



Language Proficiency and Appropriateness of Using Refusal Speech Acts by Iranian EFL Learners

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Article citation: Tabatabaei, S. (2019). language proficiency and appropriateness of using refusal speech acts by Iranian EFL learners, *Applied Linguistics Research Journal*, 4(1): 35–45.

Received Date: August 7, 2019

Accepted Date: September 18, 2019

Online Date: January 5, 2020

Publisher: Kare Publishing

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E-ISSN: 2651-2629

ABSTRACT

The present study was an attempt to investigate the effect of language proficiency on production of the refusal speech act among Iranian EFL learners. Using the Preliminary English Test, the participants were divided into high and low groups based on their proficiency scores. To examine their pragmatics competence, data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire in the form of Discourse Completion Task (DCT) consisting of 12 refusal situations. Their responses were scored by two English native teachers based on Hudson, Detmer, and Browns' (1995) analytical rating criteria considering four aspects of appropriacy, i.e. the ability to use correct speech act, correct expressions, amount of information, and level of politeness. The findings of the statistical analysis showed language proficiency was not the influential factor in the degree of pragmatic knowledge which indicated that high EFL learners did not perform significantly better than their low counterparts in pragmatic production. These findings underscore that teaching pragmatics and cultural behaviors of the target language in language classrooms might build up pragmatic competence of language learners.

Keywords: Language proficiency; Pragmatic production; Refusal speech act; Rating criteria; Iranian EFL learners.

1. Introduction

To communicate accurately and appropriately and be competent in a language, language learners need both linguistic and pragmatic knowledge whereas language teachers in ESL and EFL settings mostly focus on linguistic knowledge and ignore the paramount importance of pragmatic knowledge. On this account, lots of miscommunications occur between native speakers and L2 learners despite the exchange of perfect grammatical utterances (Al-Momani, 2009). Language learners should use appropriate language in the appropriate situation and they must choose appropriate language according to social status and the level of familiarity with the interlocutors. For example, the way one talks to a classmate is totally different with that of professor and he must choose different languages, i.e. vocabularies and grammar, according to the interlocutor.

Tanck (2002) also argues that “fluent” speakers in a foreign language, even with good command of vocabulary and grammatical rules of that language, may still lack pragmatic

knowledge, and as a result they may produce language that is socially and culturally inappropriate. According to Eslami-Rasekh (2004), the development of pragmatic and sociolinguistic rules of language use is necessary for language learners. They have to understand and produce appropriate language according to the specific situation in which they are functioning, because failure to do so may cause communication breakdown and miscommunication.

Some language learners are able to produce grammatically correct sentences that are not appropriate in a given situation. For example:

- A) Could you do me a favor?
- B) Yes, I could. (Instead of: "Sure, I'd be glad to")

This example shows that this student has a good grammatical knowledge but lacks pragmatic knowledge and does not know how to communicate appropriately in this situation. In other words, knowing words and grammatical points without considering its socio-pragmatic context may cause pragmatic failure that hinder successful communication. In a study done by Thomas (1983), he concludes that pragmatic failure is much more risky than linguistic failure. He claims that ungrammatical sentences, unacceptable intonation and wrong pronunciation may impede the flow of communication but by doing such mistakes, a speaker is considered as less language proficient; whereas, if the speaker makes pragmatic mistakes, he will be considered as rude or impolite and it leads to communication breakdown and destroys personal relationship, which hardly occurs in the case of linguistic failure.

1. Literature Review

Interlanguage Pragmatics

Koike (1989) defines pragmatic competence as "the speaker's knowledge and use of rules of appropriateness and politeness which dictate the way the speaker will understand and formulate speech acts" (p. 279). Hassal (2007) claims the procedures of the development of pragmatic competence both for native and non-native speakers are not very clear. Politzer (1988) states that triggering pragmatic competence, unlike grammatical competence, does not occur automatically and to communicate pragmatically in a competent manner, there is a need for instruction of pragmatics to non-native language learners from the beginning stages of learning the target language. In order to make learners pragmatically competent, it is necessary for them to be familiar with socio-cultural rules of target language because miscommunication and problems occur particularly when nonnative speakers speak to native speakers. They make mistakes in conversational norms involved in communication, these norms can be very important for native speakers so the mistakes of nonnative speakers may not be acceptable to native speakers and can also lead to breakdown in communication.

