

A Study of the Relationship between L2 Proficiency and Pragmatic Transfer - A Case Study of Refusal

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Abstract:

Pragmatic transfer is a research field that closely links interlanguage pragmatics and second language acquisition studies. Non-native speakers often find it hard to use pragmatic transfer properly in their daily life. This research, as a case study of refusal, analyzes the relationship between pragmatic transfer and the English proficiency of Chinese EFL learners. The participants consisted of four groups: native English speakers from America; Chinese postgraduates majoring in foreign linguistics, Chinese undergraduates majoring in English which and non-English major freshmen served as Chinese native speaker. The instrument is a discourse completion test. The results showed that Chinese and Americans all care about politeness when they make refusals. Significant differences are found in the frequency and content of refusal strategies between the Chinese and American groups, suggesting the presence of pragmatic transfer. The results show that the relationship between EFL proficiency and pragmatic transfer is positive that the frequency of pragmatic transfer increases as Chinese EFL learner's L2 proficiency increases.

Keywords:

Pragmatic Transfer, Interlanguage Pragmatics, Refusals

1. Introduction

Pragmatic transfer is a research branch of interlanguage pragmatics, which can be understood as the influence exerted by learners' pragmatic knowledge of languages and cultures other than second language on their comprehension, production and learning of second language pragmatic information [5]. In the communication with native speakers of the target language, learners tend to transfer their native social and cultural norms into the target language, produce inappropriate pragmatic behaviors.

Kecskes and Papp [8] argue that pragmatic transfer is bi-directional, an interaction of pragmatic knowledge and skills from different languages and cultures, and a fusion of pragmatic knowledge and information at the conceptual level from different language channels. It specifically examines the impact of cultural pragmatic and linguistic knowledge on the comprehension, production, and acquisition of pragmatic

information. Pragmatic transfer can be positive or negative. Positive transfer often transpires when linguistic features or cultural norms are shared between L1 and L2; Negative transfer emerges due to the influence of L1 pragmatic knowledge which differs from L2 [6].

Several studies have explored the impact of L2 proficiency on pragmatic transfer [1,12,10]. Nevertheless, no consistent conclusion has been drawn. Both positive and negative correlations are supported by researchers. This study aims to explore pragmatic transfer and its correlation with L2 proficiency by analyzing the semantic formulas of refusal employed by Chinese EFL learners at varying proficiency levels.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Refusals and pragmatic transfer

Refusal is generally regarded as a face-threatening speech act. In order to keep good relationship with the interlocutors, speakers tend to adopt some face-saving strategies which may vary in cultures. EFL learners often transfer strategies from their L1 to L2 in this process.

The major study carried out by Beebe et al. [1] compare the refusal strategies produced by native Japanese speakers, Japanese EFL learners and native English speakers through a discourse completion test (DCT). The results show that Japanese speakers of English and native speakers differ in three areas: the order of the semantic formula, the frequency of the formula, and the content of the utterances. Specifically, American participants tend to offer specific details when giving explanations, while the Japanese ones often produce explanations that might be interpreted as ambiguous, especially when refusing the interlocutors who have higher social status. This study of has laid the foundation for later researches on the speech act of refusal as it provides a relatively systematic classification of refusal strategies as well as a well-designed DCT questionnaire.

Similarly, Keshavarz et al. [9] investigate the pragmatic transfer in refusal strategies used by Iranian EFL learners, demonstrating that even advanced learners still contain non-native pragmatic features arising from L1 pragmatic transfer. They argue that the amount of transfer is related not only to proficiency level but also to other factors such as the eliciting speech act, the importance of L1 cultural values, and the ease of use of the formula in L1 or L2 [9].

In general, current literature on refusals indicates that specifically one's cultural orientation, language proficiency, and interlocutor status all seem to affect the type and frequency of strategies.

2.2. Relationship between L2 level and pragmatic transfer

While several studies have demonstrated that transfer exists at the pragmatic level, the relationship between L1 transfer and L2 proficiency in the interlanguage pragmatics has been controversial.

