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When Students Say Far Too Much: Examining Gushing in the ELT Classroom

Cuando los alumnos dicen demasiado: análisis del uso excesivo de palabras en clases de inglés como lengua extranjera

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English foreign-language users often overuse words when faced with difficult situations. Called *gushing*, such excessive use of words is often legitimately employed by native speakers to express, for instance, gratitude and apologies when a simple *thank you* or *sorry* does not sufficiently convey an interlocutor's feelings. This paper examines the appropriateness and effectiveness of gushing when employed by advanced students facing difficult situations. Answering discourse completion tasks, students from a private university in Guadalajara, Mexico were asked to employ acquiescing, persisting, and aggressing strategies to resolve two particular situations. The results indicate that gushing was widely used, but in communicatively ineffective ways, reflecting an area where teachers can help develop students' communicative competencies.

Key words: Insincerity, gushing, lack of knowledge, language insecurity, unnecessary reinforcement.

Los hablantes del inglés como lengua extranjera frecuentemente usan palabras en exceso cuando enfrentan situaciones difíciles. Hablantes nativos utilizan un excesivo número de palabras para expresar, por ejemplo, gratitud y disculpas cuando un simple gracias o lo siento no transmite completamente los sentimientos del interlocutor. Este artículo examina el uso excesivo de palabras por alumnos con un nivel avanzado de inglés al enfrentarse a situaciones difíciles. Al responder un cuestionario de completación, alumnos universitarios en Guadalajara, México, usaron estrategias conciliadoras, interrogatorias y argumentativas para resolver dos situaciones específicas. Los resultados indican que un uso excesivo de palabras fue utilizado pero en formas comunicativamente ineficaces y reflejan un área donde los profesores pueden ayudar a los alumnos a desarrollar competencias comunicativas.

Palabras clave: falta de conocimiento, inseguridad del lenguaje, insinceridad, refuerzo innecesario, uso excesivo de palabras.

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Introduction

This research project had its beginnings in students' apologies uttered when they arrived late to class and attempted to explain their reasons in English. Often, the longer the explanation went on, the more dubious the apology sounded in the target language even though the students may have had a genuine reason for arriving late. While English foreign-language (EFL) users are often lost for words when faced with difficult, challenging, and unexpected situations, the opposite is also true: they frequently use too many words when fewer would suffice. EFL users need to find the right balance between not coming across as reticent and being too talkative and verbose. As expounded by Grice (1975) in his maxim of quantity, interactants usually aim to make their contributions as informative as necessary while not offering more information than necessary. Being too talkative may be due to the foreign-language user's insecurity, lack of language knowledge, an unnecessary need to reinforce what is being said, or the inability to express oneself in an emotionally appropriate way. One of the aims of this paper is to identify the motives behind using gushing and to consider how teachers can help students in their spoken English to avoid unnecessary gushing.

Additionally, in negative situations, foreign-language users may become particularly frustrated when they want to directly confront people who have been rude to them. Foreign-language users have choices: they may want to be submissive and accept the situation, they may aim to react in a proactive and defiant manner, or they may want to be aggressive and antagonistic. Beebe and Waring (2005) described these options in terms of *aggressing*, *persisting*, and *acquiescing strategies* (p. 71). While the aim of foreign-language teaching is not to practice rudeness in the target language, we will argue in this paper that teachers should at least equip their students with the necessary communicative resources so that they can react in the way they want to, and if they so desire, be rude. Of course, foreign-language users must be aware of the communicative consequences of being rude and impolite.

Furthermore, students need to distinguish socially approved uses of gushing from those that are less appropriate. For instance, Aijmer (1996), in examining speech functions, argued that gushing may be expected and even encouraged when expressing extreme gratitude, rejecting an extremely kind offer, or apologising when another interactant's feelings are hurt. Therefore, gushing may be an extremely effective communicative tool when used appropriately.