The contribution of pragmatics in second language learning has brought about the concept of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), the study of how nonnative speakers comprehend, develop and produce speech acts (Kasper, 1997). ILP has become the focus of attention in second and foreign language teaching and learning. Bardovi-Harlig (2002) notes that ILP "is not a new area, just an underdeveloped one", and claims that its main aim is the development of pragmatic knowledge (p.185). Eslami-Rasekh (2005) claims that individuals seem to have inclination towards creating their own pragmatic rules while learning a new language which has been referred to interlanguage pragmatics. As Kasper (1997) points out, interlanguage pragmatics of language learners does not develop along with their grammatical competence and the native speakers' pragmatics knowledge is different from the one of the language learners. In this respect, the present study aims to investigate the interlanguage pragmatics of refusal speech act by Iranian EFL learners.

Refusal speech act

Refusals are usually produced as a response to four kinds of initiating acts, i.e. suggestion, offer, request and invitation rather than being uttered as an initiating turn on the part of the speaker (Gass & Houck, 1999). Refusal is characterized as an act by which a speaker turns down to engage in

an action proposed by the interlocutor (Chen, Ye, & Zhang, 1995). Moreover, it is a face-threatening act because that it is against the interlocutor's expectation. On this account, it requires a high level of pragmatic knowledge. However, in most of the cases it is performed through the employment of indirect strategies.

Factors affecting L2 pragmatic competence

According to Bardovi-Harlig (1998), the following factors have a direct influence on the acquisition of pragmatic competence: Input, instruction, level of proficiency and length of stay in the L2 culture, and the L1 culture. Inadequacy of academic materials such as textbooks or even the teacher may be considered as a lack of appropriate input. In most instructional textbooks, speech acts are not the focus of learning; consequently, teaching pragmatics through these textbooks is not efficient. Therefore designing textbooks with greater focus on speech acts can be an important factor in developing pragmatic knowledge of language learners. Another factor is related to the type of input given by the teacher. For instance, the teacher may consider it appropriate to use a particular register when speaking to the learner which may however be inappropriate when the learner uses the same register when speaking to the teacher. In other words, the teacher may address the students in an informal register and use imperatives but may expect to be addressed by students in a formal register. This choice, then, depends on what the instructor considers appropriate according to his/her understanding of the cultural norms of the target language (Bardovi-Harlig, 1998).

Another factor influencing the learners' pragmatic competence is the effect of instruction that may be influenced by the teacher's emphasis on similarities and differences between the L1 and L2. The amount of exposure to the L2 context may have an effect on the learner's pragmatic awareness.

The learners' level of proficiency also has an effect on their pragmatic knowledge. Although only a limited number of researches have been conducted on the relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic knowledge of learners, studies have shown that advanced learners are more competent in performing a speech act in a specific situation. Koike (1996) investigated the pragmatic knowledge of Hungarian EFL and ESL learners and found that in both groups advanced learners were significantly more competent in pragmatic knowledge than intermediate learners.

Bardovi-Harlig (1998) also points out that the duration of stay in the second language context has an effect on the pragmatic knowledge of language learners and that the longer the learners live and interact with native speakers in a second language context, the more pragmatic knowledge they will acquire. In 1967, Carroll conducted a study on ESL students and found that length of stay was one of the main influential factors affecting learners' overall language proficiency. For a long time, this study was referred to support the positive effect of duration in study abroad regarding the amount of linguistic and pragmatic gain they receive and in general the greater proficiency in L2.

