‘Advice Columns’ Letters as a Teaching Resource:
A Slice of Linguistic,
Pragmatic, Non-Verbal and Cultural Life

Kristofer BAYNE

Abstract

Materials for language learning can lack authenticity and can be one-dimensional in their presentation of language. Letters to advice columns can bring an authentic and flexible element to the foreign or second language classroom. This paper first introduces the advice column. It then describes the importance of linguistics, pragmatics, non-verbal communication and culture for language study. It next outlines how features of advice columns letters correspond to these four important competencies. Finally it details the classroom process using advice columns letters for a holistic approach to language study.

Introduction

In an ideal world, the teaching and learning of any foreign language would take a holistic approach. This would involve trying to deal concurrently with the many, many components that make up language. It would include such things as vocabulary, grammar and syntax as ‘surface’ aspects, the enormous and critical range of non-verbal communication, and also the deeper socio-linguistic aspects such as politeness, register and so on. Basically these are the range of competencies we acquire over time in our native language and culture. Unfortunately, even just considering the spoken language, this is a very difficult task for language learners. Advancements in technology and databases have made the collection and collation of such authentic ‘living’ language far easier and more accessible. Similarly, improvements in approaches to language teaching have seen a move away from grammar-translation methods toward more communicative approaches. Yet, we still
face a huge task in binding non-verbal and cultural issues in a meaningful fashion in a short amount of time.

For the majority of institution-based teachers and learners (as opposed to people who learn second, third or even more languages outside of the classroom, in the ‘school of life’), materials, usually a textbook, are the tools of the trade. It may be for practical and pedagogic purposes that we need to continue breaking ‘language’ up into ‘teachable’ parts through our teaching/learning materials and we hope that the learner can reassemble them for effective communication when necessary. We may never find the über-material that can fit all our language teaching/learning needs. But we can consider candidates.

This paper suggests advice columns as one resource that could be used in the English as a Foreign Language classroom to address four key areas: linguistic, pragmatic, non-verbal and cultural. It will first describe what exactly is an advice column. It will then briefly define the four key areas and their relationship to advice columns. It will then take an example advice column letter and detail the classroom approach that could be taken. It will also be noted that this approach builds on a base laid by Richard Yorkey.

**Background to Advice Columns**

Advice columns publish selected letters from readers, each followed by advice or comments from the columnist. Advice columns can be found in newspaper “lifestyle” sections and in a wide variety of magazines. Their history in these mediums goes back to the eighteenth century. Advice columns became well established in 1950s America. Two of the more famous columnists were twin sisters, Esther and Pauline Friedman, who penned “Ann Landers” and “Dear Abby” respectively. Different advice columns cover a wide range of subject matters and while writing styles may vary, all tend to have the same basic format. Almost universal in western newspapers and magazines, the genre has also spread to the Internet.

Advice columns offer advice to many different audiences and on a variety of subjects. Most are written by someone with expertise in a certain area. Common types of advice columns include those that focus on relationships, sex, etiquette, money, work, health, physical fitness, being a teenager and parenting. While some problems may concern a reader’s personal or internal issues or opinions, overwhelmingly letters deal with a problem, often interpersonal in nature. It may be between family members, intimate friends, work colleagues, neighbours, service industry personnel etc., or it may even be a problem perceived or observed by a third party (the letter’s author). The range of topics is only limited by the number of possible social interactions and issues in everyday life; in other words, it is practically without limit.

Advice columns serve two main functions for their readership. The first
function is practical: for a reader to write in with a question about an embar- 
rassing or difficult predicament, and to have it answered anonymously from a 
trusted source, the columnist. The columnist acts as advisor, either publicly 
in their published response to a letter or in some instances privately through 
personal return correspondence. By extension, readers are likely to have similar 
problems or experiences and can often relate to the advice given in the columns. 
In some cases subsequent letters may refer back to past letters or the advice 
given. The second function is entertainment. Even though the nature of 
advice given is usually well meaning and, hopefully, well considered, people 
often enjoy reading advice columns, whether they can relate to the advice or 
not, simply because they find either the problems or style of advice-giving to 
be amusing and/or interesting, or perhaps even educational.

