

The Effect of English Proficiency on Chinese Learners' L2 Refusals

Yuhang Yang

School of English and International Studies, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, 100089, China

19010003@bfsu.edu.cn

Abstract. This study investigated the effect of English proficiency on Chinese learners' L2 refusal productions. 40 participants were divided into two groups according to proficiency and their refusals were elicited online using two low-setting open-ended role plays. Results demonstrated that English proficiency had a noteworthy influence on L2 refusals from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. Different linguistic knowledge, the competence of processing, expression, and interaction, and degrees of negative L1 transfer all resulted in the different refusal performances of the two groups. Moreover, this study supported that even advanced English learners lack enough L2 pragmatic competence, which had pedagogical implications.

Keywords: English Proficiency Effect, Second Language Pragmatics, Speech Act of Refusal, Pragmatic Competence.

1. Introduction

Refusal is the speech act that falls under the category of commissives since they commit the refuser to (not) acting [1, 2]. Brown and Levinson considered it a face-threatening act since it highlights different desires or needs of the interlocutors, which tend to risk people's positive or negative faces and may disturb social harmony [3].

In Second Language (L2) Pragmatics, refusal has long been viewed as a major sticking point for language learners [4], given that it requires a high level of pragmatic competence [5]. It is complex and tricky, whose unsuccessful performances might cause unconscious offenses, communication breakdowns, or even endanger the interpersonal relations of the speakers [6]. Therefore, L2 refusals have received much attention.

One main type of study on L2 refusals is to investigate the influence of English proficiency on language learners' ways to refuse. For example, Bella employed three role-plays to compare refusals from learners at three proficiency levels of L2 Modern Greek and an NS group. It demonstrated that regardless of proficiency, higher proficiency learners used fewer direct strategies and more indirect strategies and adjuncts than the low proficiency group. But there was a significant difference in highest-proficiency learners' and native speakers' uses of refusals [7].

However, although the proficiency effect on L2 refusals has been explored for some time, there are still some research gaps. Firstly, research only focused on proficiency effects on one or several aspects of L2 refusals, with most focusing on categorizing refusal strategies and comparing their frequencies, which may be too general. Secondly, few studies had been done in the Chinese context, especially by employing role-plays to elicit refusals. And finally, only a few studies analyzed the data from an interactional competence perspective using the fine-grained toolset of Conversation Analysis (CA), which could offer us more details of learners' production and provide new insight into the differences between the refusals used by low and high proficiency learners. Thus, the present study aims to fill those gaps and provide new sights into learners' L2 refusals.

2. Research method

2.1. Participants

40 participants were divided into 2 groups according to their English proficiency with 16 females and 4 males each. Concerning the low proficiency group, all were sophomores from a non-foreign language high school in Beijing, aging 16-17, who got an average score of 110-130 in the unified English exams taken at school. This controlled their English proficiency at a low level. Regarding the high proficiency group, students were enrolled in third-year English majors at Beijing Foreign Studies University. Aged 20-22, they got “excellent” in the Test for English Majors-Band 4, and their scores in specialized courses also ranked in the top 30% in their grade, which indicated their advanced English proficiency.

2.2. Instruments

Open-ended role-plays including two scenarios were used to elicit participants’ refusals in response to requests. Both scenarios were low settings of social power (-P), and social distance (-D), but with a high degree of imposition [3]. In Scenario 1, a student borrows a laptop from another schoolmate who cannot lend it since he/she is also doing his/her term paper/homework. And in Scenario 2, a student asks the student sitting next to lend a charger, but this student is just about to leave and should take away the charger.

2.3. Procedure

Role-plays were conducted online because of Covid-19 prevention. For each proficiency group, participants were randomly assigned a same-sex interlocutor and the roles. They did not know each other’s instructions and could ask questions concerning the experiment to the researcher, who was present for the duration of both role plays. No time limit was imposed on their preparation and they were free to initiate and end the role-plays.

Finally, 40 conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed following CA conventions [8].