Another factor influencing pragmatic competence is the first language and culture. In other words, the more similar the culture of L1 and L2, the more pragmatically competent the language learners will be. When language learners involve in learning the second or foreign language, positive or negative transfer may happen. A positive transfer occurs when there is similarity between the L1 and L2 and the learner communicates successfully in the target language. In this situation, L1 facilitates the learning of L2. On the other hand, a negative transfer occurs when the learner incorrectly uses a speech act based on his/her comparison of L1 and L2 and in this situation, L1 interferes with the learning of L2 (Bardovi-Harlig, 1998).

Selected studies on refusal speech act

Jie (2005) investigated the performance of Chinese university EFL learners in production and comprehension of refusal and request speech acts. To this end, 66 university students at two levels of language proficiency (high and low) participated in the study. Data were collected through a DCT, MDCT and retrospective interview, and the results of the study showed that language proficiency had little effect on the performance of the two groups and there was no significant

difference between the two groups in their overall use of politeness strategies in both DCT and MDCT. Moreover, the findings indicated that contextual variables did not affect the strategy choice by the two groups.

In 2012, Abarghoui scrutinized the differences between Iranian EFL learners and the Australian native speakers in refusal to request. A DCT was used to elicit the data from the participants. The results showed that Iranian EFL learners are likely to utilize limited and different strategies for refusing their interlocutors' requests than their native counterparts. Furthermore, the researcher found that the interlocutors' social status, social distance and gender have a great effect on the choice of refusal strategies used by Iranian and Australian native speakers.

Aliakbari and Changizi (2012) examined the use of refusal by Persian and Kurdish speakers, the frequency and shift of semantic formulas according to different types of eliciting acts and status of the interlocutor. Data were gathered through DCT and the results showed that "regret", "excuse and reason", "direct refusal", "postponement" and "wish" were the most frequently used strategies. Moreover, they found that Kurdish speakers, in comparison with Persian speakers, used more variety of strategies and higher level of frequency shift in their use of several semantic formulas according to social status of the interlocutor.

In another study by Hashemian (2012), cross-cultural differences in realization of refusal to requests between Persian native speakers (PNS) and English native speakers (ENS) in terms of frequency of semantic formulas were considered and he also examined the evidence of pragmatic transfer of L1 refusal strategies into L2 and the relationship between language proficiency and transfer of refusal strategies. The data were collected by using DCT and classified into semantic formulas, i.e. direct, indirect, and adjuncts to refusals. Results indicated that there was no significant difference in the use of direct refusal strategies between the PNSs and the ENSs. The PNSs used more indirect strategies than ENSs whereas, the ENSs used noticeably more Adjuncts to Refusals than PNSs. Findings also showed the evidence of pragmatic transfer in the use of Indirect and Adjuncts to Refusals by both the high and low proficiency learners. However, the occurrence of transfer in low proficiency group in refusal strategies was greater than high proficiency group.

Shishavan and Sharifinia (2016) investigated the refusal strategies of Iranian EFL learners and Anglo-Australian students to highlight the areas of cross-cultural miscommunication. Data were collected through a DCT and interviews. Findings of the study showed that both groups of participants used more indirect strategies when refusing to higher social status. However, while making refusal to equal status, the performance of the Iranian and Australian participants differed from each other to a degree that could lead to intercultural miscommunication. The results of interview showed that cultural norms of *tā'ārof* (ritual politeness) and *ru-dar-bāyesti* (state/feeling of distance-out-of-respect) greatly influenced the refusal of the Iranian students.

Although a relatively large number of studies have been conducted on different types of speech acts, little research has been done to investigate the appropriateness of refusal production among Iranian EFL learners. To bridge this gap, this study aims to investigate the effect of language proficiency on the appropriateness of refusal production among Iranian EFL learners.

In Iran, English is considered as a foreign language and an obligatory subject for approximately six years before entering into university. Most of the teachers in Iranian schools and universities and other EFL contexts still adhere to the traditional instruction with focus on language forms (teaching vocabulary and grammatical points) that denotes teaching linguistic forms in isolation. The problem with this type of approach is that students with some years of studying English behind them fail to communicate fluently in L2.

