An Exploration of the Institutional Discourse

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The purpose of the study is to investigate the norms or expectations of native and non-native English speaking students in the academic consultations. In this study, four graduate students participated. Each participant was asked to conduct four different tasks: *Free Elicitation Task, Cued Elicitation Task, Discourse Completion Task,* and *Open-ended Interviews*. The results show that the participants are aware of the prototypical patterns of the discourse but seem to have different perceptions in terms of function of small talks, the role and status, and politeness strategies. It is important that English language learners need to be aware of the sociolinguistic norms for the discourse and have strategies for negotiating speech acts in this context in order to have satisfactory interactions with expert members of the community in which they are seeking membership.

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I. Introduction

Discourse communities are considered "socio-rhetorical networks that form in order to work towards sets of common goals" (Swales, 1990, p. 9). Expert members of a discourse community tend to share a generally agreed common goals and to develop their own norms of particular discourse patterns. English language learners

who wish to enter a new discourse community need to have the linguistic, social, and pragmatic knowledge of the contexts. Due to a lack of understanding of the contexts, English language learners may experience challenges including language related problems or academic adjustment problems.

In institutional encounters, it is important to know when it is appropriate to open a conversation, what topics are appropriate to particular situations, which language forms are to be used, and how speech acts such as greetings, compliments, suggestions, or rejections are to be used (Agar, 1985; Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Blum-Kulka, 1982; Bouton & Kachru, 1992; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1992; Hatch, 1992; Holmes, 2005; Krase, 2007; Scollon & Scollon, 1991; Tyler, 1994; Wolfson, 1983). English language learners in higher education must be able "to adopt smoothly to the linguistic and social milieu of their host environment and to the culture of their academic departments and institutions" (Braine, 2002, p. 60).

The purpose of the study is to explore the perceived norms of academic discourse and the language needs in the discourse community. This study attempts to enrich the understanding of the learners by exploring the perception of the socially and culturally complex academic discourse for the purpose of enhancing the pedagogy for English language learners. If English language learners are aware of the sociolinguistic norms for the particular institutional encounters, and have strategies for negotiating speech acts in this context, they may be able to benefit from having satisfactory interactions with expert members of the community in which they are seeking membership. This understanding of the appropriate pragmatic strategies can also assist teachers to provide better instruction for students to join institutional discourse communities.

2. Background

According to Agar (1985), the institutional discourse is comprised of three things: *diagnoses, directives,* and *reports. Diagnoses* are part of the discourse where "the institutional representative fits the client's ways of talking about the encounter to ways that fit the institution's" (p. 149). *Directives* are part of the discourse where the institutional representative asks the client to do certain things. *Reports* are the summary of the institutional discourse. The sequences of institutional discourse may not follow a paradigm.

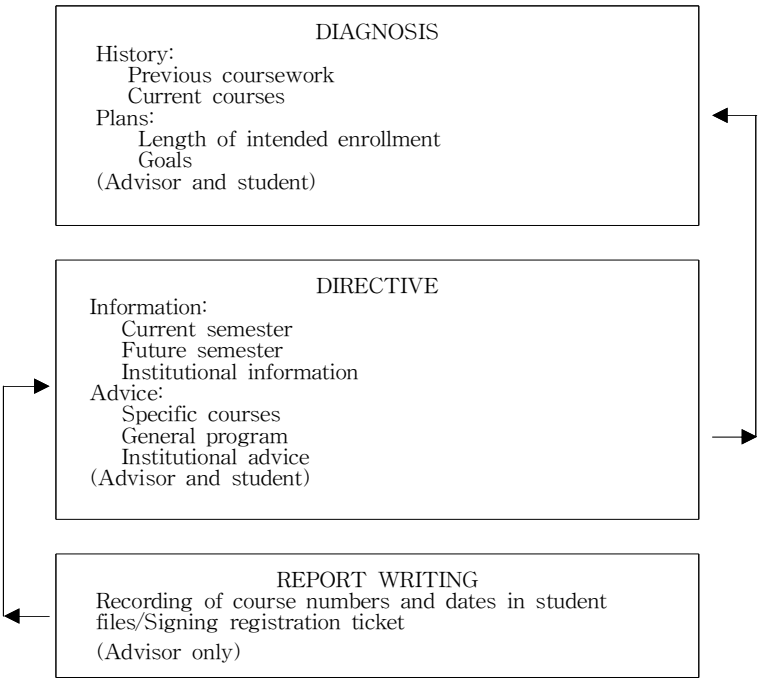
In institutional settings, expert members tend to develop their own norms of particular discourse patterns and are aware of the conventions associated with particular discourse patterns (Tyler, 1994). Studies of institutional discourse suggest that the perceived norms can be realized in language-specific and culture-specific patterns (Agar, 1985; Erickson & Schultz, 1982; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1992; Scollon & Scollon, 1991; Tyler, 1994).

Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1990, 1991, 1993, 1996) conduct several studies on cross-culture or cross-linguistic differences in perception of academic discourse. On the basis of Agar's (1985) framework for institutional encounters, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1990) analyze academic advising session. As shown in Figure 1, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford report that the academic discourse is highly structured and consists of the three periods: *Diagnosis period, Directive period,* and *Report writing period*. The diagnosis period is characterized by the student's relevant academic history. The directive period is to determine the student's schedule for the next semester. A series of actions including suggestions, rejections, or requests can take place in this portion of the interview. A report writing period is to record the agreed-upon schedule in the student's file.

Ranney (1992) investigates the expectations of a group of eight

Hmong refugees and a group of eight native speakers of English in medical consultations. She argues that Hmong refugees have perceptions in medical consultations that differ from those of native speakers. In a study of tutoring sessions involving a native speaker of Korean and a native speaker of American English, Tyler (1994) argues that different perceptions of the negotiability of status and role can play a crucial part in cross-cultural miscommunications.

FIGURE 1
The Structure of the Advising Interview



Generally, faculty members have a higher institutional status and play the role of the expert by virtue of their expertise in their fields

and their institutional familiarity. (Griffin & Mehan, 1981; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1992; Kress & Fowler, 1979). In particular academic discourse communities, all students may need to play "a subordinate role and be polite, modest". At the same time, students need to show themselves "to be worthy potential members" (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1996, p. 177) of the community. They must demonstrate "independence of opinion" (Kress & Fowler, 1979, p. 75). However, this can be challenging for some nonnative English-speaking students who may have different perceptions on the role of a student. Demonstrating modesty and playing a subordinate role can be more preferable for some students.

One of the sociolinguistic challenges in the workplace is how workers manage small talk effectively; what topics are appropriate or where they can occur. Holmes (2005) argues that analyzing culturally specific norms about appropriate ways of making small talks is crucial. Tarone and Kuehn (2000) examine a genre of the social services intake interview between financial workers and nonnative English-speaking applicants. With regard to the appropriate topics in this particular institution, they point out that the applicants' attempts to explain why they are applying for assistance are not welcomed by financial workers; a description of the applicants' needs would not assist them in obtaining the benefits. Therefore, personal information in some institutional talks may hinder satisfactory interactions with expert members of the community.

In some case, the advanced students' lack of success is not due to the lack of linguistic competence but due to lack of context-specific pragmatic competence. Unsuccessful students may have little understanding of pragmatic strategies or linguistic forms appropriate for the community. Therefore, miscommunications can occur at the discourse levels, rather than at the grammatical levels.

Studies on institutional discourse enable to provide a more

complex, broader explanation of the use of languages linked to the particular contexts by identifying a specific pattern and linguistic features of a particular genre and by exploring the rationale behind discourse conventions. The emphasis on the prototypical features of discourse can help English language learners succeed, especially in academic or professional contexts.

TABLE 1
Small Talks in the Institutional Discourse

Dimensions	Examples of relevant consideration
Content	• What topics are appropriate? • What level of detail is appropriate?
Distribution	• Where does it occur in an interaction? • How much is appropriate at any point? • Who has the right to start/end small talk?
Functions	• What can be achieved through small talk? (e.g. strengthening collegial relationships, easing workplace tensions)

The purpose of the present study is to explore the different perceptions that native English-speaking and nonnative English-speaking students have for the academic advising discourse. The research questions are as follows: 1) What is the prototypical structure of the academic discourse perceived by native English and non-native English speaking students?; 2) What are their perceptions of the academic discourse?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

In the present study, four female graduate students participated as in Table 2. In order to investigate cultural differences, both

native English speaking (NS) and non-native English speaking graduate students[1] (NNS) were invited. All participants were graduate social science majors enrolled in doctorate degree programs in a large Mid-Western university in the U.S. Their ages ranged from the mid 30's to mid 40's. All participants' names are pseudonyms.