There are some generic features of advice columns. Though advice columns 
vary widely in content matter and style, they tend to share a few key features. 
The letters sent into advice columns are generally anonymous, with the 
names of all people involved changed or omitted. Sometimes the writer will go 
by a first name and a city of residence, or use a ‘signature’ that summarizes 
the problem, such as “Heartbroken in Delaware.” Catchy titles related to the 
problem in the letter may also be included. The ‘Ann Landers’ column 
(Landers, 1996) was particularly adept at this, for example, “No Payoff for 
Goof Off”, or “Beard Bothers Bride”. Though each letter is about one person’s 
specific problem, those letters chosen usually tend to have a universal nature 
to them so that readers can get the maximum amount of benefit from reading. 
The letters are short, not much longer than 250 words, and are written in a 
descriptive, colloquial style of English. They are liberally coloured with idiomatic 
expressions and common-use vocabulary.

It may be that advice columns are a culture-specific and culturally-influenced 
artefact. Their prevalence in western media may be influenced by the willing-
ness of such societies to ‘disclose’ and share their inner thoughts, often publicly 
and with complete strangers. While advice columns do exist in Japan, they 
are not as common nor do not share the same legitimate standing as their 
western counterparts.

Advice Columns Letters as a Source

For the purposes of this paper, the actual letter seeking advice is of much 
more interest than the actual advice given. In particular, the letters of ‘conflict’ 
deal with slices of real life that are rarely, if ever, dealt with in mainstream 
language studies materials. Moreover, they are authentic examples of what 
could happen, rather than contrived ‘textbook-ese’ gambits. For these two 
factors alone, advice columns and the situations they detail are of great use to 
language learners. Willis and Willis state that:
The aim of language teaching worldwide is to enable learners to use
the language they have learned in school or college to communicate
confidently and effectively with other users of English in the
world outside.

(2007: 3)

They propose that to do this, learners must be involved in learning tasks that
are more meaning-based than form-based. They might argue that the parts of
a language dismantled into grammar systems, for example, do not necessarily
make the whole. A far better approach is one done in a context that has some
intrinsic value for learners.

While textbooks are based on situations and language that may appear in
real life, for the most part they are artificial constructs, filled with contrived
language for fabricated situations and created to teach a certain language
point. Advice column letters are, on the other hand, authentic texts, not written
for educational purposes. They are concerned with what goes on in daily life in
the society where the target study language is spoken. Although they are not
transcripts of conversation, they do give insights into how people might com-
municate (or not communicate as is often the case). They are like a window
into the lives of real people in the target language/culture. They hold intrinsic
interest in that fact alone. But, because they regularly place people in conflict,
they open up an opportunity to discuss and deal with difficult, unpleasant or
stressful situations. That is something that is rarely addressed in textbooks,
but something that, of course, happens regularly in daily life. For example,
language and strategies for breaking difficult news to someone, for asking
someone to desist in some annoying behaviour, being forceful in personal
views, being necessarily insisting, even angrily demanding, and so on. An astute
mature-age student once asked me, in relation to a text we were using,
“Doesn’t anyone ever get angry in English?”. Textbooks tend to present a
sanitized and also mild picture of people communicating. Life is not like that;
it also includes unpleasantness and difficulty. Students know this and advice
column letters attest to this.

**Important Facets of Communication**

The previous section put forward advice column letters as a source for a
holistic study of language because they are authentic and of intrinsic interest,
and they reflect the reality of interaction between people. But these need to be
further qualified in the classroom context of language learning. I will propose
and explain a simple diagram (Diagram One) to further support advice columns
letters as a useful language source.