The Iranian EFL learners in this study had different proficiency levels (high and low). Therefore, this cross-sectional study comparing pragmatic production of Iranian EFL learners with different proficiency level might help to investigate the relationship between grammatical competence and pragmatic competence. Through comparing these two groups, this study aimed to find out whether there was any significant difference between them in appropriateness of the refusal production.

Research Question: Is there any significant difference between high and low EFL learners in

the production of refusal strategies?

Null hypothesis: There is no significant difference between high and low EFL learners in the production of refusal strategies.

3.Method

3.1.Participants

Participants of this study consisted of 95 Iranian learners studying in India and they were given a proficiency test of OPT. They included 26 MA and 34 PhD students with different majors such as Linguistics, Law, Commerce, Physics, Computer Sciences and Psychology. Based on their scores on proficiency test, 30 were selected as high proficiency group and 30 as low proficiency group. In other words, those who scored one standard deviation above the mean were regarded as the high group, those scored one standard deviation below the mean as the low group and those whose scores fell between were not considered in the study.

Two British English teachers participated in this study as the evaluators of learners' responses in the DCT and scored learners' production according to Hudson et al.'s (1995) analytical rating scale in terms of four aspects of appropriacy, i.e. correct speech act, correct expression, amount of information and level of politeness. They were given an explanation of the guidelines and purpose of the research by the researcher.

3.2. Materials

The instruments used in this study included the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) and a Discourse Completion Test (DCT). The DCT for refusal speech act was adopted from a study by Lingli and Wannaruk (2010) involving L2 situations and four types of initiating acts, i.e., refusal to invitations, suggestions, offers and requests differing in the social power between the interlocutors (see Appendix).

3.3.Procedures

Two British native teachers scored respondents' performances on the DCT according to Hudson et al.'s (1995) rating scale by using analytic five-point Likert scales (one=not appropriate to five=completely appropriate). In other words, the participants' refusal responses were compared with regard to four aspects of appropriateness, i.e. *the ability to use correct speech act, correct expression, the amount of information and level of politeness* for all twelve situations separately. The total score of refusal test for each criterion was 60 as there were twelve refusal situations and the maximum score for each component (criterion) in each situation was five (Table 1).

Table 1. Scoring Scale (Hudson et.al, 1995)

Situation 1	Learner's score				
Correct speech act	1	2	3	4	5
Correct expression	1	2	3	4	5
Amount of information	1	2	3	4	5
Level of politeness	1	2	3	4	5
Overall performance	1	2	3	4	5

4.Results

Appropriacy level of learners' performance on the DCT

This part shows the results of data analysis related to the research question. The analysis of the data was carried out through statistical procedures of *t-test*.

To answer the research question regarding the difference between high and low EFL learners in production of the refusal speech act, the learners' performance on the DCT was compared in

two groups. To this end, two English native teachers evaluated the appropriateness of learners' production in refusal speech act on the DCT according to four rating criteria. Table 2 shows the results of descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and standard error of mean) for high and low groups in these four components of appropriateness for refusal strategies.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of appropriacy level of L2 refusal

Rating criteria	Group	Mean	SD	SEM
Correct speech act	High	31.76	10.25	1.87
	Low	29.80	10.20	1.70
Correct expression	High	34.13	8.23	1.50
	Low	33.13	8.95	1.63
Amount of information	High	36.46	7.11	1.29
	Low	30.53	6.52	1.19
Level of politeness	High	31.20	10.51	1.91
	Low	29.10	10.00	1.09
Overall performance	High	33.53	8.70	1.58
	Low	32.06	8.36	1.02

The findings of the table showed that in all four kinds of rating criteria, the mean score of the high group exceeded the mean score of the low group. To see whether the difference in the mean of high and low group was statistically significant, the *t-test* was performed.

