

# Investigating L2 Refusals: A Case Study of Chinese Native Speakers' L2 Pragmatic Competence

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**Abstract**—The speech act the researcher studies in this paper is *refusal* which, according to Ellis (2008), involves high level of pragmatic competence of the speaker, especially when it is compared with other speech acts like *apology* and *request*. Refusal seems to be particularly high-demanding for L2 learners, for L2 linguistic proficiency might be the hindrance. The researcher studies on one Chinese L2 learner's pragmatic competence by focusing on the pragmatic strategies adopted in his L2 refusals. The result of this study suggests that L2 pragmatic competence is restrained by learners' linguistic proficiency from utilizing more effective pragmatic strategies. Both linguistic and pragmatic transfer limits Chinese L2 learners' pragmatic behaviors. Therefore, pedagogical intervention involving pragmatic knowledge for enhancing Chinese L2 learners' pragmatic competence is advised and it might be even more helpful to the learners if culture is covered in the intervention.

**Index Terms**—refusal, speech act, directness, indirectness, “face”, pragmatic competence

## I. INTRODUCTION

L2 learners' refusals, though more limited than the study of the speech acts of apologies and requests (Ellis, 2008), are investigated by many researchers to the date, among which contrastive rhetoric method is used to compare the refusal strategies employed by native speakers and L2 learners. The study of L2 learners' refusals focuses not only on the employment of pragmatic strategies but also on the negative transfer of L1 sociocultural knowledge. Relevant pedagogical implications are drawn from those research studies as well.

Politeness strategies are primarily focused on when researchers investigate in speech acts of refusals. Chen et al (1995) elaborates two kinds of Chinese refusals (substantive and ritual refusals), in which Chinese notion of politeness plays a very significant role. According to Hong (2011), directness and indirectness existing as strategies in refusing speech acts indicates the considerable differences between Westerners and Asians in conventional ideas of politeness. However, it is suggested in the research studies that direct strategies are employed greatly in accordance with the social status while the indirect strategies are not (Nelson et al, 2002 & Felix, 2003). Otherwise, the politeness markers of apology are usually utilized before or after the statement of refusals (Liao & Bresnahan, 1996).

In the contrastive study of refusal strategies between L1 and L2 learners, the negative transfer of L1 sociocultural knowledge can be perceived and apparently, just like what Felix (2003) and Hong (2011) both point out, it is due to the lack of sociocultural knowledge of L2.

Pedagogical implications are drawn from researchers' studies in variety of facets. Textbooks and instructions should try to provide L2 learners an appropriate and applicable L2 pragmatic environment in order to raise their awareness of pragmatic factors and social contexts so that they can develop their L2 pragmatic competence as a whole (Hong, 2011). Simultaneously, pragmatic information “has to be attended to and stored in short-term memory” (Felix, 2003, p.247) by practicing conversations and discussing L2 sociocultural values in the classroom.

In this study, the researcher focuses on analyzing what pragmatic strategies are preferably employed by the informant (a female Chinese native speaker) in various L2 refusals towards requests, offers, etc. and what crucial factors have influenced his choice of refusal strategies. The researcher also tries to examine the informant's L2 pragmatic competence in coping with various situations of refusals, and accordingly draws the pedagogical implications.

## II. DESCRIPTION OF THE INFORMANT AND THE PROCEDURES

The learner providing data on the performance of the refusal speech act that is discussed in this paper is a Chinese native speaker who was one of the researcher's students two years ago. He, who only had English class in the first year of college, now is a junior ready to graduate from college within one year. Although he had learned English for 7 years and passed CET4 (College English Test Band Four, a countrywide examination in China for testing college students' English proficiency) a year ago, his English proficiency draws back a lot (according to his own explanation) due to the little exposure to English in almost one year, especially in spoken English. Otherwise, he hasn't any cross-cultural experience. Data were collected through a roleplay task including 6 scenarios on refusing speech acts adapted from the

published research studies (Chen et al, 1995 & Nelson et al, 2002 ), in which various situations (+/- social power, social distance and size of imposition) with different topics (borrowing money, offering a promotion, etc.) are provided. The informant was offered the six situations before the roleplay task and told to ask any questions about the task if he has. However, he was not informed what the author aimed at in the research or anything referred to refusal language and strategies. The speech acts reflected from the roleplay task between the informant and the author were recorded through telephone and then were transcribed and analyzed.