To examine how foreign-language users engage in gushing, advanced students—based on their performance level on the TOEFL—were asked to react to a series of rude situations through the use of written discourse completion tasks (DCTs). They were given choices regarding the use of aggressing, persisting and acquiescing strategies (Beebe & Waring, 2005). The results examined the extent to which students engaged in gushing and emotionality and whether they did so in appropriate and effective ways. In the method section, we explain how the preliminary data were obtained, that is, through examining critical incidents and classroom discussion. While the study was carried out using only one task, we argue that the results provide sufficient argument to warrant a more in-depth follow-up investigation into this phenomenon.

Gushing: Terminology

Gushing has been examined in terms of speech act theory and the violation of Grice's (1975) conversational maxims. However, given that there appears to be little current literature on the topic, this article aims to increase teacher awareness of this phenomenon.

Examining gushing within speech act theory (Austin, 1962), Edmondson and House (1981) argued that illocutionary acts (i.e., utterances with

a communicative purpose), are often given more emotional weight by interactants who try to identify themselves more closely with their addressees. For instance, an interactant may want to come across in an extremely supportive way, as in the following utterances:

- I'm most terribly sorry, I really am.
- Thanks awfully. (Edmondson & House, 1981, p. 95)

These two instances of gushing can only be considered appropriate when evaluated within a specific context. If one steps on someone's foot by accident, an utterance such as "I'm most terribly sorry, I really am" may be considered excessive, but not if one is late for an important social engagement. Context, participants, communicative implications, and the actual speech act itself are crucial in determining the appropriateness of gushing. Consequently, foreign-language users must evaluate the use of gushing in terms of appropriateness, acceptability, and usefulness. Sometimes, as argued by Bergman and Kasper (1993), foreign-language users may choose to gush because it provides "an opportunity for knowledge display" (p. 101).

Also reflecting speech act theory (Austin, 1962), Aijmer (1996) identified a range of speech functions in which gushing is often found. She noted thanking when "the social occasion seems to demand a high degree of emotionality or 'gushing'" (p. 69) and rejecting where "the rejection of an offer is regarded as a face-threatening act, which requires politeness and conscious attention" (p. 74). Aijmer offered the following example as an instance of profuse thanking with gushing, which is further accompanied by a compliment. (So that the reader can fully appreciate gushing, transcription symbols have been removed.)

> C: you can have a spoonful
> of cream with these if you like.
> B: I really won't thanks awfully.
> They're terribly
> good. (p. 74)

Associating gushing with insincerity and a violation of Grice's (1975) quality maxim, Jautz (2008) defined gushing as those "cases where people display so much emotion when, for instance, thanking someone, that their utterances can no longer be taken to be sincere" (p. 141). Jautz (2013) further noted that gushing can often be associated with disingenuousness and pretence. Referring specifically to radio phone-ins and broadcast interviews (but also applicable to other contexts), she argued that "many examples of gushing may be found, i.e., cases in which people display so much emotion that one cannot take their utterances sincerely" (p. 210). In considering the motivation behind such gushing, Jautz (2013) examined "whether seemingly polite utterances are only examples of gushing in order to create a better image of oneself in public rather than to show respect for one's interlocutors and their (face) wants" (p. 210). This is the potential pitfall for foreign-language users: they may not sound sincere, and by implication, convincing, when engaging in gushing. Apart from Jautz's (2013) current work, gushing has attracted scant interest in English-language teaching. Given the lack of relevant literature and to further investigate this phenomenon, we therefore decided to conduct classroom research by asking students to react to difficult situations, after which we evaluated their utterances in terms of gushing.

Gushing: Pedagogical Dimension

In English language teaching, teacher talking time (TTT) and student talking time (STT) have received considerable attention. Teachers are encouraged to reduce their own interventions to allow students to participate as much as possible (Gower, Phillips, & Walters, 1995; Harmer, 2007). However, as Harmer (2007) noted, in the case of teachers, teacher talking quality (TTQ) is just as important as student talking time: "It is the quality of what we say that really counts" (p. 118). We argue that the same observation should apply

to students; that is, there should be a focus on the quality of student talk. Maximum opportunities for pair-work and group-work may only result in gushing if teachers do not focus on what learners are saying in terms of communicative effectiveness and appropriateness. Although in this paper, we examine students' written answers of spoken dialogue and evaluate their effective use, there is a close corollary with student talking time, especially when it involves gushing.