Table 3. *t-test* between high and low EFL learners on appropriacy level

Rating criteria	T	df	Sig.	Mean difference
Correct speech act	1.30	58	.09	1.96
Correct expression	0.54	58	.45	1.00
Amount of information	3.36	58	.00*	5.93
Level of politeness	1.80	58	.06	2.10
Overall performance	0.85	58	.36	1.47

Note: asterisk * shows significance at $p \leq .05$

The following examples are a sample of native speakers' rating in assessing the learners' performance on refusal speech act with regard to these four criteria.

-Answer to Q1: Thank you so much sir. I'd love to come but I'm afraid I won't be able to make it. I have some guests today. I'm really sorry.

(Correct speech act=5, correct expression=5, amount of information=5, level of politeness=5)

-Answer to Q5: I will go to the doctor next week.

(correct speech act=1, correct expression=1, amount of information=1, level of politeness=1)

-Answer to Q10: I'm very busy in this week, therefore don't count on my help professor.

(correct speech act=2, correct expression=3, amount of information=1, level of

politeness=1)

-Answer to Q11: *I can't. I need it.*

(correct speech act=3, correct expression=1, amount of information=1, level of politeness=1)

The results of t-test showed that there was no significant difference between these two groups in *the ability to use correct speech act, correct expression, and level of politeness* ($p > .05$). This shows that high EFL learners did not use *correct speech act, correct expression and level of politeness* better than low EFL learners. In other words, as the results of Table 2 shows the mean score of the high group in *correct speech act, correct expression, and level of politeness* was more than that of the low group but their difference did not reach statistical significance ($p > .05$). The lack of significant difference between the two groups in these three criteria revealed that the learners in both high and low groups were not good at using correct speech act, correct English refusal expressions and politeness markers while refusing the interlocutor. Moreover, the results showed that there was a significant difference between high and low EFL learners in using *amount of information* ($p < .05$), in the sense that high EFL learners were more verbose and produced longer sentences compared to low EFL learners. A possible explanation for this is that high EFL learners have better linguistic knowledge and resources than low EFL learners; therefore they can produce lengthy sentences than their low counterparts. In general, considering the overall performance of learners in the production of refusal speech act (considering scores of four components altogether), the results showed that there was no statistically significant difference between high and low groups in the performance of refusal speech acts ($p > .05$).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, Iranian EFL learners with different proficiency levels employed nearly the same type of strategies with different frequency patterns. Against what was expected, even high proficient learners did not approximate English native speakers' norms in strategy choice. The possible reason might be due to transferring language norms from L1 into L2. Moreover, the results of learners' scores on DCT on the basis of four aspects of appropriacy (*correct speech act, correct expression, amount of information and level of politeness*) suggested by Hudson et al. (1995) showed that learners with different proficiency levels did not perform differently in overall performance of refusal speech acts ($p > .05$).

The findings of this study are consistent with the studies conducted by Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1998) and Garcia (1996). They concluded that knowing merely grammatical rules of target language is not enough and language learners should know the social and contextual factors of the target language to be pragmatically competent. Bardovi-Harlig (2001) highlights the necessity of pragmatic instruction and states that second language learners without receiving instruction in pragmatic features are fundamentally different from native speakers in production and recognition of pragmatics.

On the other hand, the result of this study contradicts Ran's (2007) study in which learners with higher level of language proficiency performed better than learners with lower proficiency level on DCT in complaint speech act. The findings of this study are also in line with the study by Jie (2005) which used DCT and MDCT to measure pragmatic knowledge of Chinese learners at high and low levels of language proficiency. The researcher found that there was no significant difference between high and low groups in their overall use of politeness strategies on DCT. The findings of this study support the findings by Arghamiri and Sadighi (2013) who found that proficiency level of language learners is not the influential factor in their level of pragmatic knowledge. The results of their study indicated that there was no significant relationship between the proficiency level of Iranian EFL learners and their performance on the DCT in refusal speech act.