Takahashi and Beebe [13] investigate the phenomenon of pragmatic transfer and the proficiency effect on pragmatic transfer. The results show that higher proficiency learners tended to transfer more while the phenomenon of pragmatic transfer occurred among both lower and higher proficiency learners. They claimed that more proficient learners were more likely to transfer the sociocultural norms of L1 than less proficient

learners because they have enough control over the L2 to express their feelings. Therefore, they propose the positive correlation hypothesis

Based on that, Maeshiba et al. [7] examine the apology strategies used by ESL Japanese learners of different proficiency levels to test the positive correlation hypothesis. The findings, however, reveal that higher proficiency learners are less likely to transfer L1 apology strategies that do the lower proficiency learners.

Likewise, Ren and Gao [11] compare compliments made by high-proficiency and low-proficiency Chinese EFL learners. With 30 English major seniors as high-proficiency learners and 30 non-English major freshmen as low-proficiency learners, the researchers collect data through a DCT and a rating task. The results show that the favored compliment response strategies used by EFL learners at different levels of English proficiency differ, and pragmatic transfer decrease as their proficiency in English increase.

Nevertheless, according to Dai & Zhang [2], the relationship between L2 proficiency and L1 pragmatic transfer is neither positively nor negatively correlated, but rather in an inverted U-shape. That is to say, as the language proficiency of Chinese EFL learners changes from the low to intermediate level, the degree of pragmatic transfer increases; as the language proficiency of Chinese EFL learners changes from the intermediate to advanced level, the degree of pragmatic transfer decreases.

Based on the research purpose and the previous studies, this thesis intends to cope with the following questions:

- (1) Are there any significance differences in the frequency and content of semantic formulas between Chinese and American groups?
- (2) Does pragmatic transfer exist in the frequency and content of semantic formulas used in the refusals of Chinese lower level and higher level EFL learners?
- (3) What's the relationship between L2 proficiency and pragmatic transfer?

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Refusal strategies

Beebe et al. [1] identify 17 refusal strategies grouped under three categories. The system is illustrated with examples from the data in the following Table 1.

Table 1. Coding system of refusal strategies.

Category	Strategy	Example
Direct	a. Performative statement	'I refuse'
	b. Non-performative statement	'I can't'
Indirect	c. Statement of regret/apology	'What a pity', 'I'm sorry'
	d. Wish	'I wish I could be there'
	e. Excuse, explanation or reason	'I have an appointment'
	f. Statement of alternative	'Why not ask your mother'
	g. Condition for future or past acceptance	'I would have been able to go if you had told me earlier'
	h. Promise for future acceptance	'Next time'
	i. Statement of principle	'Practice makes perfect'
	j. Statement of philosophy	'I can't receive my student's gift'

Adjuncts	k. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor	‘You’d better read less cartoons’
	l. Acceptance that functions as refusal	‘I’d love to, but...’
	m. Avoidance	‘I will think about it’
	n. Statement of positive feeling or agreement	‘That’s a good suggestion’
	o. Statement of empathy	‘I understand’
	p. Pause fillers	‘Well...’
	q. Gratitude/Appreciation	‘It’s very kind of you’

A refusal response often contains more than one strategy. In order to identify the set of strategies, the responses are divided into small semantic units, and each semantic unit is then coded as a specific strategy category. For instance:

I’m really sorry [Regret]. I’ve already had a plan [Reason].

3.2. Hofstede’s cultural dimensions

Pragmatic transfer is more influenced by the culture of the language. Among all the cultural patterns, Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory is the most significant one. Starting his investigation in the field of international business, Hofstede [4] comes up with the four globally well-known dimensions: power distance, masculinity-femininity, collectivism-individualism and uncertainty avoidance.

Power distance is people’s acceptance for unequal distribution of power in a society or an organization. It concerns people’s respect for hierarchical relations and authority. Uncertainty avoidance refers to the social acceptance of ambiguity. It measures a country’s preference for strict rules of fuzziness and risk. The individualism/collectivism dimension is used to measure the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. The masculinity-femininity dimension emphasizes the degree to which male or female traits dominated. Masculinity refers to male traits such aggression while femininity represents modest and considerate.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Participants and instruments

The participants will consist of four groups: NESs from the US who are still college students, graduate students majoring in foreign linguistics who have passed TEM8 as the advanced EFL group (AG), undergraduate English majors who have just passed TEM4 as the lower EFL group (LG), and non-English major undergraduates who are seen as NCSs. Each group includes 10 participants, totaling 40 participants. All participants will be required to complete a DCT adapted from Dai [2]. The DCT is a pragmatics tool that requires students to read a written description of a situation and then write what they would say in that scenario to refuse the interlocutor. The scenarios in the questionnaire have been adjusted to ensure that participants are all familiar with the situations where refusals occur.