TABLE 2
Description of Participants

Name	Country	Native language	Length of time in the U.S.	Major
Ana	U.S.	English	Born and raised in the U.S.	Education
Lisa	U.S.	English	Born and raised in the U.S.	Education
Maya	Japan	Japanese	9 years	Education
Yi	Taiwan	Taiwanese	5 years	Education

3.2 Instruments and Procedures

In this study, an individual participant was asked to conduct four different tasks.[2] The tasks used are as follows: 1) Task A-*Free Elicitation of Scripts*; 2) Task B-*Cued Elicitation of Scripts*; 3) Task C-*Discourse Completion Task*; 4) Task D-*Open-ended Interviews*. Each task lasted 20-25 minutes.

For Task A, the participants were given an example of a typical conversation between a patient and a doctor's receptionist based on Ranney's (1992) study, and then asked to describe the typical patterns between a professor and a graduate student. Thirty-eight

1) The non-native English speaking students obtained a TOEFL score of over 550 on the paper-based test. The graduate school standard for English language proficiency for international students in the university is a computer TOEFL score of 213 (550 on the paper-based test). They earned a master degree in a large Mid-Western university in the U.S.
2) Detailed description of each task is provided in Appendix.

script elements were developed by the researcher on the basis of the results of Task A. One week later, each participant was asked to conduct Task B by putting cued scripts of academic discourse in order. For Task C, each participant was asked to give the exact words they would use in hypothetical situations (*Discourse Completion Task*). Lastly, an open-ended interview (Task D) regarding expectations or norms that each participant may have in academic discourse communications was conducted.

In order to understand the participants′ previous experience, they were asked to describe their demographic information pertinent to the study, their language skills, educational background, or previous academic experience with faculty members before conducting Task A. The open-ended interviews on each individual participant were tape-recorded. After transcribing the interviews, the researcher attempted to identify the theme for ″meaningful themes, issues, or variables, to discover how theses are patterned, and to attempt to explain the patterns″ (Johnson, 1991, p. 90). For clarification, the researcher consulted with the participants (Carspecken, 1996; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000).

However, the limitation of a single research instrument, interview, for eliciting all information need to be circumspect. In order to explore the culture of the particular discourse community, the actual conversations need to be investigated for future research.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Structure of the Academic Discourse

The prototypical structure of the academic discourse perceived by

the participants is as following: *Diagnoses, Directives,* and *Reports*. *Diagnoses* are part of the discourse where a professor determines what agenda a student brings to the meeting. *Directives* are where a professor provides suggestions for a student to do certain things. *Reports* are the summary of the discourse that a professor produces. When asked what particular speech acts could occur during each period, the participants state that it consists of the greeting, requesting suggestions or asking permission, and closing as shown in the examples of 1 and 2.

1. I walk in and then I usually I ask her ′how are you doing′ and … weather … something about the weather … If it's clear what a meeting is about she says ′so let me see the form′ … what are we meeting about today′, ′what can I do for you today′… and (I) lead the conversation…″ (Ana, NS)

2. Student knocks on the door and says as a something greeting. And then advisor maybe asks "what can I do for you?" … And then sit down and ask her that "could I have your signature? This needs to be submitted today or tomorrow" something like this. And then she will do some response something like 'yes'. Professor would say "OK we're done" and I would say "thank you". (Yi, NNS)

Although all participants have considerable knowledge of the discourse patterns for the academic discourse, nonnative English speaking students in this study preserve some perceptions that differ from those of native English speaking students with regards to function of small talks, the student′s role and status, and hedging strategies.

4.2 Small Talks in Institutional Discourse

Although the prototypical pattern of the discourse described by participants appears to be identical, a different perception was revealed in terms of small talks in the institutional encounter. As shown in Holmes′ (2005) study, one of challenges that English language learners may face is to manage small talks effectively. As shown in the examples of 3 and 4, identifying appropriate topics can be very challenging to some nonnative English-speaking students.

3. I don't know what I should talk about. You know … I really don't know how? I think there is a specific code how you tell the stuff? … When and what is appropriate and what is not appropriate? (Maya, NNS)

4. I don't know what kind of topics I can talk with her (advisor) … I was freaking to death. I don't know what I should say … I think starting conversation is hard … we cannot directly point out our problems but we need to say something'. (Yi, NNS)

In term of the function of small talks, native English-speaking students in this study state that small talks are to establish *′rapport′* with a professor (example 5). In contrast, nonnative English-speaking students regard small talks as showing *′respect′* toward a professor (examples of 6 and 7).