It is mistaken to consider language only as sets of words organised by
certain rules that human beings use to describe their physical and social

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world. This is, unfortunately, how foreign and sometimes second languages are taught and learned (or attempted to be learned). Some people can be ‘successful’ with this approach, but they might also end up being what Bennett (1997) rather pointedly describes as ‘fluent fools’, or people who may be quite adept at speaking and/or writing a foreign language, who can function well at a certain transactional level (e.g. shopping, ordering, describing etc.), but who do not understand its deeper social and philosophical functions. What he means is that competence in communication must be understood as going beyond words, which are, after all, the final and usually public expression of a thought process. And they are only one form of expression which, to be effective, must be understood by another person. Take, for example, these ten possible responses to this question:

“Will you marry me?”
1. No. 2. I’m sorry, there is someone else. 3. When Hell freezes over. 4. Marry you??! 5. I’m sorry, I...(utterance incomplete) 6. Oh... Um... Er.... 7. (Laughter.) 8. (Eyes looking down, slow shake of the head from side to side.) 9. (Silence.) 10. (Turns and walks away.)

All communicate a negative response but require different competencies to fully understand their impact and meaning. The phrase ‘communicative competence’ was first used by Hymes (1966) and later defined by Canale and Swain (1980) as:
1. grammatical competence: words and rules
2. sociolinguistic competence: appropriateness
3. discourse competence: cohesion and coherence
4. strategic competence: appropriate use of communication strategies

Bachman (1990) suggests ‘pragmatic competence’ as a better descriptor, incorporating sociolinguistic competence. There are many possible ways to describe these competencies, but for my own purposes I will use the terms linguistics, pragmatics, non-verbal communication and culture.

**Linguistics**

Since language is so central to human life and human experience, it requires “a degree of detachment” (Widdowson, 1996: 35) to explain it. This is the role of linguistics. Herein also lies a problem: language is in ways so organic that in trying to devise categories to describe it we will either miss something and/or...
be constantly reviewing and refining categories. Taking a simplified look at what constitutes linguistics we can identify some diverse features (Widdowson, 1996):

- The patterns of sound – phonetics and phonology
- Construction of words – morphology and lexis
- Combination of words – syntax and grammar
- Meaning of words – semantics
- Connection between words – cohesion
- Meaning in context – pragmatics

The further we go down the above list the larger and more potentially vague and open to controversy the categories become. We can all agree that the word ‘drink’ in English is spelled /drɪŋk/ and how to pronounce it, we can also agree that it can be a noun or a verb, we can come up with words that collocate; however, its meaning in context, who says them and when will have different connotations.

We can break this list and other features down into three more convenient linguistic areas: syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Syntax is the relationship between the linguistic forms. Semantics is the relationship between the linguistic forms and things. Pragmatics is the relationship between the linguistic forms and the users of those forms, i.e., people. For this reason I have opted to treat the latter as a separate though overlapping entity in Diagram One.

**Pragmatics**

Although a sub-field of linguistics, pragmatics goes beyond the formal properties of language such as grammar and syntax into a more interpretive analysis of meaning. Yule (2003: 3) describes the study of pragmatics in four ways. It is the study of ‘speaker meaning’. In this sense it is a study not of the words or phrases a speaker uses but the meaning that is conveyed. It is also a study of ‘contextual meaning’, where the questions of who, what, when, where and other conditions come into play. It is also “the investigation of invisible meaning” (ob. cit.) whereby inferences must be made about intended meaning because of what is unsaid or stated indirectly. Finally, Yule suggests pragmatics involves “the expression of relative distance” (ob. cit.). By this he means that ‘distance’ can be physical, status or conceptual, and, because a speaker and listener will share experiences, I will suggest they are largely cultural, choices can be made about what is said.

It should be obvious, then, that pragmatic competence is very challenging and relies very much on experience. Part of the difficulty would also concern how pragmatic meaning is expressed through non-verbal communication.

**Non-verbal Communication**

Non-verbal communication (NVC) is communication without words. True, but really it is not as simple as that. In my earlier example of responses to the question, “Will you marry me?”, most people would say responses 7 to 10 were
non-verbal, and 6 partly so. True again, but in fact all the responses would involve features of non-verbal communication. Chen and Starosta describe NVC as “all intentional and unintentional stimuli between communicating parties, other than the spoken word” (1998: 83). Studies of many cultures have shown that NVC accounts for a significant portion of the actual message transfer in communication (Mehrabian, 1972; Birdwhistell, 1970). Before looking at specific kinds of NVC we will look very quickly at how it differs from verbal communication. It does so in several ways (Chen & Starosta, 1998: 83-84). Firstly, we can quite easily control what we say, choosing our words carefully for different situations. On the other hand, NVC happens almost automatically and, as Chen and Starosta point out, unintentionally. Secondly, NVC is less systematic and multiple non-verbal signals can be transmitted at the same time. A third difference is acquisition. We cannot as easily study NVC as we do verbal language and it is a competence we acquire, to differing degrees, as we grow, through observation and experience. Finally, NVC is usually encapsulates more emotional message than verbal communication.