2.4. Data analysis

Transcribed conversations were analyzed from 5 aspects. Firstly, adapting Taguchi’s six-point rating scale ranging from zero to five, appropriateness was assessed based on two main dimensions, i.e., sociopragmatics and pragmalinguistics [9]. It also subsumed the grammatical and discourse competences regarding the degree to which they interacted with appropriateness. Five raters including the author listened to the refusal parts of the conversations and evaluated participants’ overall performance using the scale. Cases of discrepancy in rating were discussed and the average appropriateness score of each subject would be used as the final score. Secondly, based on Ellis’s summary [10], the current study chose 6 measures that were widely used, consisting of the number of repetitions, reformulations & replacements, pauses, total silence time (s), its percentage, and words per minute. Thirdly, concerning syntactic complexity, Lu’s L2 Syntactic Complexity Analyzer (L2SCA) which is widely used in recent studies [11] would be used, providing 14 measures of syntactic complexity and 9 structures of the text’s frequency. Moreover, learners’ use of refusal strategies was also analyzed in terms of type and frequency, applying the typology of refusals used by Masaeed et al. [12] which was developed in previous research [4, 13]. Three main types containing 18 sub-strategies such as apology and alternative would be compared. Moreover, since refusal may not be finished in one turn because participants were having a real conversation, which may be neglected by western scholars [14, 15], this study grouped the data into two stages, including the request-response stage (i.e., the first turn of refusing the request) and the insistence-response stage (i.e., more refusal responses to the insistence of requesting). And two raters coded the strategies based on the typology to ensure reliability. Finally, the sequential organization and formatting of refusals were analyzed by CA, which included delay, prefacing, pause, etc., and even refusal patterns used by different proficiency learners in different stages.

3. Findings

3.1. Appropriateness of refusals between two proficiency groups

Firstly, the inter-rater agreement test showed a very good agreement ($ICC = 0.83, p < 0.001$), ensuring reliability and accuracy. After calculating, statistics revealed that the mean for the high proficiency group was much greater than that for the low proficiency group, indicating that learners with higher English proficiency produced L2 refusals more appropriately, with fewer grammatical and discourse mistakes. Moreover, the independent sample t-test also confirmed that the proficiency effect on the appropriateness of learners' English refusals was significantly large, with $t=-10.758, p=.000$.

3.2. Fluency of refusals between two proficiency groups

The independent sample t-test revealed a statistically significant effect of English proficiency on the number of pauses ($t=4.391, p=.000$), total silence time ($t=3.232, p<.005$), percentage of total silence time ($t=6.628, p=.000$), the total number of words ($t=-3.122, p<.005$), and words per minute ($t=-3.461, p<.001$). Those measures indicated that most high proficiency learners responded to the interlocutor quickly without preparing for too long, speaking fluently and comfortably. While the lower proficiency group hesitated for a long time to pre-planned their utterances, could not produce English automatically, and should think during speaking, which caused more pauses but fewer words and a slower speech rate.

3.3. Syntactic complexity between two proficiency groups

Processed by the L2SCA, data demonstrated that except for the measure of Mean Length of Clause (MLC), all statistics of the high proficiency group were higher than the low proficiency group, which confirmed the proficiency effect on syntactic complexity of L2 refusals. Higher proficiency learners would produce L2 refusals with more complex syntactic structures. More specifically, some measures possessed obvious differences between the two groups, such as the frequency of dependent clauses, coordinate phrases, complex nominals, dependent clauses per T-unit (DC/T), etc. These displayed that the low proficiency group produced significantly more simple sentences, nominals, and fewer words, verbs, and complex sentences when performing refusals due to limited competence.

3.4. Frequency of refusal strategies used by two proficiency groups

The inter-rater agreement indicated excellent reliability ($ICC2=0.94, p<0.001$). Through discussion, the coding result was finalized and further analyzed.

3.4.1 Overall frequency

The frequency of each refusal strategy used by all participants regarding the request-response stage, the insistence-response stage, and the whole conversation was shown in Table 1.

In general, the high proficiency group used more refusal strategies than the low proficiency group, concerning both the type ($n_{low}=9, n_{high}=11$) and number ($n_{low}=86, n_{high}=97$), although the differences are not significant ($p>.05$). Moreover, for either the three main types or each type, the two groups showed no significant differences in terms of total frequency. In particular, both groups used indirect strategies most frequently, followed by adjunct and direct strategies. And both preferred the explanation strategy most with alternative and apology, which showed that regardless of the detailed ways of achieving L2 refusals, learners with different English competence still have very similar thinking patterns to refuse others' requests.