The strategies employed in speech acts of refusals are discussed in this study in accordance with the politeness theory which is elaborated by Brown and Levinson who focus on politeness as a pragmatic phenomenon (Thomas, 1995). Brown and Levinson propose 3 strategies of politeness: positive politeness, negative politeness and off-record (politeness), all of which are derived from one crucial factor---“face”, individuals’ self-esteem. In positive politeness, the speaker shows in his speech that he wants what the hearer wants, or wants some of what the hearer wants, whereas negative politeness focuses on satisfying the hearer’s being respected or recognized. Off-record politeness means to claim the imposition in a very unambiguous way or indirectly to minimize or mitigate the speaker’s responsibility for his imposition (Brown and Levinson, 1987). No matter what strategies are utilized in the conversations between the speaker and the hearer, minimizing the threat of the face-threatening act (FTA) to maintain each other’s faces seems to be crucial to the social interaction. With respect of culture, “face” is of great importance in communication and interaction for Chinese people who tend to be quite indirect in claiming the impositions and assume politeness a central factor for maintaining people’s “faces”. As to the speech act of refusing, according to Chen et al (1995), face preserving is much more important in order not to destroy the social relationship between the interlocutors (Chen et al, 1995).

Quite a number of strategies have been referred to in Brown and Levinson’s study on politeness, such as Claiming common ground by hedging, avoiding disagreement, etc., conveying that the speaker and the hearer are cooperators by giving reasons, offers, promises, being direct or indirect, utilizing off-record politeness by giving hints, understating and so on. The employment of those strategies is determined by the relationship of the speaker and the hearer and the content of their conversation (Brown and Levinson, 1987). The rating of imposition (R) can be re-ranked in accordance with the speaker and the hearer’s social distance (D) and social status (P); social status makes a big difference in strategies-employing; social distance also contributes largely in the speaker or the hearer’s choice of strategies (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

### III. DATA ANALYSIS

In all the six situations including refusing requests and offers, the informant has employed politeness strategies to make his refusals successful with respect of directness level, semantic formulas and modification types.

#### *Directness and Indirectness*

“One distinction between direct and indirect speech acts is that through direct speech acts, the speaker says what he or she means, and through indirect speech acts, the speaker means more or something other than what he or she says” (Hong, 2011, p.133). The informant seemed to know what the functions indirectness has in completing his goals of conversation and thus he was motivated to utilize indirect strategy in all the six situations, which indicates that preserving and defending one’s face by not refusing directly is of great importance for maintaining social relations between the speaker and the hearer. The informant indicated his refusals very indirectly by using a lot of modifications and semantic formulas in order to serve the purpose of politeness. Directness was adopted only in the situations (1, 2 and 5) of refusing an offer from a lower social status (cleaning lady), a big offer from a higher social status (his boss) and a small request from a very close social distance (elder sister). But even in situation 1, 2 and 5, the informant employed indirectness at the very early moves before he stated his final refusals.

#### *Direct strategy:*

The informant employed non-performative statement in his direct refusals. (i.e., line 7 “*Don’t pay*”. line 12 “*I can’t leave my family now*”. line 31 “*No! I don’t want to borrow to you!*”)

#### *Indirect strategies:*

1. The informant adopted quite a number of reasons or explanations in his indirect refusals. (i.e., line 7 “*It’s very cheap.*”; line 11 & 12 “*I have a little child.*”; line 16 “*I already borrow it to Li Mei.*”; line 19 “*I have to pay for my house charge.*”; line 23 “*my tape recorder is, is broken too.*”; line 33 “*I don’t like you!*”; line 36 “*but, but buy a ticket for you is, is hum unfair for other people.*”)

