

A Contrastive Study of Advice-Giving Behaviours in Vietnamese and American English: A Preliminary Investigation

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.909000503>

Received: 09 July 2025; Accepted: 14 July 2025; Published: 16 October 2025

ABSTRACT

This preliminary study conducts a contrastive analysis of advice-giving behaviour in Vietnamese and American English from an intercultural pragmatics perspective. Grounded in speech act theory and politeness theory, the research explores how cultural values shape the linguistic realisation of advice across age, status, and gender. Data were collected through 24 discourse completion tasks (DCTs) and selected media dialogues, yielding 1,440 advice-giving utterances. Findings reveal that while both groups use direct, hedged, and indirect strategies, Vietnamese speakers prefer hedged and indirect forms, particularly in hierarchical or age-sensitive contexts. American speakers, by contrast, predominantly favour directness. A shared four-part structure (opening, proposition, reason, conclusion) was observed in both languages. Quantitative frequency analysis supports these patterns and highlights significant cross-cultural variation. The study also discusses the risk of pragmatic failure in intercultural encounters, where differing norms may lead to miscommunication. Pedagogical implications are drawn for ESL/EFL classrooms, emphasizing the need for intercultural pragmatic instruction. Despite limitations in ecological data sources, the study offers a foundation for future research incorporating statistical testing and real-life interactions. The results contribute to intercultural pragmatics and inform more culturally responsive language education.

Keywords: advising behaviour, intercultural communication, politeness strategies, discourse completion test, language teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Communication is a psychological interaction between individuals, expressed through language, gestures, and body movements. The success of communication largely depends on the speaker's ability to recognise communicative intentions and the pragmatic meanings behind utterances (Wrench, McCroskey, & Richmond, 2008). Even learners with a firm grasp of a second language may still encounter difficulties using it appropriately within social and cultural contexts (Hinkel, 1997).

One of the commonly used speech acts in social communication is giving advice. Offering advice is not merely a means of sharing suggestions but also a way to maintain interpersonal relationships. According to Searle (1969), the speech act of giving advice can be defined as “not an attempt to get you to do something, like a request, but rather to tell you what is best for you to do.”

However, misusing this speech act can provoke adverse reactions from the advice recipient, especially in intercultural interactions where cultural norms vary. Vietnam and the United States represent two culturally distinct societies, with differing linguistic and social conventions, which can lead to misunderstandings in intercultural communication.

Effectively giving advice is not simply about following structural models; it also requires a contextual understanding of when and how to give advice appropriately. Factors such as age, social status, and the presence

of others must be considered. The advice-giver must strategically select contextually appropriate expressions to achieve communicative goals.

The communicative intentions behind various speech acts such as questioning, requesting, refusing, praising, and expressing condolences have been well-studied in Vietnam. However, there remains a gap in the systematic investigation of the advice-giving speech act in Vietnamese, especially in contrast with English. This gap represents a research opportunity.

Therefore, this study aims to identify the linguistic and cultural features embedded in advice-giving behaviours in Vietnamese and American English. The findings are expected to enhance mutual understanding between the two cultures and improve the teaching and learning of this speech act in English and Vietnamese. Such knowledge will foster greater flexibility and sensitivity in language use among Vietnamese English learners and American Vietnamese learners.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theory of Speech Acts

The concept of speech acts, introduced by J.L. Austin (1962), is one of the fundamental elements of pragmatics. Austin defined a speech act as uttering a particular sentence in a specific context with a particular purpose. He made a clear distinction between constative utterances and performative utterances. While constative utterances consist merely of the act of saying and are evaluated in terms of truthfulness, performative utterances accomplish a specific action and are reviewed according to appropriate conditions. Austin suggested that when a speaker produces an utterance, they simultaneously perform three acts: the locutionary act, the illocutionary act, and the perlocutionary act. The locutionary act is the production of sounds and words with referential meaning. The illocutionary act includes doing something by saying something. Lastly, the perlocutionary act refers to the impact on the listener and others.

