

A Review on Refusals in Second Language Pragmatics Instruction

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Abstract

Research on the development of L2 pragmatic competence has focused chiefly on speech acts. However, this does not mean that speech acts are sufficiently understood. Refusals have been much less studied than requests, though they are the second most investigated speech act (Ren, 2022). This paper aims to make contributions to L2 refusal instruction by reviewing previous studies on L2 refusals. In conclusion, research on L2 refusal instruction has mostly concentrated on implicit and explicit instruction, ignoring the role of task-based instruction and other instructions. However, they are widely used in other second-language acquisition (SLA) areas, like morphosyntax. Individual learner factors like L2 proficiency and working memory are investigated in L2 refusal instruction. This paper aims to make contributions to L2 pragmatics by reviewing empirical research on L2 refusals.

Keywords: refusals, L2 pragmatics instruction, learner characteristics

1. Introduction

Refusals are highly face-threatening and are considered to be more complicated than other speech acts, such as compliments and requests. This is mainly because “refusals are produced in response to others’ request, invitation, offer or suggestion and therefore do not allow for much pre-production planning and preparation” (Houck & Gass, 2011: 2). Within the field of second language pragmatics, there is substantial research on the effects of instruction on learner’s pragmatic development (e.g., Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2018; Ren, 2015; Taguchi, 2013). However, refusals were not sufficiently investigated. Research on L2 refusal instruction has studied chiefly the effect of implicit and explicit instruction on ESL learners. The second section reviews empirical studies on learners’

pragmatic development in producing interlanguage refusals, focusing first on implicit and explicit instructions and then on other studies.

Individual learner factors are essential considerations in pragmatics instruction because they inevitably impact learners’ capacity to complete and engage in tasks, shaping their actual learning experience. Hence, factors that are indicative of their capacity and engagement, such as proficiency, working memory capacity, and motivation, are important to examine. The fourth part reviews research on the effect of individual learner factors (L2 proficiency and working memory) on learners’ L2 refusal development.

2. Pragmatic Competence

As an important field of linguistics, pragmatics refers to “the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication” (Crystal, 1997: 301). Pragmatics involves two knowledge dimensions: pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics (Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983). The former is concerned with forms of language that can be used to perform language functions, including pragmatic strategies such as directness, indirectness and routines, while the latter is concerned with a language user’s understanding of the context in which these forms are used.

Pragmatic competence is defined by Thomas (1983: 92) as “the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context.” Taguchi (2019: 4) defines pragmatic competence as “a multi-dimensional and multi-layered construct that entails three main components: (1) linguistic and sociocultural knowledge of what forms to use in what context; (2) interactional abilities to use the knowledge in a flexible, adaptive manner corresponding to changing context; and (3) agency to make an informed decision on whether or not to implement the knowledge in the community”. Ren (2022) argues that Thomas’s definition neglects other semiotic and multimodal resources that are used in interaction, such as emoticons and emojis in digital communication, so he proposes a downgrading of the language part in Thomas’s definition and the addition of the dimension of appropriateness, thus defining pragmatic competence as the ability to use linguistic, semiotic, and multimodal resources effectively and appropriately to achieve a communicative purpose, and to understand such uses in interaction.

Taguchi (2015) maintains that language learners encounter challenges in developing their pragmatic competence because they have to attend to multipart mappings of form, meaning, function, force, and context. Such mappings are not only intricate but also variable and unsystematic. These difficulties in developing second language (L2) pragmatic competence suggest the need for pragmatics instruction.

Early work on pragmatic competence adopted a comparative stance where identifying discrepancies between L2 learners’ pragmatic

production of target language speech acts and those of native speakers was of primary interest (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996; Kasper & Rose, 2002). Recently, researchers have turned their focus to nonnative speakers’ interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) competence. This work has generated significant literature on various speech acts, including apologies, invitations, refusals, and requests (Takahashi, 2010).

3. Definition of Refusals and Refusal Strategies

Refusals are complex speech acts that require not only negotiation, but also “face-saving maneuvers to accommodate the noncompliant nature of the act” (Gass & Houck, 1999: 2). Refusals are highly face-threatening and are considered to be more complicated than other speech acts such as compliments and requests. This is mainly because “refusals are produced in response to others’ request, invitation, offer or suggestion and therefore do not allow for much pre-production planning and preparation” (Houck & Gass, 2011: 2). Generally, refusals are considered to be parts of requests, suggestions, invitations, and offerings, which are responding acts in which the speaker denies to engage in the four kinds of actions proposed by the interlocutor (Levinson, 2001). According to Turnbull and Saxton (1997), the term refusal refers to the refuser’s overall contribution to a conversational exchange in which a request is made and denied to comply with.