2. He also utilized statement of regret several times. (i.e., line 16, line 19, line 20, line 36: “*I’m sorry....*”)

3. The informant offered a statement of alternative in situation 6. (i.e., line 39 “*Maybe you can ask the, the train station, right, the train station.*”)

4. He used the indirect strategy of “attempt to dissuade interlocutor”. (i.e., line 8 “*Anyway you ah did your job very well.*”)

5. He knew how to set condition for the future acceptance. (i.e., line 19-20 “*I have no enough money if I hum...*”.)

6. Acceptance that functions as refusal (i.e., line 29 “*Well...*”.)

All of those semantic formulas that had made his speech acts longer and more complex indicate that his indirectness strategy was employed to try to be more polite and save both the speaker and hearer’s “faces”.

#### *Modification types:*

The informant employed only few external modifications. In situation 2 (i.e., line 11 *"I'm very glad to hear that"*), he tried to make the hearer feel good and to show his agreement here, though the language he used was not very appropriate.

The use of *"my buddy"* (line 19) and *"my boss"* (line 11), where positive politeness strategy being reflected, indicates that the speaker wanted to compensate the relationship between the speaker and the hearer while he tried to refuse the hearer and thus make the hearer feel better.

The data indicates that the informant was, to some extent, able to be aware of utilizing different strategies in accordance with various situations, and he could also use some modifications for his refusals, such as the utilization of *"my buddy"* (line 19) and *"my boss"* (line 11). *"Anyway you did your job very well"* (line 7) in situation 1 was used to downgrade the old lady's fault and try to compensate it by complimenting how well she did in other aspects and then to persuade her not to pay for the broken vase. But he hasn't got enough sensitivity to the varying of P (social status), D (social distance) and R (the rating of imposition). He used the expression of regret *"I'm sorry"* no matter the social distance was far or close, or the size of imposition large or small (e.g., the informant employed the statement of regret *"I'm sorry"* in both situation 4 and 6 where close and distant relationship respectively existed; borrowing notes and money in situation 3 and 4 indicates the variation of imposition, but the informant seemed paying no attention to the size of imposition by employing the same indirect strategy of politeness).

#### IV. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The informant knew some strategies in doing speech acts of refusals and he was able to change his refusing in different ways according to the variations of situations. However, the limited L2 proficiency restrains him from utilizing more complex linguistic codes to fulfill his pragmatic strategies in refusing. As we can see in his responding to his interlocutor, there were some grammatical mistakes in his language: e.g. *"although...but..."* (line 5); *"I'm very like..."* (line 5); *"borrow it to..."* (line 16); *"But buy a ticket for you is"* (line 36)...and all the sentences were simple and short: e.g., *"It's very cheap"*; *"Don't pay"* (line 7); *"I have a little child"* (line 11)... Long-time pauses and repetitions appeared frequently in his expressions: e.g., *"Anyway you ah did your job very well"* (line 7); *"but, but buy a ticket for you is, is hum unfair for other people"* (line 36); *"Maybe you can... ask the, the train station, right, the train station"* (line 39). Undoubtedly the fact that he couldn't express himself freely in L2 directly and negatively influenced his choice of refusing strategies.

The linguistic transfer from L1 (Chinese) to L2 (English) (e.g., the usage of *"although ... but"* possibly was derived from the Chinese words *"不但, 而且"* and the informant used English in Chinese way, ignoring the different ways of using conjunctions in Chinese and English.) takes the most responsibility for the informant to output simple, short and even grammatically wrong sentences. But the pragmatic transfer from L1 to L2 determines more of his L2 pragmatic behaviors. Chinese people preferably employ indirectness in interaction between interlocutors because they inherited the cultural legacy from Confucius in terms of maintaining an appropriate relationship with each other while communicating (Hong, 2011). The informant adopted indirectness more than once in his refusals in order to avoid giving any clear messages which might be a breaker of the harmonious relationship between the interlocutors. To Chinese, refusing people directly may be seen as very impolite behaviors. They would rather express their refusals very vaguely by using variety of reasons or explanations, as what the informant did in his speech acts.