J.R. Searle (1969) further developed Austin's theory by proposing a framework of rules or conditions governing the performance of communicative acts, referred to as felicity conditions. Searle introduced four primary conditions: the propositional content condition, the preparatory condition, the sincerity condition, and the essential condition. These rules help determine when and how a speech act can be considered successful. Searle also classified speech acts into five main types. Assertive acts possess truth value and express what the speaker believes to be true. Expressive acts convey the speaker's emotions. Declarations are utterances that change the world. Directives are efforts to get the listener to act. Finally, commissive acts are the speaker's commitment to a future action.

The Speech Act of Advice-Giving

In Searle's classification, giving advice is categorised as a directive speech act. Searle identified several felicity conditions for advice-giving, including propositional content, preparatory condition, sincerity condition, and essential condition. The propositional content involves a future action to be performed by the hearer. The preparatory condition includes the speaker having a reason to believe that this action will benefit the hearer and that it is not apparent that the hearer will perform it under normal circumstances. The sincerity condition requires the speaker to believe the action will benefit the hearer. The essential condition is the speaker's commitment that the proposed action is in the hearer's best interest.

Researchers have conducted numerous studies to define and closely examine Searle's conditions for advice-giving, including Hinkel (1997) and Matsumura (2001). These studies have shown that participants apply various strategies when giving advice. Forms of advice include direct advice, which uses words such as "should"; hedged advice, which provides for softening elements like "need to," "it's better," or "maybe"; and indirect advice, in which the speaker's intention is not made explicit. Leech (1983) argued that indirect speech acts "increase optionality" and that "the more indirect the speech act, the weaker its force and the more tentative it becomes" (p.108). In contrast, direct strategies are often considered less polite.

Politeness and Related Factors

Politeness and related factors such as age, gender, and social relationships also strongly influence the use of different types of advice. Brown and Levinson (1987) pointed out that the severity of the issue is also an essential factor in speech act research. The social status between the speaker and the hearer significantly impacts the speech behaviour when giving advice. Al-Shboul and Zarei (2013) demonstrated that social status considerably influences this behaviour. Matsumura (2001) focused his research on advising recipients of higher, equal, and lower status, showing that social status is crucial in determining the manner and degree of advice-giving. In addition, studies have shown that the politeness factor is closely related to gender, with different genders often applying different strategies when performing speech acts (Hinkel, 1997).

In Western cultures, age may not be a significant influencing factor, but in East Asian cultures, age considerably impacts social behaviour, including communication. According to Tiraphat et al. (2021), age significantly affects speech behaviour, including advice-giving. Previous studies have indicated that advice-giving is influenced by various factors such as the severity of the problem, social status, gender, and age. This study will examine all three aspects—gender, age, and social status—of the advice-giver to gain a comprehensive understanding of the advice-giving speech act in Vietnamese and American English.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA

Research Methodology

This study applies a pragmatic approach and the speech act theory, focusing on Searle's (1969) felicity conditions for advice-giving. Pragmatic elements in advice-giving behaviour are analysed using linguistic descriptive and conversation analysis methods. The linguistic descriptive method describes the means of expression and the strategies used to advise in Vietnamese and American English. This description includes internal explanatory techniques such as classification, systematization of data, and direct componential analysis. In addition, external explanatory techniques such as quantitative and qualitative statistics are also applied to provide a more comprehensive view.

The conversation analysis method is implemented to analyse excerpts containing advice-giving behaviours taken from television sitcoms and natural conversations of research participants. Based on the principles of conversation analysis by Schegloff (2007), this method helps to identify how and in what context advice is given.

Finally, the contrastive method is applied to identify similarities and differences in the realisation of advice-giving behaviours in Vietnamese and American English. This method is based on the principles of contrastive analysis by James (1980), allowing for an examination of the pragmatic meanings expressed in advice-giving across the two languages.

