Promoting Pragmatic Competence: Focus on Refusals

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Being able to communicate successfully in a second language (L2) depends on not only having the knowledge of grammar but also on the ability to select context-appropriate language. Thus, pragmatics can prove to be one of the most difficult aspects of language to acquire, even for advanced L2 speakers, and it plays a crucial role in L2 teaching. Considerable amount of attention has been devoted to teaching pragmatic skills in second and foreign language classrooms in recent years (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). This paper represents a step towards strengthening the link between research on interlanguage pragmatics and L2 classroom practices. Focusing specifically on the speech act of refusal, we illustrate the potential areas of difficulty for second language learners. After a review of current literature on teaching refusals, a qualitative analysis of selected examples of refusals produced by Korean and Norwegian English as a second language (ESL) learners is presented. Specific pedagogical approaches and strategies for teaching L2 refusals are offered, including implications for curriculum development.

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Most second language learners (L2), once they find themselves in the target language environment, experience the anxiety associated with the need to communicate with other native and nonnative speakers. They may feel that they possess insufficient grammar and lexical means to fully participate in interactions, and that they do not have native-like intuitions about what is appropriate, polite, and acceptable in the target culture. This is where pragmatics, the knowledge of "when to speak, when not, . . . what to talk about with whom, when, where, [and] in what manner" (Hymes, 1972, p. 60), plays a role in the ability to communicate successfully in a second language.

Speech acts have been extensively studied to understand how people of various linguistic and cultural backgrounds use language in context. Studies have demonstrated that how speech acts are performed may vary across languages and cultures (Beckers, 1999; Chen, 1996; Kinjo, 1987; Stevens, 1993). Nonnative speakers of a language might respond to utterances in the target language the same way they would in their first language (L1), which might result in more serious communication breakdowns than those resulting from grammatical errors (Linde, 2009).

Teaching pragmatics, therefore, has received attention in L2 research; however, teaching practices are not always grounded in current research findings (Cohen, 2012). This paper focuses on the speech act of refusing, a face-threatening act that involves a complex sequence of semantic formulas, and it aims to strengthen the link between research and L2 teaching practices.

Literature Review

Pragmatic Knowledge

The ability to perform speech acts requires various types of language knowledge. In Canale and Swain's (1980) model of communicative competence, performance of speech acts belongs to sociolinguistic competence. According to Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei and Thurrell (1995), pragmatic knowledge belongs to sociocultural competence, which allows language users to consider the social and cultural context of utterances, and to actional competence, which is responsible for comprehending and expressing communicative intent. Bachman and Palmer (1996; 2010) propose that the knowledge of speech acts is situated within language use, the component of language competence which allows us to create and interpret meanings in context.

Refusal Strategies

Performance of refusals can vary greatly depending on sociolinguistic factors such as the context and the status of those involved in the interaction, and it requires appropriate strategies to minimize the negative effect on the interlocutor. Refusals can involve a long sequence of interactional exchanges. At the same time, the linguistic means used to perform them can vary depending on whether one is refusing an invitation, an offer, or a request (Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Salazar, Safont & Codina, 2009). Refusal strategies can be classified into direct strategies, indirect strategies and adjuncts to refusals. Direct strategies include a blunt *no* and negation (e.g., "I can't" or "I don't think so"). Indirect strategies include suggesting other options, explanations, and avoidance. Adjuncts to refusals are external modifications of the speech act. They include expressions of gratitude, consent, empathy, or a positive opinion about the proposal before turning it down.

Cross-cultural studies suggest that the basic types of refusal strategies are universal, yet the specific content and frequency of the strategies vary across cultures. In some cultures, such as Chinese and German, speakers tend to use indirect refusals (Beckers, 1999; Chen, 1996), whereas direct strategies are preferred in cultures such as Polish (Rakowicz, 2009). Speakers of English tend to employ softeners such as "I'm afraid . . ." frequently, while Egyptian speakers of Arabic do not (Stevens, 1993).