I will briefly and simply outline four main and widely-recognised categories, including their official terminology and some examples. Kinesics is the study of body movement and activities, including face, eye contact (oculesics), hands, and touch (haptics). Proxemics is communication through the use of space, including how objects are arranged and ‘personal’ space between communicators. Chronemics is communication involving the use and concept of time. Finally, paralanguage refers to the use of voice or vocal signals in communication, and would include features such as voice quality (pace, pitch, etc.), characterizers (laughter, sobbing, yawning etc.), qualifiers (changes in quality such as soft or loud volume, elongation of words etc.), and segregates such as ‘um’, ‘eh’, ‘well’ (functioning not as a word but as a break). There are other NVC features such as olfactics (smells and scents), object communication (style of dress, hair, etc.), and semiotics artefacts, such as brand or status products (Danesi, 1999). Non-verbal communication is an enormous area of study and, to add to its complex nature, “nonverbal expressions, like language, ...are culture bound” (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2006: 14).

**Culture**

‘Culture’ is a controversial term. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) made a list of 154 definitions in 1952. Considering that the still growing discipline of ‘intercultural communication’ was in its infancy, we could expect there to be many many more. For convenience and simplicity I will define it as ‘a learned and shared system of systems that

![Diagram Two: 'The Cultural Iceberg']
guide the thought and behaviour of a group of people’. ‘Systems’ covers a very wide spectrum that comprises, in more general words, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, value and practices. Culture is often likened to an iceberg (Katan, 1999) (Diagram Two) in that only a small part of it is visible or in our conscious knowledge. This is sometimes called ‘Big C’ culture, not for its actual scale but because it can be easily observed. By far the most important and influential part of culture, as in an iceberg, is that which we cannot actually see. In most case it is unconscious, hence ‘small c’. This is the domain of the system examples mentioned above.

It would seem obvious that language is a prime medium to make culture viable. In fact it is not a case of which came first, culture or language. As humans evolved and social groups grew, language and culture simultaneously emerged as ways to mutually construct identity and maintain coherence. Kramsch (1998) describes how language and culture are bound. Firstly, language “expresses cultural reality” (Kramsch, 1998: 3). People use language to communicate their descriptions, ideas, thoughts and concepts, and they are understood because they have experiences in common. Secondly, language “embodies cultural reality” (ob. cit.) when people create new experiences and meaning through the choice of how they communicate. Consider on-line forms of social networking such as Twitter (“Twitter”) and the use of emoticons (“Emoticons”). Finally, language is a system not only of communication but also of social identity and solidarity. As in the above definition, culture is a ‘system of systems’ so in this sense it symbolizes cultural reality.

In this section I have introduced four key elements of language: linguistics, pragmatics, non-verbal communication and culture. In Diagram One I have suggested that the first three overlap and that culture permeates them all. Although all four are explicably and necessarily related to communicative competence, in most cases, they are dealt with as separate disciplines in the curriculum. Given that they are richly detailed and complicated this may be for practical reasons.

Classroom Practice

Let us now examine how, through advice columns letters, we might attempt to introduce these key elements in the classroom. Credit and acknowledgment must be given here to Richard Yorkey, who, over twenty-five years ago, formalized the basic framework for the approach in his now out-of-print text, Reply Requested. To fit both my own contexts, aims and perhaps advances in teaching and learning methodologies since Yorkey’s time, the process to be described below has emphasized some and de-emphasized other activities. Some have been eliminated and new activities and steps added. Original material from Yorkey will be identified.
To start, Letter [1] below (Yorkey, 1981: 121), is a representative example of a letter we might use.