The above methods and techniques are complemented and coordinated throughout the research process to ensure scientific rigour and effectiveness.

Research Data

This study uses two primary sources of data: conversational materials and discourse completion test (DCT) responses. The conversational data are collected from dialogue excerpts in Vietnamese and American television series produced between 2010 and 2020, broadcast on Vietnam Television and HBO. The reason for investigating advice-giving behaviour in English and Vietnamese through the lenses of social status, age gap, and gender over a relatively short period is to explore how advice is given in the two languages within modern society, without considering any possible changes compared to earlier periods. Television series offer communication contexts that resemble real-life interactions, making them effective for identifying advice-giving behaviours (Jucker, 2009). However, it is acknowledged that television dialogues, while rich in context, are ultimately scripted and subject to dramatisation. This may limit their ability to represent spontaneous, real-world interactions fully. Although previous studies (e.g., Jucker, 2009) support the use of media dialogue in speech act research, the reliance on TV

series as natural data introduces potential concerns regarding authenticity and contextual variability. As such, the television data in this study serves a supplementary function, complementing the primary data obtained through DCTs rather than replacing naturally occurring conversations.

To enhance ecological validity in future research, it is recommended to incorporate more naturally elicited data, such as audio-recorded conversations from real-life interactions in classrooms, workplaces, or family settings. Such additions would enable a more comprehensive analysis of pragmatic behaviour and strengthen the applicability of findings to real communicative situations.

In addition, the DCT questionnaires are designed based on the principles of Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), including four categories of situations: health, study, work, and relationship. Participants are asked to advise people of varying social statuses (higher, equal, lower), ages, and genders in each scenario. This enables the collection of controlled data on advice-giving behaviour in diverse social contexts.

Participants include Vietnamese graduate students and doctoral candidates from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities – Vietnam National University, Hanoi, and native American English speakers living both inside and outside the United States. The sampling follows Patton's (2002) purposive sampling method, ensuring the data are representative, allowing for a more in-depth and comprehensive analysis of advice-giving behaviour.

The total number of participants in the DCT survey was 60, with 30 native Vietnamese speakers and 30 native American English speakers. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure a range of perspectives across age, gender, and educational backgrounds. The Vietnamese group consisted of graduate students and doctoral candidates aged 23 to 40 ($M = 30.1$), while the American group included university students and professionals aged 22 to 45 ($M = 31.4$). The gender distribution was approximately balanced in both groups (Vietnamese: 16 females, 14 males; American: 15 females, 15 males).

The DCT questionnaire was designed based on the framework of Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), consisting of 24 scenarios evenly distributed across six domains (health, study, work, relationships, lifestyle, and finance). Each scenario was constructed in three variations to reflect different relational dynamics regarding age, social status, and gender. Before distribution, the questionnaire was piloted with 10 bilingual participants to ensure clarity and cultural appropriateness. Minor modifications were made based on their feedback.

Data were collected via an online platform (Google Forms) over four weeks. Participants were instructed to respond as naturally as possible, imagining themselves in each scenario. All responses were coded using a standardised coding scheme adapted from Matsumura (2001), focusing on advice strategy type (direct, hedged, indirect) and the structural elements (opening, propositional content, reason, conclusion). Two trained coders independently annotated the data, with an inter-rater agreement rate of 91%. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

This methodological rigour ensures transparency, replicability, and validity in analyzing pragmatic advice-giving behaviour across cultures.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Linguistic Features of Advice-Giving in Vietnamese and English

We find many notable similarities when examining the linguistic features of advice-giving in Vietnamese and English. Both languages employ three types of advice: direct, hedged, and indirect. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), using these strategies helps speakers adjust politeness and minimize threats to the hearer's face. Additionally, both Vietnamese and English apply the components described in Searle's (1969) theory, including felicity conditions, propositional content, preparatory conditions, sincerity conditions, and essential conditions.