The main cause of Iranian EFL learners' inability in pragmatic functions is that grammar translation method has been a dominant teaching method in Iran for a long period of time with the focus on language forms and unfortunately teachers ignore the fact that to have a proficient language learners, they have to be taught both language forms and language functions. In fact,

EFL learners in Iran are usually exposed to form-oriented instruction and pragmatic functions are rarely taught to them in the classroom.

The rationale for the significant effect of instruction in pragmatics is emphasized by Schmidt's (1990) noticing hypothesis theory focused on the role of consciousness learning on the development of different aspects of language. He believes that to learn a language feature, it should be noticed at the conscious level. Schmidt (1990) underscored that simple exposure to the target language is inadequate and the reason for this inadequacy is that pragmatic features and contextual factors are neglected even after prolonged exposure. He states that to acquire the pragmatic knowledge, both the linguistic forms and the social and contextual factors should be taken into account.

Unfortunately, EFL learners relying on the cultural norms of their own language inappropriately use these strategies and neglect the fact that some strategies are culture specific. Ignoring the differences between different languages becomes problematic and hinders the smooth communication between people of different languages. L2 learners do not usually pay attention to the cultural differences between their own language and the target language; therefore, they use politeness strategies from their native language when performing a speech act in a target language which may lead to pragmatic failure in the target community.

In other words, the findings of this study showed that language proficiency was not a determining factor in the degree of pragmatic production of language learners and highlights the necessity of raising learner's pragmatic awareness and teaching them in language classrooms. Moreover, the results indicated that cross-cultural differences in realization of refusal speech acts should be considered to avoid performing negative transfer and pragmatic failure in communication with native speakers.

All in all, considering overall performance of learners (considering scores of four aspects altogether), the results showed that there was no significant difference between high and low EFL learners in the production of refusal speech acts which indicated that an increase in overall L2 proficiency did not result in an increase in L2 pragmatic knowledge. Therefore, the answer to this research question is negative, and the null hypothesis is not rejected.

In other words, although the mean score of high EFL learners in three aspects of appropriateness i.e. *the ability to use correct speech act, correct expression and level of politeness* exceeded that of low EFL learners, yet it did not reach to a statistically significant difference. However, in the case of *amount of information*, there was a significant difference between these two groups in the production of refusal speech acts. The central factor which can be offered as a possible explanation for the superior performance of high EFL learners in terms of amount of information is their language proficiency. In other words, high EFL learners having better linguistic knowledge tended to use longer sentences than low EFL learners did. Whereas, low EFL learners tended to use short sentences due to lack of their linguistic resources.

The results of the present study suggest that incorporating pragmatic instruction in the context of teaching English in the EFL classroom would be effective in building up learners' pragmatic competence. As Eslami-Rasekh (2004) believes explicit metapragmatic instruction ease up pragmatic development of L2 learners and it can be done by language teachers through giving input enhancement in the classroom, awareness-raising activities about the input features, and participating language learners in productive activities. In fact, EFL teachers should integrate some sort of focus on language functions into their teaching. To this end, syllabus designers should take into account the contextualization of different kinds of speech acts in textbooks, integrate these pragmatic functions into the curricula and describe the major strategies and semantic formulas employed by native speakers in the execution of different kinds of speech acts.

There are some limitations in the scope of this study that restricts the generalization of the findings. Therefore, the following topics are suggested for further research to be taken into account. In this study, only refusal speech acts was investigated and findings of a study which is limited to one types of speech act cannot be generalized to other kinds. Therefore, future studies might expand the scope of investigation by considering the learners' performance on other kinds of speech acts like apologies, requests, compliments, etc.

From a methodological perspective, learners' data were elicited by means of DCT. In DCT, participants had time to think about what they are going to say. Therefore, further studies are needed to examine the performance of language learners by oral DCT, role play and observation of naturally occurring speech to gain better information on learners' and native speakers' performance on refusal speech act. Further research can be conducted to investigate whether contextual variables (e.g. social status, social distance, and level of imposition) and gender have any effect on performance and strategy choice of refusal speech act.

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