4.2. Data collection and analysis

To ascertain negative pragmatic transfer, we need to examine whether there are statistically significant differences in the frequencies of a pragmatic feature between IL-L2 and L1-L2 [5]. The investigation of pragmatic transfer should involve the comparison of these data: (1) samples of the target language produced by L2 learners;

(2) samples of the target language produced by its L1 speakers; and (3) samples of L2 learners' L1 [3].

In order to understand the influence of Chinese on the use of certain semantic formulas by L2 learners, this thesis distinguishes between distinctive and indistinctive pragmatic transfer. Lu [10] evaluates the discrepancy between the two languages in the frequency of use of a semantic formula. According to Lu [10], distinctive pragmatic transfer occurs when the discrepancy in the frequency of refusal strategies between native Chinese speaker (NCS) and native English speaker (NES) is greater than 25%. Indistinctive pragmatic transfer occurs when that number is less than 25%. Only distinctive pragmatic transfer will be discussed.

In this research, the low quartile (25%) used by Lu [10] is taken as the line of division in order to find out whether there are the conditions for pragmatic transfer. And then, the frequency of each refusal strategies used by two EFL learner groups are compared to discover the relationship between proficiency and pragmatic transfer.

5. Difference in the Frequency of Refusal Strategies

Altogether 652 refusal strategies from the 4 groups are coded. The results show that pragmatic transfer occurs in 6 out of 17 types of refusal strategies, namely b (non-performative direct), c (regret), e (reason), f (alternative), m (avoidance) and q (gratitude). The distribution of each type of refusal strategies used by each group across 12 situations is displayed in Table 2 in the light of percentage within groups.

Table 2. Refusal strategies used by each group.

Refusal Strategies	D	Group			
		NCS (N=174 M=17.4)	LG (N=136 M=13.6)	AG (N=184 M=18.4)	NES (N=158 M=15.8)
b	37	11.49	17.88	12.36	18.35
c	81	16.67	15.53	13.73	3.16
e	38	39.66	28.41	30.90	24.68
f	63	6.9	5.88	6.87	2.53
m	45	3.45	2.21	2.81	1.90
q	59	5.75	5.88	11.80	13.92

Note: N=total number of refusal strategies used by a group; M=the mean number of refusal strategies used by each participant

As shown in Table 2, NCSs (11.49%) use direct refusal strategies distinctively less frequently than NESs (18.35%) do, with the degree of discrepancy being 37%, which provides the condition for distinctive pragmatic transfer. It is worth noting that, the degree of discrepancy between the AG and the NES is greater than that between the AG and the NCS. It implies that, compared to the LG, the AG shows more similarities with the NCS. In the refusal strategies of e, f and m, the AG shows the same tendency towards NCS, whereas the LG exhibits more similarities with the NES. It seems that the pragmatic transfer is positively related to the L2 proficiency since as the L2 proficiency increases, the frequency of pragmatic transfer increases. Secondly, for the strategies of c and q, NCSs (16.67%) employ more 'regret' strategies than NESs (3.16%) do, the degree of discrepancy being 81%. In this situation, the AG employs this strategy less frequently than the LG and exhibits a tendency towards the NESs. And it is the same with the strategy of 'gratitude' that as the L2 proficiency increases, the frequency of pragmatic transfer decreases.

The findings indicate that in the majority of refusal strategies where pragmatic transfer occurs, there is a positive correlation between the L2 proficiency of Chinese EFL learners and pragmatic transfer. This contradicts the prevailing assumption that pragmatic transfer decreases with higher levels of proficiency in L2. Actually, during the intermediate stage of pragmatic competence, learners lack sufficient knowledge of the target language's pragmatics, leading to a limited ability to apply this knowledge in natural contexts. This limitation is evidenced by the scarcity of discourse samples (N=136) and consequently, a low frequency of pragmatic transfer.