**No Payoff for Goof-off**  
Dear Ann Landers,  
Our 20-year-old dropped out of college in the middle of this year. She says she wants to travel and mature, so that when she returns to college she will be able to appreciate what is being taught. I say, “Baloney”! The girl has an excellent mind, but she has goofed off, stayed up all night, slept all day, missed classes, and failed in almost every subject. Her best friend refuses to room with her next year. Our daughter owes the girl money, and she has also put the touch on her grandmother, her brother, and heaven knows who else. My husband and I are not wealthy. We work long hours. Our home is not fully paid for. We have other children to educate. So long as our daughter stayed in college we felt an obligation to support her. Now that she has fouled up in school, I don’t believe we owe her travel money while she “matures.” My husband feels we should go along with her or we might lose her for good. I believe this is subtle blackmail. He reads your column daily and thinks you’re a smart woman. He needs a reality check.

**The Buck Stops Here**

Two forms of analysis must be considered. One is a direct form that works with the actual information contained in the letter and the other an indirect form that requires speculative and idealized construction of appropriate strategies and dialogue to fit the letter. I will refer to Letter [1] for the remainder of this paper. This section will follow the same order as the previous section; however, this does not necessarily reflect the order of their treatment in the eventual classroom process.

**Linguistic Analysis**

This is the easiest language element to deal with as we literally have the target items in black and white, and it is also the type of analysis that learners are familiar with and probably expect. From any letter we could isolate particular linguistic features to analyse. In Letter [1] we would need to deal with the meanings or even etymology of the lexical items such as vocabulary and idioms:

- ‘payoff’, ‘goof off’, ‘drop out’, ‘foul up’ in both verb and noun forms
- ‘go along with’, ‘put the touch on’
- ‘baloney’, ‘blackmail’
- ‘the buck stops here’, ‘reality check’
We could look at syntactic structures, for instance:

- Generic reporting phrases
  She says·, I say·, I (don’t) believe·
- Comparing two forms of listing and emphasizing reasons:
  Firstly, highlighting ellipsis at work in the sentence [added]:
  “The girl has an excellent mind, but she has goofed off, [she has] stayed
  up all night, [she has] slept all day, [she has] missed classes, and [she
  has] failed in almost every subject.

Secondly, the effectiveness of short, structured sentences in explanations, as in,
  “My husband and I are not wealthy. We work long hours. Our home is
  not fully paid for. We have other children to educate.”

**Pragmatic Analysis**

Yule (1996) isolated four pragmatic concerns, those being speaker meaning,
contextual meaning, how more gets communicated than is said and the ex-
pression of relative distance. In the advice column letters and Letter [1] we
only ever see a report of communication and a one-side account at that. We
can only speculate on what exchanges might have taken place, but with
teacher guidance, strategic elements can be reconstructed and then analysed.
In the conversations between mother and daughter, and the husband and
wife that would have obviously proceeded the writing and publishing of Letter [1],
what pragmatic features would have manifested themselves as each participant
dealt with:

- the issue of wanting money?
- the issue of the daughter’s waywardness at college?
- the conflicting opinions of the parents?

**Non-verbal Analysis**

As with the pragmatic analysis, the non-verbal analysis is indirect and
would follow the preparation of instruction on appropriate and probable strategies
and speculative dialogues. The teacher can draw on personal experience or
understanding of similar situations and cultural norms to replicate certain
non-verbal features. Also, learners can contribute to listing likely features. In
Letter [1] we could expect a contrast between the mother and the daughter.
These may include:

- Eye-contact
- Hand gestures
- Paralinguistic differences

**Cultural Analysis**

Returning to Bennett’s ‘fluent fools’ (1997), he suggests that to avoid
becoming one, or producing them, learners need to be much more aware of the
cultural dimensions of language. To achieve this he suggests a ‘culture-contrast’
approach whereby learners are made aware, firstly, of how their own language
reflects basic values, beliefs and social action in their own cultures, and next
are given opportunities to compare these to the target language. Advice
column letters convey the experiences of native speakers and reflect their
ideas, values, beliefs and actions. Although they may be narrow in scope they
can be used in the way Bennett suggests.