5. I don't want to start with a conversation on the weather or how she is doing. Actually I wanna establish some kind of rapport with her and figure out where she is coming from. So I can base the rest of my time with her correctly. (Lisa, NS)

6. Instead of going straight to business, I don't want to give

any tension to her. You know... at least I like to respect her as a human being. I'm not here just to get advice. (Maya, NNS)

7. Yeah ... I feel like they're like my parents generation I need to respect them ... I need to say something to them (Yi, NNS)

Appropriate ways of managing small talks can be culturally specific. Holmes (2005) reports that the major function of small talks at the workplaces is social. In workplaces, non-native English speaking new workers need to manage small talks of social function in maintaining interpersonal relationships with co-workers. Small talks can be "an indispensable component" of being a good co-worker (Holmes, 2005, p. 360).

What can be achieved through small talks in academic discourse is to *'ease tensions'* with faculty members and also *'build rapport'* with the expert members. Rapport is one of the most important features of interaction at institutional contexts (Erickson & Schults, 1982). Having established rapport is supposed to be beneficial to make effective interventions. English language learners in educational contexts need to manage small talks not only in establishing interpersonal relationships with faculty members but also in demonstrating "worthy potential members of the intellectual community" and "an independence of opinion" (Kress & Fowler, 1979, p. 75).

Considering the importance of small talks to establish rapports with a representative in the institutional encounters, English language learners need to be more cautious to manage small talks effectively. They need to be aware of what specific topics can be appropriate before entering a new discourse community. Some novice members may not be confident or accurate in their judgments about what topics are appropriate in particular contexts

and how much details are appropriate in the contexts. Therefore, it should be noted that we need to *demystify* this feature of institutional interaction in order to assist students to be confident and accurate in their judgments about the appropriate small talks in discourse communities where they wish to enter.

4.3 The Role and Status in Institutional Discourse

In order to have a successful negotiation, it is important to play not only '*a subordinate role*' but also '*an independent role*' in the academic discourse community (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993, 1996; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1992; Kress & Fowler, 1979). One of the important attitudes for good communication in academic contexts can be is to show confidence and to leave them with a good impression by playing the role of a leader in the community.

8. If you have the attitudes I think your advisers respect you more. Oh yeah, she knows what she is doing. She's got it planned out. I think that helps ... See you have to act like you're in charge. If you present yourself, then you could get different respect from them. (Ana, NS)

As Ana puts it, this can *'take energy and a different mentality'* and requires *'a business mind set'* to have a successful negotiation in academic settings. To have a successful communication with a faculty member, it is essential that students show themselves "to be worthy potential members of the intellectual community that demands that they demonstrate independence of opinion" (Kress & Fowler, 1979, p. 75).

9. This is your window into the world you're about to enter. You want to impress them. You want them to be happy with your

work. You need to be real with them enough so they will understand what you're going through. They can help guide you. So that's a fine balance between showing them everything and just using them to get somewhere. (Lisa, NS)

However, some English language learners believe that playing 'a worthy potential member of the academic community' may not be necessary and playing a 'subordinate role' can be more preferable.

In terms of the status of a professor, all participants see the advisor to be higher. Some native English speaking students like Lisa may see themselves to be equal to their professors because they may have more knowledge than the advisor in their own specialized areas.

10. But … I've got knowledge in certain areas that they don't. And when they are trying to tell me something in the area that starts bugging me. So I guess I do see us as equal where I have a lot to learn from them and they have something learn from me. (Lisa, NS)

It is not surprising that nonnative English-speaking students in this study do not see themselves as equal to their professors.

11. I always feel like teachers have a higher status … I always feel like I'm inferior and I'm not good enough to tell or talk about something with advisors. (Yi, NNS)

12. I haven't met the professor that does not have greater knowledge than me. All of them have better knowledge … I never felt I'm equal … Knowledge-wise. That might work better for me because I grew up with that system. So I know how to act properly within in the system … if I were

> told 'No, we're equal so you talk to me like this'. I think it's probably difficult because they're older than me and have more knowledge and how can I talk to ... try to talk equal. (Maya, NNS)

It must be noted that demonstrating *'independence of opinion'* and *'a worthy potential member'* can be a must to be successful in an academic discourse community where they wish to seek a membership in the community.