In terms of a general pedagogical framework, we adopt a Gricean approach to spoken language production and argue that students should aim to produce language that is informative (the *quantity* maxim), conveys the truth (the *quality* maxim), is relevant (the *relevance* maxim) and is spoken clearly and appropriate in length (the maxim of *manner*). If it is not used to convey supportiveness, gushing potentially breaks these maxims.

Use of Gushing: Difficult Choices

When faced with perceived rudeness, interactants have choices regarding how they want to react. For instance, one can accept and suffer rudeness and carry on. On the other hand, the alleged rudeness can be challenged. A third possibility is to respond in the same way, that is, be rude back. Beebe and Waring (2005, p. 71) described these strategies in terms of acquiescing strategies (apologize, express thanks, acquiesce, opt out), persisting strategies (argue, justify, request), and aggressing strategies (insult, threat, challenge).

When employing acquiescing strategies, language users decide not to react to the rude situation. They may apologise for their behaviour, opt out of the situation altogether, or just say nothing. These strategies allow the perpetrator to get away with being rude. With regard to persisting strategies, language users may decide to take issue with the rude person, perhaps by arguing, justifying one's own behaviour, or requesting clarification from the other person. Far from being submissive, with this strategy the language user challenges the rude person. Finally, the foreign-language user may decide to answer back and not accept the rudeness by replying with insults and threats. Whichever strategy the language users choose, they must ensure that it is pertinent and effective. Any unnecessary gushing can easily undermine the efficacy of a given strategy.

Communicative language teaching involves preparing students for a range of social situations and contexts and giving them choices with regard to how they want to react and be perceived and "has become a generalised 'umbrella' term to describe learning sequences which aim to improve the students' ability to communicate" (Harmer, 2007, p. 70). While teachers may argue that it is not their role to help students to be rude, students should be allowed to be rude if that is their decision and therefore should be given the communicative resources to do so.

Method

To analyse how students negotiate and react to negative situations and whether they engage in gushing, the lead author, as their teacher, asked 24 middle- and upper-class students studying English at a private university in Guadalajara, Mexico to voluntarily take part in the study. The study took place in March 2014 and included nine male and five female students in the cohort, with ages ranging from 20 to 25 years. They were studying to attain BAs in law, international commerce, and institutional administration and needed to obtain a TOEFL score of at least 550 points to graduate. The students had been studying English for over five years and were at an advanced level. Participants were assured that their identities would not be revealed.

To introduce the topic, the lead author presented two critical incidents to the class. The incidents concerned two Mexican EFL users who had been

asked in the United States where they came from, and their replies were sneered at. As part of a classroom discussion, students were then asked how they would have handled these critical incidents. Subsequently, they were presented with the two situations in this study. Their answers were then collected and analysed using Beebe and Waring's (2005) acquiescing strategies, persisting strategies, and aggressing strategies.

The instrument used for data collection was a single written discourse completion task (DCT), which students duly completed in one session (this instrument aims to obtain a communicative response from the responder). The students had to respond to the following two situations and were given no time limit.

- You have a meeting with an American co-worker to discuss some company processes. When the meeting starts, you begin to give different ideas but he/she does not take them into consideration. Additionally, he/she does not give any reasons why he/she is doing that. How would you react?
- You and some friends go shopping in the United States. When you get to the store, you start looking at some clothes. Suddenly, you realize that your friends are not with you anymore. You want to ask the sales person to show you some jeans in a certain size but your English is not very good. When you finally ask the clerk to show the jeans to you, he/she says that he/she cannot understand you and that you should bring someone who really speaks English. How would you feel about it?