Apparently the informant needs pedagogical intervention for improving his L2 pragmatic competence so as to perform his speech acts more appropriately. He used one strategy (giving reasons or explanations) frequently in all the situations regardless of the variations of P (social status), D (social distance) and R (the rating of imposition), from which we can see his shortage of strategies utilization in performing speech acts of refusals and undoubtedly this could be improved within L2 pragmatic instructions. "Learners progress steadily in developing a full range of strategies for performing illocutionary acts and in learning how to perform them using varied linguistic means" (Ellis, 2008, p.190). However, it is absolutely doubtful that how much L2 pragmatic ability could be obtained in classroom teaching. It is clear, according to the data analysis, that the informant's L2 pragmatic proficiency could be higher if his L2 proficiency were higher, as he could convey his ideas freely within the linguistic instructions. But there are other crucial determinants for enhancing one's L2 pragmatic competence, such as cultural differences and awareness of pragmatics. Could all of these skills be acquired simply in pragmatic instructions? Possibly it is necessary for teachers to focus on pragmatic respect, linguistic ability as well as the cultural facet so as to help the L2 learner to reduce the negative transfer from L1 to L2, and increase his awareness of using pragmatic skills also. But as what Ellis (2005) suggested, "it takes learners a long time to learn the sociocultural rules underlying the performance of specific illocutionary acts" (p.190). Therefore, an authentic pragmatic environment is of great significance in terms of one's L2 pragmatic competence.

Considering the EFL environment in China, Chinese native speakers lack of opportunities to put L2 (English) into practical use, which results in their weakness both in language and pragmatic proficiency. It should be highlighted that achieving higher efficiency of classroom teaching in language proficiency is necessarily urgent in that it will consequently impact the learners' pragmatic competence. Though CET band 4 serves as a language proficiency test, having passed it doesn't mean the command of every facet of English which should be regarded as a language instead of a subject only. Therefore during the obtaining process of L2, the instructors should not only focus on the linguistic

aspect but also the pragmatic scope, and the sociocultural knowledge as well. All college English classrooms should be fully aware that students' overall ability in language needs more than simply giving linguistic instructions, though language proficiency does impact students' pragmatic level significantly. Besides teaching L2 learners pragmatic strategies, offering them a pragmatic environment by practicing and interacting with this language is equally important.

The findings in this paper indicate that there is correlation between L2 linguistic and pragmatic proficiency and the informant's less L2 pragmatic competence, to some extent, was determined by his limited linguistic ability. He did use some strategies in performing his speech acts, yet not enough for indicating his awareness and sensitivity of the variety of situations. And more importantly, L1 transfer had a great impact on the informant's pragmatic strategies utilized in expressing his refusals. These findings are partly in accordance with the previous findings. Indirectness was employed in the informant's speech acts proves what Hong (2011) suggests in her study that the preference of indirectness is realized by offering explanations and apologies. As far as the sociocultural factors are concerned, Felix (2003) and Hong (2011) make a clear stance that the negative transfer lies in being short of sociocultural knowledge. The author also places much emphasis on the L1 transfer factors and appeal to a L2 pragmatic environment for nonnative speakers to acquire enough L2 sociocultural knowledge. However, as for the relationship between L2 proficiency and pragmatic competence, the author finds difference within Ellis (2005)'s findings in which it declares the non-linear relationship between learners pragmatic behavior and their general proficiency. Probably the difference lies in the limitations of this research project that only one informant was engaged and no comparison with other L2 learners of different general proficiency, which could not sufficiently support the researcher's findings. Otherwise, though interactive enough, the instrument of data collection might have been less supportive because making recordings somewhat drove the informant into nervous state while doing role-play task, which consequently and negatively influenced his final pragmatic behaviors.