4.4 Downgraders in Institutional Discourse

The use of the appropriate language forms is crucial in institutional talks. In this study, difference among the participants appears in the use of downgraders in academic discourse. When requesting suggestions or making rejections during interaction, students need to avoid directive statements and to use down-tone forms. The choice of on-record requests such as *I prefer to take...*; *I still want to take this next term...*; *I think I'm ready to do...*(Yi, NNS) can seriously jeopardize the relationship with the representative of the institution. More hedged expressions appear to be appropriate in this particular context.

House and Kasper (1981) identify several downgraders: politeness markers (*please*), play-down (*I wondered if..., might*), consultative devices (*Would you mind if...*), hedges, (*somehow, kind of, rather*), understaters (*not very much, a little bit*), downtoners (*simply, just, possibly*), minus-committers (*I believe, I suppose, in my opinion, I think, I guess*), scope-staters (*I'm afraid that..., I'm not happy about the fact that...*), or agent avoiders (passive and impersonal constructions). With regard to the use of a minus-committer, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1990) report that native English speaking students tend to employ a minus-committer, *I don't know*, as a downgrader, while the

nonnative English speaking students use no markers at all.

However, the repetition of the same form, *I don't know,* can be risky in certain situations. This extensive use of the form may serve as an *uncertainty.* As discussed in the student's role in academic discourse, both playing 'a worthy potential member of the academic community' and a 'subordinate role' is crucial. Instead of giving impressions of 'a potential worthy member of the community', this can indicate the student's 'uncertainty' or 'a lack of knowledge'.

13. I would use ... just typical phrases ... I'm not clear about this ... I'm confused about this one ... I don't know this one. Those are pretty typical phrases for me to use. I would say that directly, I don't know. Help me. (Yi, NNS)

14. I would say ... I still don't understand that one. I don't know about ... So could you tell me more about it? I would say "could you ... ?" (Maya, NNS)

Although both Yi and Maya seem to have some knowledge of politeness strategies by using modal, *could*, they tend to avoid using various strategies in negotiating with their faculty members (see example 15). In contrast, native English speaking students in the study attempt to employ various forms as shown in the example 16.

15. I would say "could you ...?" I think that's shorter than "Do you mind if you ...?" I have a hard time ... when I try to use different way of saying It ... in my brain ... the grammar structure is coming in. I usually messed up. So "could you ..." is easiest for me. (Maya, NNS)

16. I would try to re-articulate what they (advisors) say. So if I understand this correctly ... I was wondering if there is ... I

was thinking ... (Liz, NS)

It is very probable that downgraders are appropriate forms in institutional encounters. It should be noted that the use of downgraders can vary in various contexts. Due to this complexity, we as practitioners can not simply expect students to derive norms from extensive exposure, as native speakers may do. Furthermore, we should not overlook the fact that learning appropriate linguistic forms in particular discourse community is essential to acquire sociolinguistic competence (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1996).

5. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The results of the study show that the participants are aware of the prototypical patterns of the discourse but appear to have different perceptions in terms of function of small talks, the role and status, and politeness strategies. Although English language learners are proficient in English, miscommunications can occur. This can happen, as Clyne (1994) points out, at the discourse and pragmatic levels, rather than being caused by linguistic levels. For native English-speaking students, it may not be problematic to learn the rules of institutional talks because they can acquire the rules simply by observing the interactions and can derive the norms from extensive exposure. However, it is not a simple task for nonnative English-speaking students who are new to a particular discourse community to understand the complexities of the international encounters. For practitioners, it is also challenging to devise efficient ways of assisting students to acquire the norms of institutional talks and pragmatic skills needed for successful interactions in particular discourse communities.

Given the importance of the pragmatic competence, we can not overlook them. As a first step, we could ask students (a) to

describe a typical conversation between an expert member and a novice in one particular institutional encounter and (b) to tell what types of things the expert member might say and do and what the novice member usually does. Another efficient way of enhancing students′ understanding of academic discourse is to ask students (a) to decide what elements are typical things or not typical and (b) have them to put the elements in the order in which they would expect to occur. Script elements can be presented in random order on index cards.