Unlike other speech acts such as requests, complaints, and apologies, refusals have received little attention in research on interlanguage pragmatics. Studies to date have found that nonnative speakers use different semantic content in the head act than native speakers (Chang, 2009), employ direct and indirect strategies in nonnative-like ways (Jung & Kim, 2008), and may experience difficulties selecting appropriate linguistic means for high-stakes refusals in situations in which the social distance between the interlocutors is high (Taguchi, 2007). Several studies (Beebe et al., 1990; Kwon, 2004) have also documented occurrences of pragmatic transfer in L2 speakers' refusals in English.

Refusals in English, Korean and Norwegian

In English, direct refusal formulas are preferred, but these are often assisted by reasons and expressions of gratitude or a positive opinion (Kwon, 2004). Native speakers of English also tend to use softeners such as "I'm afraid . . ." or "I don't know if . . ." (Stevens, 1993). When uttering refusals in response to invitations, they often express gratitude (Nelson, Al-Batal & Echols, 1998), and overall they tend to provide specific reasons for refusals (Beebe et al., 1990).

Very few studies to date have examined refusals in Korean. Kwon (2004) found that Koreans prefer direct refusal strategies, as well as providing reasons and using alternative statements. They also use extensive mitigation (i.e., linguistic devices that allow one to soften the impact of a face-threatening speech act) such as providing reasons and apologies before uttering a refusal. As Kwon (2004) notes, these pragmatic features of Korean refusals "may cause pragmatic failure when Korean learners of English rely on their native culture-specific refusal strategies" (p. 339).

To our knowledge, no studies of refusals in Norwegian, or another closely related Scandinavian language such as Swedish or Danish, have been conducted to date. As a result, our discussion here focuses on the more general characteristics and politeness norms in Norwegian. Very generally speaking, in the Norwegian culture, which is characterized by egalitarian individualism, there is a strong focus on equality between the interlocutors (Awedyk, 2003; Dittrich, Johansen & Kulinskaya, 2011). In addition, a strong emphasis on objectivity and correctness is a prominent feature of the Norwegian culture (Horbowicz, 2010), as are peace and quiet (Gullestad, 1989) and focus on harmony and avoidance of conflict (Elster, 2006). As a result, Norwegians tend to employ conversational strategies that allow them to minimize the possible imposition on the interlocutor (Rygg, 2012).

Data Collection and Participants

To illustrate the potential challenge areas in production of refusals for Korean and Norwegian learners of English, we have selected samples from data collected in a large

intercultural pragmatics project. The project, currently under way, aims to compare refusals produced by Korean, Norwegian, and Turkish learners of English.

The data in this project have been collected using a written, anonymous, online discourse completion task (DCT), a commonly used data collection method to elicit a particular speech act developed by Blum-Kulka (1982). In DCTs, participants are first given a written scenario that includes information regarding the setting and social statuses and then asked to produce a certain speech act—*refusals* in this study—by completing a dialogue, writing an email or a text. The task in this study consisted of two scenarios regarding refusals: one that elicited refusals to an invitation from a friend, and another in which the respondents were asked to refuse a request by a professor (see Appendix). Participants were given a brief description of the situations and asked to respond following their intuitions.

To date, 41 Korean and 30 Norwegian respondents have participated in the study. The Korean participants were freshman year students at a U.S. university in South Korea and scored at least 80 on TOEFL IBT as part of the requirements for admission into the university. The Norwegian participants were freshmen students enrolled in an English-medium teacher training course at a Norwegian University. Participation in the survey was voluntary, but the students were offered an extra credit in their writing or grammar course for completing the survey.

Data were analyzed using the framework proposed by Salazar et al. (2009). In each response, the head refusal was identified and classified as either direct or indirect. In addition, adjunct strategies were labeled using the categories such as options, explanations, advice and criticism. Below, we illustrate three potential areas of difficulty for the two groups of study participants, namely inappropriate choice of main refusal strategies, overuse of adjunct strategies, and underuse of adjunct strategies.

Results

Choice of Main Refusal Strategies

One of the main areas of difficulty we identified in our data pertains to the use of main refusal strategies. In English, direct refusal strategies are preferred. In contrast, our data contain several examples of indirect refusals, including plain indirect strategies, reasons and explanations, and statements of regret and apology. Direct strategies have been identified as well, but were in some cases blunt and not accompanied by any external modifications. Table 1 below illustrates these issues.