Table 1. The overall frequency of L2 refusal strategies

Refusal strategies	Low proficiency			High proficiency		
	Request	Insistence	total	Request	Insistence	total
Performative verbs/Bluntness	0	0	0	0	0	0
Non-performative statements/negation of proposition	6	1	7	2	0	2
GROUP TOTAL-Direct	6	1	7	2	0	2
Plain indirect	2	3	5	9	2	11
Wish	0	0	0	0	1	1
Reason/Explanation	19	8	27	22	5	27
Regret/Apology	13	5	18	9	3	12
Alternative	5	11	16	16	9	25
Disagreement/discussion/criticism	0	2	2	2	0	2
Statement of principle/philosophy	0	0	0	0	0	0
Avoidance (verbal)--Hedging	1	0	1	2	1	3
GROUP TOTAL-Indirect	40	29	69	60	21	81
Positive opinion	0	0	0	0	0	0
Willingness	6	2	8	5	0	5
Gratitude	0	0	0	0	0	0
Agreement	0	0	0	0	3	3
Solidarity/Empathy	1	1	2	6	0	6
GROUP TOTAL-Adjunct	7	3	10	11	3	14
TOTAL	53	33	86	73	24	97

3.4.2 The request-response stage

Surprisingly, learners' overall use of refusal strategies was significantly affected by their English proficiency regarding the request-response stage, with $t=-2.494$, $p<.05$. This means that low proficiency students produced fewer strategies since they spoke less. More specifically, higher proficiency learners used extremely more indirect strategies ($t=-2.939$, $p<.05$), especially the strategy of plain indirect ($t=-2.307$, $p<.05$) and alternative ($t=-3.584$, $p<.001$), and also more empathy strategy which belongs to the adjunct type ($t=-2.147$, $p<.05$).

3.4.3 The insistence-response stage

However, in the insistence-response stage, English proficiency didn't have a significant influence on learners' use of refusal strategies. They all most frequently used the strategy of alternative, i.e., offering some other solutions to solve the problem. It's worth noting that according to Table.1, the low proficiency learners produced more refusal strategies than high proficiency learners. After examining the data in detail, the author found that it was led by the way low proficiency learners engage in the conversations. They spoke less in the first turn and preferred to produce more only when their interlocutors said more. Thus, they used more strategies in the insistence-response stage.

3.5. The sequential organization and formatting of refusals between two proficiency groups

3.5.1 The request-response stage

Dispreference is characterized by a delay or outright avoidance of the core refusal, which is achieved sequentially through inter-turn gaps and delays, turn-internally via certain prefatory particles (such as "well", "oh", "umm"), mitigation, etc. [16]. Concerning the first turn of refusals, both groups showed consistent dispreference marking. They both delayed the core second pair part, used prefatory particles, and provided explanations, apologies, willingness, etc. for their refusals. Also, both groups produced the structure of "admitting + explanation" following a pause or combination of pause and particles, which confirmed their interactional competence to mark refusals as dispreferred.

However, because of the proficiency effect, learners' processing and expressing capacity differed and they packaged the refusal messages in different ways.

The low proficiency group paused unconventionally longer before taking their turns, and most chose the combination of pause and prefatory particles as their beginning. Then, due to low English competence, they have fewer available interactional tools to mark dispreference, and thus only applied much shorter explanations to perform their refusals as shown in Excerpt 1. Moreover, although they had the intention to delay the refusal to decrease the impoliteness, they did it in an unappropriate way such as saying "I didn't mean to offend you" that was too serious in this context.

Excerpt 1: (Low, group 1, S1)

A: (1.0) umm:: (.) my computer:: is broken (0.3) and I need to hand in my homework. (0.7) so:: can I use your computer?

B: (1.0) umm: bu::t I have to fini (0.3) finish my homework↓ (0.5) and I should hand in my homework (0.3) tomorrow morning.