However, there are also notable differences between the two languages. In Vietnamese, the verb "*khuyến*" (to advise) can be used directly as a performative verb. In contrast, in English, the verb "*advise*" belongs to the class of indirect verbs and often appears in different contexts. As Nguyen (2005) pointed out, this difference reflects each language's cultural characteristics and communicative conventions.

The Structure of an Advice-Giving Utterance

When analysing the structure of an advice-giving utterance, we can identify a typical pattern that applies to both Vietnamese and English. This pattern consists of four main components: opening, propositional content, reason, and conclusion. According to the study by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), this structure ensures clarity and effectiveness in delivering advice.

The opening aims to set the context and establish the relationship between the advisor and the recipient. In Vietnamese, one might use expressions such as “*Này em/bạn,...*”, “*Thưa anh/chị,...*”, or “*Tớ sẽ cho cậu một lời khuyên,...*”. Similarly, in English, speakers may begin with phrases like “*Hey/Listen,...*”, “*Sir/Madam,...*”, or “*I’d like to advise you that...*”

Next, the propositional content is the core of the advice, describing the action or choice being suggested to the recipient. For example, in Vietnamese, one might say “*...nên đi khám để kiểm tra sức khỏe (đi)!*” or “*...đừng nên cắt ngang người khác.*” In English, similar expressions include “*...you should see a doctor for a check-up.*” or “*...you shouldn’t interrupt others.*”

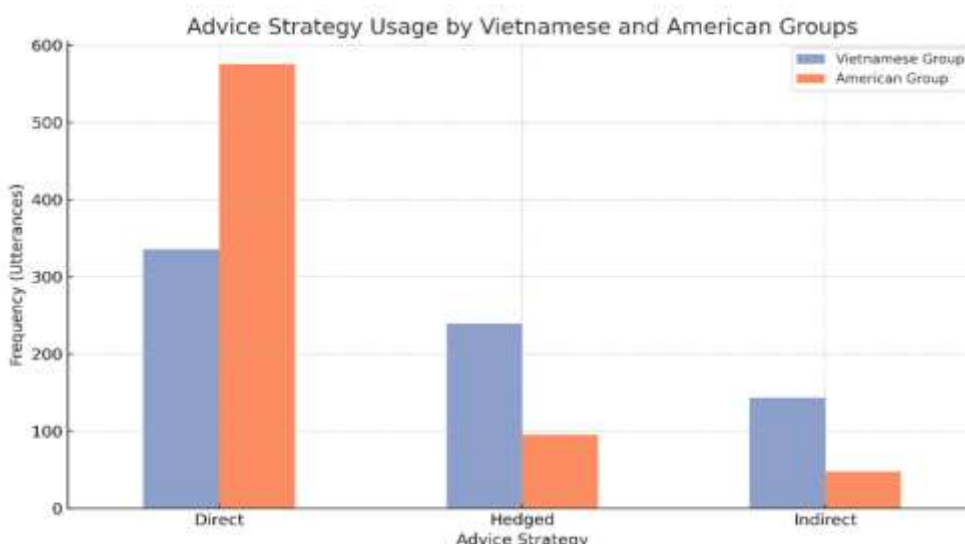
The reason explains why the advice is beneficial to the recipient. In Vietnamese, one might say “*...vì bệnh tình của bạn có thể nặng thêm.*” or “*...điều đó rất bất lịch sự.*” In English, these could be expressed as “*...as your condition may worsen*” or “*...it’s very impolite.*”

Finally, the conclusion summarises and emphasises the importance of the advice. Vietnamese speakers may conclude with “*Vậy cậu nên làm theo lời tớ nhé.*” or “*Hy vọng anh sẽ cân nhắc đến lời tôi nói.*” In English, equivalents include “*So I think you should follow my advice*” or “*I hope you’ll consider my advice.*”