Letters will be themed with an issue and we can use this as a basis for
discussions on culture. In Letter [1] there are several points about life at univer-
sity that we could focus on to better understand western culture. For example:

■ Taking leave during university
■ Travelling to ‘ (or other means) to ‘mature’
■ Appropriate behaviour and expectations at university
■ Parental obligations to support university students
■ Parental obligations to support travel

Since the aim is to raise awareness of the cultural aspects of the letter, I
would suggest that cultural discussions need not be conducted only in English,
and that much can be gained by students first clarifying and sharing their
thoughts in Japanese.

Classroom practice will strike a balance between what we can do based
directly on the letter, these are linguistic and cultural analyses, and what we must
speculate and create during the classroom process, pragmatic and non-verbal
analyses.

Classroom Process

Several steps over two to three weeks (2-3 X 90 min classes) can be taken
according to a framework.

Step One is a scaffolding session, which can be done independently of the
letter. The aim is to draw the learners more personally into the upcoming
topic and also lay a base for later cross-cultural comparisons. The topic of the
letter can be raised for open, small-group discussion via a number of ques-
tions relating to the learners’ own lives and experiences. Given the some-
times confrontational or delicate nature of advice letters it maybe required
that students ‘reveal’ somewhat. Conducting this discussion in small groups
is a much more supportive and sensitive forum. Also, as the learners are
drawing on their personal views, they can do so in English. In the case of
Letter [1] the discussion would be related to university life and the ideas of
travel undertaken at this time, for example:

■ Are you planning a ‘graduation trip’?
■ Did you take one at the end of high school?
■ Who paid?
■ What are your obligations as a student to your parents? To the college?
■ Would you like to live in a dormitory?
■ Would your parents be surprised at your college lifestyle?
Step Two Before delving into any deeper analysis or issue it is important that learners understand what the letter is actually about. Step Two is reading for basic understanding, which can be done outside of class time as homework. To support this endeavour several comprehension questions can be set. They could be quite generic and general, applicable to any letter.
1. Who are the people involved in the letter?
2. What is the ‘problem’? Are there ‘sides’ to the problem?
3. What does each person think of the problem?
4. Who wrote and sent the letter?
Or they may be posed to establish a clear framework for understanding, for example, from Yorkey (1981: 121):
1. Why did the girl drop out of college?
2. Does the mother agree with her daughter?
3. According to her mother, what kind of student was she?
4. Who did the girl borrow money from?
5. Does the mother feel obligated to help her daughter? Why or why not?
6. What does the father want to do?
7. Why does his wife disagree?
Even without understanding all the vocabulary and idioms learners can generally understand the gist of letter, key characters and the general issue. In eliciting answers to these questions the teacher can add follow up questions and comments to further clarify and draw learners into the letter.

Step Three directly deals with unknown lexical items. Learners can be asked to identify unknowns (Appendix One), then as a class these can be addressed. It is virtually impossible to prevent learners from looking up items in their dictionaries as they read, and although electronic dictionaries are a great aid to learners, there is no substitute for a teacher’s input here. In some cases the meanings of items may be very context-specific, there may be multiple or ambiguous meanings, idioms may not be recognised as such, and important items may be glossed over or ignored (Appendix Two). Letters also may yield interesting items for etymological review. In Letter [1], the origins of ‘blackmail’ is of intrinsic value and worth treatment. It also encourages students to take a more careful look at their own language when trying to find equivalents.

Step Four encourages a cultural or cross-cultural view of the issues portrayed and gives the opportunity for the students to express their own opinions or experiences while commenting. Several questions can be generated dealing with cultural aspects and opinions. For Letter [1] the learners may be asked:
- What does she mean by ‘mature’?
- Do you think that travel contributes to a person’s maturity? How?
- Do Japanese students ‘travel to mature’?
- Do they do other things ‘to mature’ while at university?
- Should parents pay for college education? What’s the general opinion/case
in Japan?