Table 1: Head Acts

Example	Strategy type	Participant's background
I would love to attend to your party, but I am really sorry that I will not be able to make it.	Plain indirect	Korean
I'm so sorry, but I'm going to Paris on Wednesday.	Plain indirect	Norwegian
I'm sorry that I cannot participate in your party due to my appointment in that day.	Indirect + reason	Korean
But I really don't feel confident talking up in front of so many students. Sorry!	Indirect + apology	Korean
No.	Direct (blunt)	Norwegian

Overuse and Misuse of Adjunct Strategies

Some of the responses in our data displayed an elaborate use of adjunct strategies. While it has to be noted that it is not unusual for native speakers to provide many reasons, especially when refusing a friend, some of the reasons found in our data could be interpreted as inappropriate, or exceedingly informal or elaborate (see Table 2). While in English, expressions of gratitude and reasons are commonly used as adjunct strategies, the nonnative speakers in our study employed strategies such as advice, criticism and elaborate reasons with potentially excessive amount of detail, in particular if there is a status difference between the interlocutors. The majority of such elaborate responses were found in the data obtained from the Korean participants.

Table 2: Overuse and Misuse of Adjunct Strategies

Example	Strategy type	Participant's background
I think the best way I can help them is to meet them in person and give them advice face-to-face.	Advice	Korean
I have a part time job from 6 to 10. My boss might be angry if I don't show up. I already missed two times of work, and I might lose my job if I miss this time again.	Excessive detail	Korean
I am afraid I don't consider the suggestion is the best way to help those students.	Criticism	Korean
[T]hank you for giving me the oppurtunity to come to your class. I hope you proseed your good work as a teacher, and i'm sure your students will be less anxious as time goes by!	Gratitude + advice	Norwegian

Underuse of Adjunct Strategies

Unlike the examples above, which contained extensive external modifications of refusals, some responses were very brief, consisting only of the head act, or the head act with minimal external modifications. The head acts were performed using direct strategies, which are preferred in English, or indirect strategies, e.g., regret, and the adjunct strategies consisted of no more than one sentence (see Table 3). Such refusals may be perceived as insufficiently justified. We want to note that these extremely brief refusals were only found in the responses provided by Norwegian participants.

Table 3: Underuse of Adjunct Strategies

Example	Strategy type	Participant's background
I'm sorry but I will not be able to make it!	Direct	Norwegian
Thanks for the invite to your party, but I can't come. Enjoy!	Direct	Norwegian
Thank you, but next week I'm already overloaded with things to do. My final exam is just around the corner so I have to study. Sorry I couldn't help, good luck to your students.	Indirect + reason + apology	Norwegian
I´m sorry, but I have to say no.	Apology + direct	Norwegian

Discussion

Teaching pragmatics

The excerpts above illustrate various challenges L2 learners may face when participating in interactions in English that call for employment of refusals. As pragmatic norms in any language display a great degree of variation, and pragmatic competence in an L2 takes a substantial amount of time to develop, "[w]ithout instruction, differences in pragmatics show up in the English of learners regardless of their first language background or language proficiency" (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003, p. 38). Thus, the importance of explicit teaching of pragmatics to second and foreign language learners has been underscored in literature (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). In fact, it has been argued that pragmatics need to be taught from beginning levels of language instruction (Félix-Brasdefer & Cohen, 2012).

Various inductive and deductive strategies for teaching pragmatics have been proposed. According to Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003), the use of authentic materials and providing learners with input before they are asked to analyze target language pragmatic norms and produce output are two important criteria for successful instruction of pragmatics. Rose (2012) suggests that pragmatics instruction should be integrated with grammar teaching, while Cohen and Sykes (2013) outline an approach that aims at helping learners develop strategies for learning pragmatics so that they can "deal with both common patterns and variety [in target language pragmatic behavior] simultaneously through observation, explicit inquiry, and experimentation" (p. 94).

It is important that focus on pragmatics should guide not only individual lessons, but whole language syllabi. Ishihara (2010) stresses the importance of integrating pragmatics into general curricula and suggests that it could potentially be taught along a range of topics. Félix-Brasdefer & Cohen (2012) point out that pragmatics-focused instruction can easily be integrated into structural syllabi, arguing that such an approach provides language learners with useful communicative resources. In the similar venue, Krulatz (2014) postulates that pragmatics should be a central component of content-based language teaching (CBLT) because students may be more motivated to raise their pragmatic awareness when the main focus of class is communication about meaningful content (p. 24).

