the lost in your family.
- 4) I am so **sorry** to hear about your dieing.
- 5) I'm really **sorry** to hear about your sister.

# 10. Conversation/Discourse strategies – strategy classification

N	Type	Type description	Freq	% (1)	% (2)
1	P	soother	91	17.27%	21.26%
2	A	addressing (voc/intj/etc)	74	14.04%	
3	F	encouragement	73	13.85%	17.06%
4	R	sympathy	60	11.39%	14.02%
5	B	advice	53	10.06%	12.38%
6	K	offer of support	51	9.68%	11.92%
7	H	enquiry about situation	37	7.02%	8.64%
8	I	interjection	25	4.74%	
9	L	praise of H	15	2.85%	3.50%
10	E	criticism of H's opponent	10	1.90%	2.34%
11	S	wish for betterment	9	1.71%	2.10%
12	G	enquiry about H's need	7	1.33%	1.64%
13	Q	suggestion	7	1.33%	1.64%
14	M	reinforcement of encouragement	5	0.95%	1.17%
15	O	reinforcement of s's support	3	0.57%	0.70%
16	D	comment of H's situation	2	0.38%	0.47%
17	J	offer of solution	2	0.38%	0.47%
18	N	reinforcement of S's offer of support	2	0.38%	0.47%
19	C	clearance of H's guilt	1	0.19%	0.23%
		<i>Total 1</i>	527		
		<i>Total 2 (without A, I)</i>	428		

## 11. Semantic formulas (Combination of discourse strategies)

N	Combination	Freq.		N	Combination	Freq.
1	KR	11		13	ABFP	2
2	P	8		14	AEFP	2
3	R	7		15	AFH	2
4	AKR	6		16	AFP	2
5	BF	5		17	AP	2
6	BFP	4		18	APR	2
7	ABP	3		19	BIP	2
8	FKP	3		20	BP	2
9	FP	3		21	FK	2
10	FR	3		22	FM	2
11	HK	3		23	FQ	2
12	HS	3		24	PR	2

## 12. Conclusion & future directions

- The results of the data analysis above are to contribute to the production of ELT materials pursuing CLT.
- Both instructors and learners can study lexical, grammatical and discourse strategies of the U.S. university undergraduates as a model of the target language.
- The analysis of ‘responses’ (positive, negative and others) and that of prosody and kinesics will provide more information on the actual use of this speech act. (in progress)

## ***Acknowledgements***

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# ADVERTISEMENT

The lecturer of this presentation (Toshihiko Suzuki, Waseda University, Japan) is looking for overseas / domestic university instructors who can cooperate with him in the **TEFL / Cross-Cultural Communication project**, utilizing the **English Speech Act Corpora (SAC)** introduced in this presentation as teaching materials. The project on the Japan side will be carried out in his once-a-week class starting **from April 2009 through January 2010** through the Internet-based **Waseda CCDL** (Cross-Cultural Distance Learning), including **Videoconferences, PC-based Video & Text Chat**, etc. (for more details, please refer to [ [http://www.waseda.jp/dlc/CCDL\\_en/](http://www.waseda.jp/dlc/CCDL_en/) ] ). The researchers will jointly (1) create teaching materials for cross-cultural communication in English with suitable syllabuses; (2) set up research hypotheses and the procedure; (3) manage the cross-cultural exchange via the CCDL; (4) collect and analyze students' data; (5) present the results of the data analysis in academic presentations and publications. It is desired that the researcher who joins this project has ample knowledge in / is willing to pursue the related fields (Pragmatics, Cross-cultural communication, TEFL, SLA, etc.)

If you are interested in this project and would like to know more about this project, please contact the presenter via email ( [toshisuz@hotmail.com](mailto:toshisuz@hotmail.com) ) or talk to him during the PAAL 2008 conference.

*With best wishes,*

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