Advanced learners possess a more extensive vocabulary, grasp of grammar of the target language, enabling them to convey complex intentional meanings effectively. However, in the process of expression, they tend to incorporate conventions from their native language, resulting in a heightened occurrence of pragmatic transfer. In this study, the AG comprises graduate students who have resided in China throughout their lives till now, causing their idiomatic expressions with the characteristics of Chinese. Cultural transfer is evident in the content of their discourse expressions, as they intentionally or unintentionally infuse values from their native culture into their second language expressions.

6. Difference in the Content of Refusal Strategies

A refusal means rejections to participate in an action proposed by the interlocutors. In different cultural environments, people may have different social values, beliefs and cultural expressions of refusals. A speaker needs to attach great attention to the situational factors such as social status and social distance in order to achieve a satisfying outcome and not to offend the interlocutor.

On the power distance in Hofstede's cultural dimensions, China scores higher compared to native English-speaking countries such as the US, i.e., the Chinese are more accepting of unequal power distance or authority. As a result, respect for authority, leaders and elders are core values, and subordinates tend to follow instructions from their superiors. Refusal is generally regarded as a face-threatening speech act. Chinese tend to adopt more face-saving strategies when refusing the interlocutor with greater power distance, greatly influencing the content of refusals.

6.1. *Speakers with unequal status*

In the following example, the professor asks the students if they have time to attend a college party this weekend, and the participants need to decline this invitation. EFL learners' refusal strategies reflect a distinctive pragmatic transfer.

- (1) 不好意思啊老师, 周末我爸妈飞过来看我, 就待两天, 实在去不了。 (NCS)
- (2) I'm really sorry. I have other plans for the weekend. (LG)
- (3) Sorry professor, I'm going to have an important date this weekend. Hope to join you next time. (AG)
- (4) I'd like to go, but I already have plans. (NES)

In this scenario, there is a noticeable power distance between the interlocutors. Therefore, when rejecting such a 'superior', all the Chinese participants initially employ the refusal strategy of 'regret' and apologize. They provide specific reasons rather than general ones in their responses, such as meeting their parents from afar or having an important prior engagement, in order to highlight the legitimacy and

urgency of their reasons. In contrast, NES utilizes two refusal strategies: ‘acceptance that functions as refusal’ and ‘reason’, offering general reasons rather than specific ones. Furthermore, apologies are infrequent in their refusal strategies, indicating a more egalitarian teacher-student relationship.

On the linguistic level, learners with lower proficiency tend to use shorter sentences, similar to the expressions of NES. But it should be attributed to their limitations in L2 proficiency. Advanced learners not only express ‘regret’ and ‘reason’ but also make promises of future acceptance to enhance the richness of their responses, reflecting a higher level of linguistic competence.

6.2. *Speakers with equal status*

In the following scenario, while studying in the library, a student you don't know asks you to watch his books for him because he needs to go to the restroom. Participants have to refuse this request. The status of the two parties is equal.

不好意思啊同学，我可能一会儿也走了，你问问别人吧。(NCS)

Sorry, I have other things to do. (LG)

Sorry, you'd better not. I've been immersing myself in the book. (AG)

Can you ask someone else? I'm about to leave. (NES)

Similarly, all Chinese participants exhibit a preference for expressing regret when declining their peers. Within the responses from NCS, the term ‘同学’ is used to demonstrate a sense of kindness. By mentioning the possibility of needing to leave soon and suggesting that the student ask someone else, the speaker effectively communicates the reason for refusal and provides an alternative, highlighting the significance of upholding interpersonal relationships and politeness, even in situations of equal social status. It is noteworthy that the three groups of Chinese participants provide general or personal reasons for refusal, such as ‘immerse in books’. There is a notable emphasis on personal will when declining requests from individuals of similar social status. Non-essential reasons and personal preferences are respected in these interactions. As for NESs, they tend to utilize direct and concise communication, prioritizing egalitarian relationships.

Regarding language usage, L2 English learners demonstrate brevity in their responses, offering a straightforward refusal and a brief explanation. This approach, while more direct than native Chinese responses, still maintains a level of politeness. Advanced learners express themselves more naturally in English, showcasing a high level of proficiency. They are able to integrate the directness of the L2 culture while preserving a degree of politeness and respect towards socially equal individuals.