Teaching Refusals

Some specific suggestions on teaching refusals can be found in the existing literature. Fernández-Guerra (2013) suggests using snippets from TV series as they provide students with input that exemplifies how native speakers perform this speech act in relation to sociopragmatic factors (e.g., social status, politeness, setting). He acknowledges that the conversations in TV series are previously written scripts resulting in input that might be criticized as non-authentic. Nevertheless, he argues that TV series are "made by native speakers, for native speakers to hear, and so consists of authentic language" (Baddock, 1996, p. 20, as cited in Fernández-Guerra, 2013).

Martínez-Flor and Beltrán-Palanques (2013), and Usó-Juan (2013) also recognize the potential of audiovisuals in pragmatics teaching, and in their instructional approaches to teaching refusals, they aim to address three factors that are crucial for pragmatics learning: exposure to input, opportunities for producing output, and feedback. The first phase of Martínez-Flor and Beltrán-Palanques's (2013) four-phase inductive–deductive approach to teaching refusals focuses on raising students' pragmalinguistics awareness. During this phase, refusal strategies employed in selected scenes from movies are compared to the ones used by the students and explained using Salazar et al.'s (2009) taxonomy. The second phase aims to increase awareness on sociopragmatic factors such as social distance, power, degree of imposition, gender, and age, and to explain how these factors might affect the realization of refusals. The third phase provides students with opportunities in which they can perform refusals using the knowledge they gained in the first two phases, and during the final phase teachers give feedback to students on their performance of the speech act of refusing.

Drawing conclusions from our findings, we would like to suggest that students of various linguistic backgrounds may benefit from individualized instruction geared to their specific language needs. Our data indicate that Korean and Norwegian students face different areas of difficulty, a fact that language teachers should take into consideration when planning instruction. Thus, it may be useful to conduct awareness-raising activities in which students reflect on their own pragmatic performance and compare it to native-speaker models.

Conclusion

Performing refusals in a second or foreign language is challenging because pragmatic norms vary among languages and cultures. As the excerpts obtained from the Korean and Norwegian participants in our study illustrate, difficulties may arise concerning not only the selection of appropriate head act and adjunct strategies, but also the linguistic means to perform them. While Korean students may employ an excessive amount of strategies and thus come across as overly polite and subservient, Norwegian users of English, who either employ very few request modifications or select informal language forms, can be perceived as too direct and therefore overly familiar or even rude.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the findings presented in this paper are preliminary as the data collection process has not yet been finalized. In addition, despite several examples of problems with L2 refusals, our data also contain a wide range of refusals which could be deemed perfectly appropriate.

Notwithstanding its limitations, this paper has important implications for L2 pedagogy. Performing speech acts in a foreign language can pose a challenge for language learners, and language teachers can support the development of language learners' pragmatic competence. Research suggests that employment of explicit teaching methods, and, in particular, using inductive approaches in which students discover the pragmatic rules, can be very efficient. We would also like to underscore that it may be beneficial for learners to consider their linguistic and cultural backgrounds and to be guided through the discovery process of the differences in the L1 and L2 pragmatic norms. In doing so, teachers could strengthen the link between the findings from research and the pedagogical practices in the foreign and second language classroom.

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Appendix

DCT scenarios

Subject: Birthday party invitation

Hi,

It's my birthday next week, and I am having a party to celebrate it. It's going to be next Friday at 7 pm at my house at my house. RSVP by Tuesday to let me know if you can make it. I would love to see you there!

Thomas

Subject: Invitation to give a short presentation

Hi,

This is Professor Johnson—you took my English class last semester. I am emailing you because you wrote an outstanding term paper, and I was wondering if you would be willing to come to my class next week to talk about it. My new students are quite anxious about the paper, and I think it would be nice for them to talk to someone who has already gone through the process. It would not have to be long, perhaps 10–15 minutes. Please let me know if that is something you could do.

Thank you in advance,

Prof. Johnson