Another noteworthy feature in the structure of advice-giving is the use of hedging elements. In both languages, words like “*có thể*”, “*nên*” in Vietnamese, and “*may*”, “*might*” in English are often employed to reduce the directness of the advice, increase politeness, and allow room for the recipient’s autonomy. For instance, in Vietnamese, one might say “*Mày thử đi khám xem sao.*” In English, a similar statement would be “*You might want to see a doctor.*” Lakoff (1972) defines Hedges as “words whose meaning implicitly involves fuzziness.” In both languages, these hedging words soften the force of the utterance and help preserve interpersonal harmony in communication.

A frequency analysis was conducted based on participants’ responses to the 24 discourse completion tasks (DCTs) to supplement the qualitative observations. Sixty participants (30 Vietnamese and 30 American) completed all scenarios, resulting in 1,440 advice-giving utterances. Figure 1 presents the distribution of advice strategies across cultural groups.

Figure 1. Frequency of Advice-Giving Strategies by Cultural Group



These quantitative findings reinforce the qualitative patterns previously discussed. Vietnamese participants relied more on hedging and indirectness to express politeness and deference, particularly in hierarchical contexts. American participants, on the other hand, showed a strong preference for direct advice regardless of social status or age, aligning with individualistic and egalitarian cultural norms.

Although the present study primarily employed qualitative and descriptive analysis, future research will benefit from integrating advanced statistical tools. Frequency counts, percentage distributions, and inferential tests such as chi-square could be used to examine associations between advice strategies and sociolinguistic variables. Simple frequency tables offer valuable insights into culturally patterned pragmatic behaviour even in preliminary stages.

Preliminary Observations on the Application of Searle's Felicity Conditions in Advice-Giving

Based on Searle's (1969) theory of felicity conditions, we anticipate observable differences in how Vietnamese and American speakers apply these conditions when giving advice. Regarding the preparatory condition, we predict that Vietnamese speakers may be more cautious in assessing the listener's ability to carry out the suggested action, especially in situations with social status disparities. In contrast, American speakers may pay less attention to this factor, reflecting a more egalitarian communication culture. Concerning the sincerity condition, we expect differences in how sincerity is expressed. Vietnamese speakers may show sincerity through expressions of concern and affection, whereas American speakers may express it more directly through language.

As for the essential condition, we assume that both Vietnamese and American speakers aim to ensure that the advice is perceived as being in the listener's best interest. However, the way this is conveyed may differ. Vietnamese speakers may emphasise collective benefits or responsibilities toward family and society, while American speakers may focus on the listener's benefit. We also expect variation in the explicitness with which these conditions are addressed. American speakers may state them more directly, while Vietnamese speakers may imply them more subtly within the utterance. If these findings are confirmed, they will provide deeper insight into how cultural factors influence the application of pragmatic principles in advice-giving behaviour. Such insight may significantly affect intercultural communication and language teaching effectiveness.

Cultural Differences in Advice-Giving Behaviour

When examining advice-giving behaviour in a cultural context, we observe significant differences between Vietnamese and American cultures, particularly regarding social status, gender, and age.

Regarding social status, Vietnamese culture tends to show a more pronounced respect for social hierarchy. Individuals of lower status often have to use more modest and polite language when advising those of higher status. For example, a student might say to a teacher: *"Kính thưa Thầy/cô, con nghĩ thầy/cô nên..."* In contrast, status differences are not as evident in American culture when giving advice. Employees may tell their boss, *"You should take a break, sir. You've been working too hard."*

Regarding gender, in Vietnamese culture, women tend to use more polite, indirect language and avoid conflict when giving advice, especially when speaking to someone of the same gender. For instance, a woman may say to another: *"Chị ơi, em thấy chị nên... để tốt hơn."* Meanwhile, American culture shows less gender distinction in advice-giving. Both men and women may offer direct advice, such as: *"You should try this exercise. It will help with your back pain."*

In terms of age, Vietnamese culture places great importance on respecting elders. Younger individuals must use humble and respectful language when advising older people. For example, a young person might say to an elder: *"Dạ, cháu nghĩ bác nên... để khỏe hơn ạ."* In American culture, age differences tend to have less influence on how advice is given. If appropriate, a young person can still offer direct advice to an older person, such as: *"Grandma, you really should take your medication on time."*

While individual sociolinguistic variables such as age, gender, and social status have been discussed

independently, the interplay between these variables reveals more nuanced patterns in advice-giving strategies.