In order to develop the pragmatic skills, Holmes (2005) highlights the value of preparation, reflection, and practice. One of activities, as she suggests, can be analyzing institutional interactions using movies or soaps operas. Although observing the actual interactions can be more effective, it is not easy to access to those resources. Using such materials (movies or soaps) as resources, we can assist students to enhance the norms of particular contexts. In terms of small talks, three exercises can be used in various contexts: (a) practicing automatic and brief reponses without delay and with elaboration; (b) practicing extended small talks involved to the role-play of expert members and the would-be ones; and (c) identifying the errors in a subsequent role-play such as the use of an inappropriate topic in small talks or inappropriate reponses (Holmes, 2005).

Institutional discourse provide great challenges for anyone who wishes to join a new discourse community. Unbalanced power relationships in particular discourse communities make things more challenging for novice members of a community. Therefore, English language learners need to be able to understand the complex, dynamic social interaction and to develop pragmatic strategies in order to have successful interactions with expert members of the community in which they are seeking membership.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

(Modified from Ranney, 1992)

I. Task A: Free Elicitation of Scripts

Instruction: Please describe a typical conversation between a professor and a graduate student in an advisor's office: what types of things an advisor usually says and does and what a graduate student usually says and does. For example, a typical conversation between a patient and a doctor's receptionist could be described this way:

1. The patient walks up to the receptionist's desk.
2. The receptionist says hello and asks if she can help the patient.
3. The patient says hello, gives his/her name, and ...
4. The receptionist looks ...
5. The doctor says good-bye.
6. .....

II. Task B: Cued Elicitation of Scripts

Instruction: Please read them and decide if they are typical things that could be said or done in the advisor's office or if they are not typical, and divide them into two piles (typical or not typical). Then, please take your pile of typical parts and put them in the order in which you would expect them to occur. Script elements will be presented in random order on index cards.

1. The student knocks on the door.

2. The advisor keeps the door open.
3. The advisor greets the student.
4. The student greets the advisor.
5. The advisor asks the student how he or she is.
6. The student asks the advisor how he or she is.
7. The advisor begins with small talks such as weather or paintings in the office.
8. The student begins with small talks such as weather or paintings in the office.
9. The advisor asks personal information such as where she or he grew up.
10. The student asks personal information such as where she or he grew up.
11. The advisor invites the student to sit down.
12. The student takes a seat although she or he does not offer to sit down.
13. The advisor initiates the conversation by asking what questions the student has.
14. The student initiates the conversation by asking various questions related to his/her coursework.
15. The advisor looks at the student's file to have an overview of what the student has done.
16. The student shows a handout to overview of what she/her has done.
17. The advisor asks about the student's professional goal or long term plans.
18. The student answers vaguely.
19. The student answers honestly.
20. The advisor looks at the student's file to check if student is on track and to remind her or him of the upcoming deadlines.
21. The student leads the conversation.
22. The advisor leads the conversation.
23. The advisor asks for clarifications whenever needed.
24. The student asks for clarifications whenever needed.
25. The advisor gives some suggestions such as courses.
26. The student requests some suggestions such as courses.
27. The advisor refuses the student's suggestions.

28. The student refuses the advisor's suggestions.
29. The advisor asks the student about things less related to the academic development/progress.
30. The student asks the advisor about things less related to the academia.
31. The advisor thanks the student.
32. The student thanks the advisor.
33. The advisor thanks the student again.
34. The student thanks the advisor again.
35. The advisor wants the student to ask information that the advisor has not given.
36. The student wants the advisor to explain information that the advisor has not given.
37. The advisor says goodbye.
38. The student says goodbye.

III. Task C. Discourse Completion Task

Instruction: Please tell the exact words you expect to use in the following situations:

1. The advisor wants to know what problems the student has come to the office for. The advisor says:
2. The student wants the advisor to explain some information that the advisor has not given. The student says:
3. The advisor wants the student to take courses that she or he does not wish to take. The student says:
4. The advisor gives a quick explanation but the student has difficulty understanding it. The student says:

IV. Task D. Open-Ended Interview

Instruction: I will ask you some general questions and I'd like you to express your opinions freely and raise any other relevant comments.

1. What advice would you give to someone who is new to the institutional discourse?

2. What kinds of topics or behaviors are appropriate (or inappropriate) in academic consultations?
3. What makes for good communication? What makes it poor?
4. Do you have any comments or suggestions with regard to the academic discourse?

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