In contrast, higher proficiency learners usually produced more, combining various interactional tools and implementing them more conventionally when refusing others. They showed more active reciprocity and fine-tuned recipient design, producing sequential organizations that didn't happen in the low proficiency group but most appeared in the native speaker group [17]. The first noteworthy character is their frequent deployment of "well" prefacing. Since it was only employed by the native speaker group [17], it revealed high proficiency group's native-like interactional competence. Also, they deployed variations of pro forma agreement preceded by their explanations, such as producing "okay I see" or "yeah" to show agreement first, which didn't appear in the low proficiency group. It indicated high proficiency learners' enough English processing and speaking competence to utilize this tool, which allowed them to minimize disaffiliation and maximize their kindness, just like the native speakers do.

Finally, the high proficiency learners also uniquely applied the subjunctive mood to mark the dispreferred structure, as shown in Excerpt 2. Equipped with high English proficiency, this speaker could easily and quickly use a complex sentence to perform English refusal, which was unavailable for low proficiency learners.

Excerpt 10 (High, group 1, S1):

B: (0.9) ahh (First name) you know if I:: (0.8) am convenient (.) I definitely will lend you my laptop-but (.) I'm really sorry (·hhh) and I think it's @ really a coincidence that (·)(·hhh) I have a (0.4) deadline too:: -and so (0.8) I (hhhh) I I need to finish my paper this: (0.3) er: evening↑-maybe I will er::: stay up late↑ so that I can hand in my term paper (0.3) tomorrow morning before the dea: er before the deadline-so:: (.) I'm really sorry that I:: couldn't (.) lend my laptop to you (0.3) so maybe you can turn to another↑ er: stu[dent↑ (0.4) I guess↑]

3.5.2 The insistence-response stage

Concerning the insistence-response stage, learners regardless of their proficiency provided alternatives to respond to others' insisting requests, which was also dispreferred, aiming to maintain social solidarity and decrease the awkwardness and impoliteness of refusing the interlocutor again, such as "maybe we can go to the library for help". Similar to the first stage, pausing and prefatory particles such as "oh" and "umm" were also used before speaking, although the pausing length was much longer (e.g., 2.1 seconds) since the refusers may not expect the insistent requesting and needed more time to process. Moreover, they also paused and apologized to eliminate the face-threatening nature of the repeated refusals.

However, due to English proficiency differences, the two groups also employed different interactional tools to mark their dispreferred responses. The low proficiency learners widely used the format of "but + explanation" immediately after the insistence, such as "but I also need this, it is necessary" and "but now I am writing my homework and I need to hand in tomorrow morning". Since the insistent request was unexpected, the learners needed to reformulate their responses, but their limited English storage hindered them from marking dispreference. Therefore, they could only repeat

the reason why they can't lend their laptop/charger to avoid the bald preferred organization. And noteworthy, their responses were also shorter than high proficiency learners which confirmed their exhausted English repertoire.

But for the high proficiency group, the most used pattern was "pro format agreement + explanation + alternative" which could be seen in the following excerpt. Followed by the common pausing and particles, the variations of pro forma agreement "okay but..." was used together with accounts, which only appeared once in the low proficiency group. Speaker B also further provided an alternative to mitigate the impoliteness.

Excerpt 3 (High, group 4, S1):

B: [well okay::] but: (0.4) you know (.) I (0.7) I have just began to do tha::t so:: when I finished it maybe (.) like (.) early in the morning (0.5) so:: if you want to I can len (.) I can lend it you (.) then:: but now:::↑ sorry.

As illustrated, most high proficiency learners showed a greater ability to recipient design their utterances more conventionally and accurately, trying hard to maintain social solidarity and minimize bald disaffiliation. Due to higher English proficiency, they could still quickly process their responses and flexibly exploit various sequential resources to mark dispreference when facing surprising insistent request, which was also the most significant difference between the two groups.

In summary, the sequential organization and formatting of learners' refusals were also affected by English proficiency which led to different interactional competence.