For instance, younger female speakers in the Vietnamese group displayed heightened levels of indirectness and deference when advising older male interlocutors in positions of authority (e.g., bosses or professors). These utterances often included honorifics, hedges, and conditional structures, such as: “Cháu nghĩ có thể bác nên cân nhắc lại một chút a...” In contrast, when the same speakers addressed younger or same-age peers, their advice was more direct and assertive, occasionally omitting hedging altogether.

Conversely, American participants, especially male speakers, showed less variation across status and gender boundaries. Advice remained relatively direct regardless of whether the recipient was older or of higher rank, such as in the phrase: “You really should take a day off.” However, some American female participants did employ more softeners (e.g., “maybe,” “I guess”) when advising senior male recipients, indicating subtle gender-based politeness norms.

These patterns suggest that cultural orientations towards hierarchy and gender roles substantially influence pragmatic choices—not just individually, but in their interaction. Vietnamese advice-givers appear highly sensitive to power asymmetries and relational contexts, while American speakers exhibit a more egalitarian norm in pragmatic delivery.

Further quantitative coding analysis (e.g., frequency of indirect forms in specific speaker–listener pairings) would allow for deeper insights into how these variables shape language use.

General Trends in Intercultural Communication

In the context of intercultural communication, we observe several noteworthy general trends. According to Hinkel (1997), Vietnamese and Asian-American English speakers use indirect advice more often than European-American speakers to appear polite and avoid conflict. This aligns with Ting-Toomey’s (1999) intercultural communication theory, which posits that cultures with collectivist orientations prioritise harmony and conflict avoidance in interaction.

Although this is generally true, it is essential to note that in certain exceptional cases, Vietnamese speakers may also use direct advice when necessary, especially with family members. This demonstrates flexibility in language use depending on the specific context.

The way advice is given also depends on many other factors, such as the relationship between speaker and hearer, the communicative situation, the level of familiarity, and so on. This requires the speaker to possess sensitivity and flexibility in communication to ensure that the advice is delivered appropriately and effectively.

In today’s era of globalisation, the boundaries between cultures are gradually becoming blurred due to increasingly frequent cultural exchanges. As Kim (2001) noted, this process demands the development of intercultural communicative competence at both the individual and societal levels.

Potential for Intercultural Misunderstanding

The contrastive differences in advice-giving strategies between Vietnamese and American English speakers are not merely academic observations; they carry significant implications for real-world communication. These cultural mismatches in pragmatics can lead to misunderstandings, especially in intercultural encounters where intentions are filtered through different cultural norms.

For instance, a Vietnamese speaker who uses heavily mitigated or indirect forms such as “*Em nghĩ có thể anh nên...*” may be perceived by an American interlocutor as hesitant, unclear, or lacking conviction. Conversely, a Vietnamese listener could interpret direct advice from an American speaker, “You should fix this today,” as abrupt or impolite, particularly if the recipient is older or holds a higher status.

These mismatches can result in what Thomas (1983) describes as “pragmatic failure,” where the speaker’s intended meaning is not appropriately understood due to differing norms of appropriateness. Such failures may cause offence, discomfort, or a communication breakdown in professional or academic contexts.

Therefore, understanding these cultural variations is essential for preventing unintended face threats or interpersonal tension. This underscores the importance of integrating pragmatic awareness and intercultural sensitivity into second language education, especially in training learners to navigate real-life advice-giving scenarios across cultural boundaries.