#### APPENDIX. INSTRUCTION FOR PARTICIPANTS AND SIX ROLE-PLAY SITUATIONS

##### INSTRUCTION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

Pretend you are the person in all the six situations. Read the situations first and then respond as you would in actual conversations. While you are reading, if you have some questions or if you have problems to understand the situations, please ask me without any hesitation. When we do the role play, our conversations will be audio-taped.

Thank you for your cooperation.

##### SITUATION 1:

You arrive home and notice that your cleaning lady is extremely upset. She comes rushing up to you and tells you that she has broken your china vase. She insists on paying for it. But you don't think it is necessary.

1 Cleaning lady: Oh, God, I'm so sorry! I had an awful accident.

2 Xiao Li: What's wrong?

3 Cleaning lady: While I was cleaning I bumped into the tables and your china vase

4 fell and broke. I just feel terrible about it. I insist on paying for it.

5 Xiao Li: oh, although, although I'm ah very like this Chinese vase, but ah never mind. It's a fake one.

6 Cleaning lady: But that's your favorite, I'm afraid I have to pay for it.

7 Xiao Li: It's very cheap. Don't pay. Anyway you ah did your job very well.

##### SITUATION 2:

You have been working in an advertising agency now for some time. The boss offers you a raise and a promotion, but it involves moving. You don't want to go. Today, the boss calls you into his office.

8 The boss: I'd like to offer you an executive position in our new offices in Nanchang. 9 It's a great city---only 3 hours from here by plane. And, a nice raise comes with the 10 position.

11 Xiao Li: oh, I'm very glad to hear that. But you know, my boss, I have a little

12 child. I can't leave my family now.

##### SITUATION 3:

You are in your third year of college. You attend classes and you take really good notes. Your classmate often misses classes and asks you for the lecture notes. But you don't want to lend it to her.

13 The classmate: oh no! We have an exam tomorrow but I don't have the notes from

14 last week. I am sorry to ask you this, but could you please lend me your notes once 15 again?

16 Xiao Li: ah I already ah borrow it hum to Li Mei. I'm sorry you are late.

##### SITUATION 4:

Because of some urgent need, you have just withdrawn ¥500 from the bank. Your classmate Li Jun approaches you. Obviously, he wants to borrow money from you.

17 Li Jun: Xiao Li, Could you lend me ¥500 ? I want to buy a gold necklace for my

18 girlfriend, but I don't have enough money.

19 Xiao Li: Hum... I'm sorry my buddy. I have to pay for my house charge (rent). I

20 have no enough money if I hum I'm' sorry.

##### SITUATION 5:

You are a boy of 14 years old. Your elder sister wants to borrow a tape recorder from you. But you suddenly remember the time when you were refused by her while you were trying to borrow some money from her last week.

21 Xiao Li's sister: Xiao Li, Can I use your tape recorder? Mine doesn't work right

22 now.

23 Xiao Li: ah my tape recorder is, is broken too.

24 Xiao Li's sister: When ?

25 Xiao Li: Well, today, in my class. It is broken by my classmate.

26 Xiao Li's sister: Oh, what a pity? When do you want to fix it?

27 Xiao Li: I want to repair it tomorrow.

28 Xiao Li's sister: So after you have it repaired, could you lend it to me?

29 Xiao Li: Well ...

30 Xiao Li's sister: Could you?

31 Xiao Li: No! I don't want to borrow to you!

32 Xiao Li's sister: Why, we are a family.

33 Xiao Li: I don't like you!

#### **SITUATION 6:**

You are a third year college student. After a long-time queuing, you finally get your turn to buy a ticket for going home, when an old man comes to you and asks you to buy a ticket for him. But obviously there are still a lot of people waiting in the queue.

34 Old man: Could you please buy me a ticket to Beijing? I am in a hurry, but the

35 queue is too long for me to catch the train which is leaving about 20 minutes later!

36 Xiao Li: I'm sorry, but, but buy a ticket for you is, is hum unfair for other people.

37 Old man: I know, but you see, I am going to be late for my meeting. Could you just 38 do me a favor?

39 Xiao Li: Maybe you can ask the, the train station, right, the train station.

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