4. Discussion

This study first investigated the relationship between English proficiency and the appropriateness of learners' refusal productions. As expected, higher proficiency learners produced more appropriate refusals, with fewer grammatical and discourse errors, which supported Taguchi's and Masaeed et al.'s findings [9, 12]. Three reasons may result in the inappropriateness, consisting the lacking English oral ability, the confusing word usage such as "borrow" and "lend", and misuses of expressions such as "achieve homework". This study also revealed significant differences between the two groups regarding fluency, which corresponded to Taguchi's findings [9]. It was brought by high proficiency learners' rich English knowledge bases, skillful oral English ability, and native-like mindsets. Furthermore, English proficiency largely affected the syntactic complexity of learners' refusals, which has not been examined by the previous research. Low proficiency learners were found to use much less verb phrases, complex nominals, and more simple sentences in conversations, because their insufficient English ability only allowed them to produce a few simple sentences between turns to avoid mistakes.

Furthermore, the frequency of refusal strategies was explored. From the overall perspective, high proficiency learners used more refusal strategies concerning both number and type, which supported the previous findings [7, 12]. This may be created by their different English competence and pragmatic competence since low proficiency learners lacked sociocultural knowledge which limited their use of refusal strategies in a full capacity [18]. Moreover, both groups used indirect strategies most frequently and direct strategies rarely, and they preferred the same specific refusal strategies containing explanation, apology, and alternative, which agreed with findings from most studies. For example, according to Cai, both American native speakers and Chinese English learners preferred to use indirect refusal strategies [19], which exhibited that both tend to obey the cooperative principle and the politeness principle to prevent misunderstanding and offenses [20]. However, previous research done within the context of Asia showed that native speakers were more direct than learners, which may be brought by the nature of collectivist cultures in which learners prefer a more implicit way of communication that puts the weight of correct interpretation on the hearer [21]. Also, this study presented that the English proficiency effect did not noticeably affect learners' overall use of refusal strategies, which showed that the development of learners' pragmatic competence lagged behind their external English ability. It supported that proficiency may not guarantee learners' sociopragmatic

knowledge, i.e., knowledge of what to say and how much to say in certain situations [22]. More specifically, the explanation was mostly used in Chinese regardless of context [23], which can be explained by the L1 pragmatic transfer. As Kasper claimed, if the L1 strategy is recognized as appropriate and frequently used, it is likely to be transferred to the L2 context [24]. Thus, both groups overused explanations to refuse in English since it is commonly used in Chinese culture.

Also, this study found that although the two groups didn't show significant differences in terms of overall conversation and the insistence-response stage, their use of refusal strategies in the request-response stage displayed prominent differences, especially for the strategy of plain indirect, alternative, and empathy, which was led by the different lengths of production. High proficiency learners produced much more content that combined various strategies while low proficiency learners only produced more when being elicited by the interlocutor in the next turns.

Finally came the sequential organization and formatting of both groups' L2 refusals. This study demonstrated that English proficiency had a great influence on learners' specific ways to mark their refusals as dispreferred in both stages, with the high proficiency learners utilizing the formatting in a much native-like way. The findings are in line with previous research [7, 25]. With English proficiency increasing, learners' interactional competence developed, which means that they could deploy and combine more interactional tools more accurately, actively, and conventionally, and process the productions faster so that they could "demonstrate their commitment to the maintenance of social solidarity and minimizing of disaffiliation" [17]. Thus, they employ the sequential resources in a more native way, such as using "well" prefacing, variations of pro forma agreement, etc., and still could produce enough information even facing unexpected insistent requests.

5. Conclusion

This study illustrated that English proficiency affected all these 5 aspects, although the size of influence varied concerning different measures. Possessing more proficient English ability, high proficiency learners owned well-developed English repertoire consisting of rich linguistic resources, rapid processing and production competence, expanded interactional competence, etc. Thus, they produced longer and grammatically complex L2 refusals more appropriately and fluently, using a rich combination of refusal strategies and marking them as dispreferred social actions in a native-like way. However, even the advanced English learners showed negative L1 pragmatic transfer, meaning that their mindsets were still dominated by Chinese culture and they don't master enough English pragmatic competence. These made contributions to the English pragmatic pedagogy. For example, teachers should pay attention to cultivating learners' basic English skills as a premise for learners' development of pragmatic competence, and the weight of English teaching should also be shifted to the instruction of the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge of the target language.

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