7. **Conclusions**

Research findings indicate that both Chinese and American individuals attach importance to politeness when refusing others. However, they exhibit different manifestations of politeness. Significant differences are found in the frequency and content of refusal strategies between the Chinese and American groups, suggesting the presence of pragmatic transfer. Chinese learners tend to employ more indirect strategies such as ‘statement of regret/apology’ and ‘excuse/explanation/reason’, whereas Americans prefer direct strategies like ‘non-performative statement’. Additionally, Chinese learners tend to provide more specific reasons when refusing

authority figures. Pragmatic transfer is evident in the refusal strategies utilized by both lower-level and higher-level Chinese EFL learners, although the extent of transfer decreases as proficiency increases. Higher-proficiency learners display enhanced pragmatic competence in the target language.

Limitations of the study include the focus on a single speech act (refusals) and the limited sample size. Future research could investigate pragmatic transfer across a broader range of speech acts and with larger, more diverse participant cohorts. Longitudinal studies tracing the development of pragmatic competence would offer valuable insights.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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Appendix Discourse Completion Test

Your Age:____ Your Major:____ Your English proficiency level:

Please read the following 12 situations. After each situation you will be asked to write a response of refusal in the blank. Respond as you would in actual conversation. Anything that you write will be kept confidential and reserved only for our study. Your cooperation and participation are appreciated.

(1) You are in the university cafeteria standing in line to order food. There are many choices and you are hesitated of choosing your meal. The person serving you suggests that you try the chicken dish, but you do not want to.

The waiter: Chicken dish is a good choice. Would you like to try?

You would refuse by saying:_____.

(2) You happen to meet one of your professors in the corridor of your department. The professor says that there is a meeting this weekend and invites you to join them, but you cannot.

Professor: There is a meeting at this weekend. Would you like to join us?

You would refuse by saying:_____.

(3) You are sitting at the library. A student, whom you have never met before, puts his books on the table and asks you to watch them because he needs to go to the restroom, but you cannot.

Student: Excuse me. Could you watch my books while I go to the restroom, please?

You would refuse by saying:_____.

(4) You are going through financial difficulties. One of your friends offers you some money, but you do not want to accept it.

Your friend: I know you are having a hard time. I can lend you some money.

You would refuse by saying:_____.

(5) You are going hiking with your classmates. You want to drink some water but you find that there is no water in the bottle. One of your classmates offers you a bottle of water, but you do not want to accept it.

Your classmate: I still have some water here, so you can drink mine.

You would refuse by saying:_____.

(6) You've been working in an agency now for some time. The boss offers you a raise and promotion, but it involves moving. You don't want to go.

Boss: I'd like to offer you a position in our new offices in Beijing. It's a great city which will benefit for you. And, a nice raise comes with the position.

You would refuse by saying:_____.

One of your classmates, who frequently misses classes, wants to borrow your class notes, but you do not want to give them to the classmate.

Your classmate: You know I missed several classes. Could I copy your notes from this class?

You would refuse by saying:_____.

(7) You are waiting at the gate of the university for your friend to give you a ride home. It is getting late and your friend does not show up. A stranger stops his car to offer you a ride. You do not want to accept it.

Driver: Would you like me to give you a ride?

You would refuse by saying:_____.

(8) Your professor brings many books to share with you and your classmates during the class. After class, your professor asks you to carry the books to his office, but you cannot.

Your professor: Could you carry these books back to my office?

You would refuse by saying:_____.

(9) A friend invites you to dinner, but you really have a lot of homework to do.

Friend: How about a dinner tomorrow evening?

You would refuse by saying:_____.

(10) During your course selection session, your advisor suggests that you take another course, but you do not want to.

Your advisor: I think it would be a good idea if you take another course. What do you think?

You would refuse by saying:_____.

(10) After class, you are complaining to your classmates about a particular professor. One of your classmates suggests that you go and speak directly to that professor about your feeling, but you do not want to do that.

Your classmate: I suggest that you go and talk to the professor directly.

You would refuse by saying:_____.

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