- Is the situation in this letter kind of ‘ironic’ considering college life in Japan?
- What do you think of this girl’s behaviour, at college and toward her parents?
- Is it possible to ‘drop out’ and then return to college in Japan?
- Are there any similarities between this situation and Japan?
- What would you do if you were the mother?
- How would you advise the mother?

**Step Five** begins to move away from the letter itself to examine and practice some pragmatic aspects and approaches. An advice column letter chosen carefully will throw up not only a conflict issue or problem but also the characters that have to deal with the situation. Indeed, before an advice column letter gets written, posted and published there is most likely to have been much verbal interaction between the protagonists. One way to consider the letter is from the pragmatic approach – what did or could the characters say (or not say) to one other, and how did they say it? While we cannot know the exact wording or strategies taken, letters do often relate or summarize attitudes and what was said. We can also speculate, and from there were can reconstruct probable conversations, focusing on the pragmatic, non-verbal and the linguistic.

In our sample Letter [1] we have a variety of potential dyads: daughter-mother, daughter-father, wife-husband. Taking the initial conversation in which the daughter announces her desire to “travel and mature” as an example, what lexical, pragmatic or non-verbal features can we imagine? We might imagine the conversation thus:

*Daughter: Ah... Mum? Do you have a minute? (rising tone)*

*Mother: Sure, what’s up?*

*D: Well, it’s about college...*

*M: Yeah, I wanted to talk to you about that, too. Go on... (arms folded across chest)*

*D: Well, I don’t think I am, you know, ready for college. I mean, I want to take some time out... (rapid hand wringing gesture)*

*M: “Time out.” And do what? (steady gaze at D)*

*D: Travel. I want to travel.*

*M: “Travel.” (slow head nod)*

*D: Un-huh. I think it will, you know, mature me... (breaks eye contact)*

*M: “Mature” you. So...*

*D: Right, umm, you know, so when I go back, I can, well, appreciate it better. (shifting weight from foot to foot)*

*M: “Appreciate it better.” I see. (falling tone)*

*D: Yeah, ummm... (downward gaze)*

Of course, this is all speculation and perhaps exaggerated for the sake of example, but just for this conversation we could identify and examine:

- Hesitation strategies used by the daughter (and why)
Repetition strategies ② used by the mother (and why)
Paralinguistic aspects ③ of the above – certain words will be delivered, for example the mother may use extended, drawn out phrases, whereas the daughter’s speech may be rapid and breathless.
Potential non-verbal aspects ④ of the above (kinetic, posture, oculistic etc.) – we could imagine the nervous gesturing of the daughter and the lack of gesturing by the mother, or the direction and duration of gaze by both.
Illocutionary force of the above
This could lead us to develop and practice pragmatic and non-verbal strategies for:
- Understanding or dealing with difficult, embarrassing or potential conflicting situations as the initiator
- Understanding or dealing with difficult, embarrassing or potential conflicting situations as the receiver

This would include not only the linguistic requirements (words, phrases and vocal segregates or interjection utterances, such as, ‘you know’, ‘I mean’, as ‘ah’, ‘um’) but also paralinguistic delivery (pausing, extension of words and utterances, terse or maybe even sarcastic delivery).

**Step Six** moves to have learners actively incorporate the range of linguistic and pragmatic aspect examined. From the letter we can draw on material or arguments to augment a learner role-play. In Letter [1] we know many things to help create content. We know:
- what the daughter wants to do and why
- what she has done (and not done) at college
- the mother’s point of view on her daughter’s lifestyle
- we know the father’s opinion
- we know the mother’s opinion of the financial viability

If the direction the conversation should follow is clear, a simple assignment of roles may suffice (see Appendix Three). If learners are new to the approach or need direction, it can be given and explained in the manner below from Yorkey (1981: 123):

With another student, prepare to role-play the following conversation between the mother and her daughter in the letter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A: Daughter</th>
<th>B: Mother</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Explain why you want to travel. Ask for money.</td>
<td>1. Refuse, giving the reasons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Explain why you did so poorly at school.</td>
<td>2. Reject these statements as “excuses.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Protest that parents never seem to understand/believe/trust their children.</td>
<td>3. Explain why you do not feel obligated to support her travel plans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Express disappointment and say that you will talk to your father “because he understands.”</td>
<td>4. Make an appropriate response.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A further stage can take the learners away from the letter completely to create their own role-play by posing the question, “What other context can you imagine and role-play?” Example might be given such as:

‘You want to find an apartment and live alone/share with your best friend.’