Pedagogical Implications for Language Teaching

The findings of this study have clear implications for ESL/EFL classrooms, particularly in enhancing learners’ intercultural pragmatic competence. Teachers can design activities contrasting advice-giving norms across cultures to help students become more aware of the social factors influencing pragmatic choices.

For example, role-play exercises can simulate situations where students must offer advice to interlocutors of varying age, status, or cultural background. Students gain critical insights into appropriate language use by reflecting on how a Vietnamese learner might hedge advice to a superior versus how an American might deliver the same message more directly. Teachers can also use excerpts from the study’s DCT scenarios as prompts for classroom discussion, peer feedback, or writing tasks.

Moreover, including authentic or semi-authentic dialogues in teaching materials and reflection questions on politeness, power dynamics, and cultural expectations can support learners in adapting their pragmatic strategies for different contexts. Explicit instruction on speech act realisation patterns, such as the four-part structure of advice-giving (opening, proposition, reason, conclusion), can help learners craft socially appropriate responses.

By embedding such activities into the curriculum, language educators teach grammar and vocabulary and equip learners with the cultural and communicative flexibility needed for successful interaction in diverse settings.

CONCLUSION

This preliminary study examined advice-giving behaviour in Vietnamese and American English through discourse completion tasks and selected media dialogues. The findings reveal that while both groups employed direct, hedged, and indirect strategies, their preferences differed markedly. Vietnamese speakers predominantly used hedged and indirect forms, especially in age- or status-sensitive situations, reflecting hierarchical and collectivist cultural values. In contrast, American speakers favored directness, consistent with egalitarian and individualistic orientations. A shared four-part structure of advice-giving, comprising opening, proposition, reason, and conclusion, was observed across both languages.

The integration of frequency-based analysis provided additional support for these patterns. Among the 1,440 advice-giving utterances, Vietnamese participants relied more on hedging (33.3%) and indirectness (20%), while Americans produced over 80% of their advice in direct form. These quantitative findings reinforce the pragmatic tendencies linked to cultural expectations of politeness, clarity, and relational distance.

Importantly, the contrast in advice-giving norms poses a risk for intercultural misunderstanding. Vietnamese learners may perceive American directness as abrupt, while Americans may misinterpret Vietnamese mitigation as a lack of clarity or assertiveness. Such pragmatic mismatches, or “pragmatic failures” (Thomas, 1983), can hinder effective professional, academic, and personal communication.

Given these insights, ESL/EFL instruction should move beyond grammatical competence to include training in intercultural pragmatics. Classroom activities such as role-play, cross-cultural comparison of advice styles, and reflection on politeness strategies can help learners adapt their speech to diverse communicative norms. Teachers can also use DCT scenarios to raise awareness of how age, status, and gender influence pragmatic choices.

While the present study employed primarily qualitative methods, future research should incorporate statistical tools such as chi-square analysis to examine correlations between strategy type and sociolinguistic variables. Expanding the data sources to include naturally occurring conversations from real-life contexts (e.g., workplace, classroom, family) will also enhance the authenticity and generalizability of findings.

In sum, this study contributes to a growing body of intercultural pragmatics by highlighting how cultural values shape even routine speech acts like giving advice. These findings inform language pedagogy and intercultural communication and underscore the importance of culturally responsive language use in today's globalised world.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A. Advice-Giving Behavior Survey (DCT Questionnaire)

Due to space limitations, the complete DCT questionnaire, containing 24 scenarios across six domains (health, study, work, relationships, lifestyle, and finance), each with three social-role variations, is provided in a separate online repository. The questionnaire is bilingual (English–Vietnamese) and structured according to pragmatic variables such as age, status, and gender. Access the full questionnaire here: <https://github.com/lamth1985/Appendix-A.-DCT-questionnaire>