These situations reflect work and social contexts to which the students could relate because they were all studying to obtain professionally oriented BAs and had all been to the United States for extended periods of time to visit relatives, study, go shopping, etc.

In answering the DCTs, the choices available to the students were explained to them in terms of acquiescing, persisting, and aggressing strategies. However, participants were free to respond to the two situations in any way they might choose.

As previously discussed, gushing may be due to insecurity, lack of knowledge, unnecessary reinforcement, and insincerity. In the next section, we examine the motives behind gushing to identify areas where students could benefit from pedagogical intervention.

This research reflects both quantitative and qualitative approaches. It is quantitative in that we wanted to ascertain the amount and levels of gushing, and it is qualitative in that we see the participants as individuals with their own ways of interacting. The results were analysed by quantitatively identifying the acquiescing, persisting, and aggressing strategies employed by the 24 participants and qualitatively the motivation for a chosen strategy in terms of language insecurity, lack of knowledge, unnecessary reinforcement, and insincerity.

Results

There were significant differences between the work and shopping contexts in the strategies employed and the levels of gushing. In the meeting with an American co-worker (Context 1), respondents principally used persisting strategies (13 answers), and the number of words per answer across all the strategies was roughly similar to that shown in Table 1.

In the shopping context, respondents mainly employed acquiescing strategies, averaging only 15.2 words per answer. Overall, the average number of words per answer dropped to 18.04 compared to 22.79 in the first context. The difference could have been due to the actual strategies used, the contrasting contexts or the students' possible difficulty in negotiating social situations (see Table 2).

However, in the final analysis, the number of words may not be significant. It is more revealing to examine how each interactant tried to be perceived in a given context. Acquiescing and aggressing strategies may come across as shorter and to the point when compared to persisting strategies with which an interactant is trying to get his/her point across.

Table 1. Context 1: Meeting with an American Co-Worker

Strategy	Total number of answers	Total number of words used in answers	Average number of words per answer
Acquiescing	4	95	23.75
Persisting	13	303	23.30
Aggressing	7	149	21.28
Total	24	547	22.79

Table 2. Context 2: Shopping in the United States

Strategy	Total number of answers	Total number of words used in answers	Average number of words per answer
Acquiescing	14	214	15.2
Persisting	4	101	25.25
Aggressing	6	118	19.6
Total	24	433	18.04

After identifying the types of strategies used, we now examine the possible reasons behind gushing and examine their effectiveness with regard to the chosen strategy in the four identified areas: language insecurity, lack of knowledge, unnecessary reinforcement, and insincerity.

Language Insecurity

Instances of language insecurity in the students' answers reflected significant difficulties in their efforts to get their points across. This led to gushing, which was apparent through repetition, appeals for help, and vague threats such as those seen in the following response to the sales clerk who claims that he/she does not understand the customer (Context 2):

> I'm sorry, but at the moment I'm all by my own. I'll appreciate if you make an effort to understand me, cuz I'm really trying my best. So now can you please show me the jeans size small, or should I need to talk with the store's manager?

The respondent starts off with an apology, indicating a sense of powerlessness which is confirmed by a sense of isolation with an emotional "at the moment I'm all by my own." She then calls on the clerk to "make an effort" which further indicates insecurity instead of asserting her role as a customer who should be attended to. Her follow-up request is accompanied by a vague threat of needing "to talk with the store's manager." While on the surface this appears to be a persisting strategy (arguing, justifying, and requesting), gushing indicates helplessness rather than a customer demanding to receive the treatment that he/she deserves.

An example of gushing when aggressing can be found in the following example from the meeting with the American co-worker (Context 1):

> If you don't like my ideas, can you please tell me and stop ignoring them? Give me some examples of what you are looking for, so I can improve my ideas.

The respondent appears to attack the *face* (Goffman, 1967) of the American-co-worker with the use of direct and plain language and hence reflects an aggressing strategy. The use of *please* reflects decisiveness rather than politeness. However, any possible forcefulness is lost with the conciliatory

"Give me some examples of what you are looking for" and the potentially submissive "so I can improve my ideas." Instead of firmly stating his/her position and sticking to it, the respondent has accepted the rude behaviour of the co-worker and has accommodated to it.