Finally (possible Step Seven) as a graded requirement or culmination of term’s study, students can be required to create their own dialogues based directly or indirectly on a letter situation and more formally (in the sense of what they produce) utilize strategies discussed and lexical items (Appendix Three). Learner pairs can create dialogues to perform, and in writing they should the range of elements discussed in class. After consultation with the teachers, this dialogue is then practiced and performed for classmates after considering appropriate paralinguistic and non-verbal elements. Feedback can be given later by both the teacher and classmates.

**Conclusion**

This paper has proposed letters to advice columns as an appropriate and interesting source through which learners can be made aware of and practice and produce a fuller range of language elements. These elements, of linguistic, pragmatic, non-verbal and overall cultural nature, are rarely addressed through mainstream English language teaching materials such as textbooks. Being authentic both as a genre and in the contexts they relate, advice column letters are of great cultural value and interest to language learners. They are also laden with explicit and implicit language elements that with imagination and care, as evident in Yorkey’s textbook, can be mined by teachers to create a framework of lessons and activities.

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**Acknowledgment**


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**Appendices**

**Appendix One: Notebook sample**

Since there is no textbook, students use an A-4 Notebook and make their own notes based on discussions, explanations, class notes and own examples/effort.
Appendix Two

In Letter [1], there is the sentence, “My husband feels we should go along with her or we might lose her for good.” In my experience with using this letter, learners can fail to appreciate or can confuse the meanings, singularly and combined, of ‘go along with’, ‘lose her’ and ‘for good’. Given the context of travel, some learners mistakenly interpret that the husband’s opinion is that it would be better (‘for good’) if the parents accompany (‘go along with’) their daughter for safety reasons (might ‘lose her’).

Appendix Three: Student dialogue sample

Two examples of student-generated (uncorrected first draft) and later performed dialogues based on “College Plans Go Up In Smoke”, reproduced in Appendix One.

Example One

Mother: Dinner is ready!

Daughter: Coming!

———5 minutes later———

M: What are ...you...doing...?!

D: I’m watching TV.

M: I’m not saying that. How come you’ve smoking?!

You’re only sixteen!

D: You’re old fashioned. I’m sixteen already!
It’s legal to smoke. I’m not breaking any law.
M: But I will not allow you to smoke even if it’s legal already. Smoking does no good and a lot of harm.
D: It’s my life! Don’t meddle in my life.
M: Your life?! Stop taking so big! Just who do you think is feeding you?
D: I really appreciate that. But, that is another question.
M: Yes, it is. But, if you’re not gonna stop, I won’t send you to college.
D: What do you mean by that?
M: I WILL NOT pay your expenses.
D: That’s not fair!! Alright, alright. I’ll stop it. I swear it.

Example Two
Daughter: I’m home!
Mother: How was your day?
D: Nothing special.
M: (sniffing) Hey, can’t you smell?
D: What? What kind of smell?
M: I think… I smelled on your breath.
D: It is your imagination.
M: I am sure you smoked! Why? You gave me your word, didn’t you? Did you forget that?
D: ...
M: I have believed you. I gave you credit for more sense.
D: ...
M: I said, if you smoke again, I wouldn’t send you to college. Now, it is time to hand in your notification of withdrawal from school.
D: Calm down.
M: I am calm.
D: It is not a big deal. Everyone does it. Why are you so angry?
M: It is because smoking harms your brain. Don’t you understand?
D: Of course I understand how smoking works. I think you just want to keep me under your thumb.
M: What?! I am just worrying about your health. I am your mother. It is natural to care about you.
D: If you say so, I think the punishment does not fit the crime.
M: Do you? It was because I thought you would stop it if I said that.
D: Was it just a threat? I thought you are serious.
M: I care about and love you that much.
D: Oh mom… I swear to you I will never smoke again. Cross my heart.

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