Lack of Knowledge

Lack of language knowledge was also a significant factor behind gushing, as seen in the next example, which also involves the American co-worker (Context 1). The respondent uses *I* repeatedly instead of focusing on the behaviour of the colleague who is seemingly ignoring him/her:

> I think that you don't care about what I am saying. I really want to know why, if you don't want to listen to me, I prefer to go.

The reply reflects a persisting strategy in that he/she is arguing and requesting. For example, she claims that she is being ignored with "you don't care about what I am saying" and emphatically says "I really want to know why." However, her arguments succumb to an emotional "if you don't want to listen to me, I prefer to go." Her point of view is reduced to expressing emotionality through gushing.

Gushing can also be seen in the following example as the interactant offers emotional arguments about being ignored rather than confronting the co-worker head-on.

> Sorry, but can you let me know why you don't consider my ideas, I wanna contribute with my ideas in this project. I am very interesting, really.

The initial use of *sorry,* with the immediate, polite request "can you let me know," puts the interactant in a subordinate position. While trying to pursue a persisting strategy of arguing and requesting, the interactant asks to be taken into consideration but finishes with a weak and less-than-forceful "I am very interesting, really." Her arguments for being allowed to contribute reflect an emotional appeal rather than offering solid reasons for her inclusion in the meeting.

Unnecessary Reinforcement

A major reason for gushing is the unnecessary reinforcement of one's position, and gushing may surface when all that is needed is a short remark. For instance, in the shopping incident (Context 2) when the clerk claims not to understand, one participant said:

> Sorry for my English I haven't practiced it for a long time.

This acquiescing strategy reflects a complete and utter submission to the shop clerk, who is actually the one who should be apologising for his/her rudeness. This acquiescing *sorry* is followed by an explanation for the customer's poor language skills and why this has come about: "I haven't practiced it for a long time." The customer does not need to provide the reasons why her English may not be comprehensible. This is unnecessary reinforcement of one's position. If the customer really wants to apologise a much shorter and concise reply could have been offered, for instance, "Sorry I didn't make myself clear."

Unnecessary reinforcement can also be seen in the following example of a conversation with a co-worker (Context 1).

> I'm sorry to interrupt, but I think that everybody in this meeting wants to participate. I have some different ideas that I would like you guys listen to. Please allow me just one moment so I can explain them to you.

The participant has adopted a persisting strategy where he/she makes a case for being heard. First of all, he/she apologises with "I'm sorry to interrupt" and tries to establish common ground with "I think that everybody in this meeting wants to participate." However, he/she then creates a sense of distance by saying that he/she thinks differently than the rest: "I have some different ideas that I would like you guys listen to." Next, he/she seizes the floor with "Please

allow me just one moment so I can explain them to you." Instead of coming across directly and to the point, this participant appears to have expended considerable communicative energy in just trying to gain the floor instead of simply making his/her point.

Insincerity

Insincerity can be seen in the following remark in the shopping incident (Context 2), where the participant adopts an aggressing strategy that seems to echo empty threats:

> You better bring someone more polite and who can understand me and if you can't I will go and never buy anymore in your store. I don't like people like you.

The shop clerk has to find someone who is more polite and can understand the customer. If this does not happen, the customer threatens to boycott the shop and adds a gratuitous "I don't like people like you." The whole utterance has little communicative force, and it is hard to see how the customer would achieve his/her communicative purpose after calling the clerk impolite and threatening to go elsewhere.

In the following example from the business meeting (Context 1), the participant threatens to leave:

> Hey man I think you should start hearing my ideas or I'm leaving because you are not respectful enough.

The informality of *hey man* hardly adds weight to the interactant's request. The threat to leave the meeting must be acted upon. It is more of an emotional cry to be heard rather than a solid argument. As an aggressing strategy, it does not sound particularly sincere.

Discussion

The findings from this study indicate that the participants did engage in gushing to add communicative effect when faced with rudeness. Its effectiveness, however, is questionable.

First, the results indicate that the participants in the research adopted a wide range of strategies to address rudeness, suggesting that students may not react to negative incidents in predictable and conventional ways. Instead, they weigh their options and then choose. By summing the strategies used in both contexts, one can see that in total, there were 18 acquiescing, 17 persisting, and 11 aggressing strategies. As previously mentioned, a simple word count of each utilized strategy does not fully illustrate the level of gushing because each reply must be examined with regard to its communicative intention.

With regard to language insecurity, participants employed repetition, appeals for help, and vague threats. Indeed, vague threats were a common feature of answers in general, and this could especially be seen in the number of threats to call in a supervisor. The need to go to a third party may undermine one's position in a tense argument, however, because it implies that one cannot get one's point across without additional help. Furthermore, language insecurity was reflected in the participants' softening of an initially firm position, which often descended into an appeal for help and consideration.

An inability to present solid arguments was reflected through the considerable use of emotionality with comments such as "I am very interesting, really" and "if you don't want to listen to me, I prefer to go." These examples reflect a lack of knowledge in how to argue one's point and reply successfully in the target language. Emotionality should be used to strengthen one's position rather than plea for help.

Unnecessary reinforcement could be witnessed in both the shorter and longer utterances. As seen in both incidents, sometimes a simple *sorry* can suffice instead of long drawn-out explanations. Furthermore, long-winded sentences often diminish the main communicative force of an utterance. For instance, "Please allow me just one moment so I can explain them to you" could be reduced to "Let me say this."

Furthermore, in the use of unnecessary reinforcement, the interactant runs the risk of not achieving his/her communicative goal. A remark regarding one's English, for example, such as "I haven't practiced it for a long time" may not help a customer obtain the service he/she is looking for when the shop assistant says that he/she does not understand the client.

Insincerity was particularly salient in the use of empty threats. Threats should be used to achieve one's communicative goals and not solely to express emotional distress. Threats to co-workers and shop assistants must be followed through and acted upon. Comments such as "I'm leaving because you are not respectful enough" sound hollow, while remarks like "I don't like people like you" appear to serve little communicative purpose except to voice one's dislike.

Conclusions

In this paper, we examined the appropriateness and effectiveness of gushing in negative situations from an interactional viewpoint. While the data were collected from a limited sample of EFL users, findings show that these foreign-language learners did not use gushing particularly effectively. Its use highlighted communicative weaknesses in terms of language insecurity, lack of knowledge, unnecessary reinforcement, and insincerity. Given the lack of research in this area, further investigation with a larger sample is necessary, examining sociocultural factors that may influence the choice of a given strategy. Furthermore, the participants in this investigation studied at a middle- to upper-class private university, and the research contexts were designed to be familiar to them. Follow-up research would need to examine sociolinguistic variables related to gushing among other EFL populations.

Students should be exposed to both the positive and negative aspects of gushing. Moreover, teachers should raise students' awareness of gushing and how it can be used more effectively as well as how it can fail to achieve its objective. To this end, we suggest five possible scenarios for practising gushing, although, of course, many more can be found: (1) Giving one's opinion, especially when one's views are radically different from those of other interactants, while trying not to offend anyone; (2) making offers, especially when having family or friends over, and they decline invitations to eat or drink; (3) disagreeing, when one is with one's in-laws, for instance, but one does not want to offend or disrespect them; (4) making suggestions to friends that do not seem well-received and must be defended; and (5) offering advice to acquaintances that may be easily misinterpreted. This can be achieved through acting out role-plays and answering DCTs.

This study clearly points to new areas for research. First, one must question whether written gushing is the same as spoken gushing.

Second, the number of participants in our study was relatively small, and a larger study is required to confirm the results. Therefore, further research should examine a wider range of contexts with a greater number of participants. However, we argue that this paper contributes to an area that has been largely ignored in English language teaching.

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