The systematic categorization of refusal strategies was first put forward by Beebe *et al.* (1990), who argued that a refusal usually consists of several semantic formulas that can be understood by themselves alone. For instance, when an interlocutor refuses to lend something to others by saying “I’m sorry. Mine is lost. Why not ask John?” The refusal can be divided into the following three semantic formulas: “I’m sorry”, “Mine is lost”, and “Why not ask John”. It can be analyzed from the three semantic formulas respectively, and each of these formulas makes a refusal strategy. By analyzing refusals in this way, Beebe, *et al.* (1990) classified refusal strategies into direct refusal strategies, indirect refusal strategies, and adjuncts. Direct strategies are utterances in which the propositional content and the speaker’s intention are consistent. Therefore, the direct refusal strategy is the direct declination to the interlocutor. In this way, the speaker’s intention to refuse is expressed explicitly. In contrast,

indirect refusal strategies, meaning refusing others by uttering something other than refusal itself, are generally face-saving speech acts in which the interlocutors express their intention in an indirect way. Adjuncts, the third category, are semantic formulas which cannot make a refusal alone and are always used together with direct or indirect refusal strategies. However, they also play an important role in refusing.

4. Research on Refusals in L2 Pragmatics Instruction

Research on the development of L2 pragmatic competence has mostly focused on speech acts. However, this does not mean that speech acts are sufficiently understood. Indeed, only a couple of speech acts have attracted much attention, with many more only underexplored or even neglected altogether (Ren, 2022). Refusals have been much less studied than requests, though they are the second most investigated speech act. Studies on refusals have predominantly focused on English as the target language (e.g., Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2018; Ren, 2015; Taguchi, 2013), with only a few studies focusing on other languages such as Spanish (e.g., Félix-Brasdefer, 2008).

Since the late 1980s, there has been an upsurge in empirical research on whether and how L2 pragmatic features should be taught. By far, most studies confirm that virtually all aspects of L2 pragmatics are amenable to instruction and that, broadly, the benefits of instruction outweigh non-instruction (Taguchi, 2015). Most of the instructed L2 pragmatics studies conducted to date have been framed along the implicit-explicit instruction continuum to compare the relative efficacy of different treatment conditions (Jeon & Kaya, 2006). Research on refusals has primarily investigated refusal strategies and adjuncts to refusals (i.e., external modification), following the coding scheme developed by Beebe *et al.* (1990).

4.1 Research on Implicit and Explicit Instruction on L2 Pragmatics

4.1.1 Implicit and Explicit Instruction on L2 Pragmatics

In the instructed SLA literature, the purpose of implicit instruction is to induce learners to infer grammatical or pragmatic rules without drawing their focal attention to them (Ellis, 2009). Broadly, implicit instruction is geared to “incidental learning” where learners are not aware of the target feature (s). Therefore,

teaching practices which are associated with it involve “creating a learning environment that is ‘enriched’ with the target feature, but without drawing learners’ explicit attention to it” (Ellis, 2009, p. 17). However, in explicit instruction, learners’ attention is directed to a target feature and, as DeKeyser (1995, p. 380) puts it, ‘some sort of rule is being thought about during the learning process.’ This points to the fact that the central construct for characterizing and operationalizing implicit and explicit instruction is ‘attention’ (Chun *et al.*, 2011: 73). Explicit instruction caters to intentional learning, where learners are made aware that they are going to learn about grammar, vocabulary, or pragmatic aspects of language and then to practice them in the class (Ellis & Shintani, 2014).

There is a wealth of research suggesting that implicit and explicit instruction could have differential effects on L2 acquisition. Spada and Tomita’s (2010) meta-analysis found large effect sizes for explicit instruction over implicit instruction of both simple and complex grammatical features. Similarly, in L2 pragmatics literature, numerous studies have compared the effectiveness of implicit and explicit instruction of different pragmatic features.

House (1996) examined the relative effects of input and opportunity for communicative activities (i.e., implicit instruction) over explicit instruction of conversational routines on “pragmatic fluency”. She compared two versions of a similar communicative course which took place over 14 weeks. In the implicit group, participants were asked to do extensive conversational practice, but they were not presented with any metapragmatic information. In the explicit group participants received explicit metapragmatic information about the use and function of routines both orally and through handouts. Based on descriptive statistics, House concluded that explicit instruction was more effective than implicit teaching in helping learners to use gambits and strategies.

Alcón-Soler (2007) investigated the effectiveness of implicit and explicit instruction on learners’ pragmatic awareness of requests. In this study, implicit instruction was operationalized through presenting excerpts from a series called Stargate, using input enhancement and implicit consciousness-raising tasks. Explicit instruction consisted of presenting a scripted version of

excerpts from the same series used in implicit group as well as explicit consciousness raising tasks. However, she did not find any advantage for explicit instruction over implicit instruction except for the observation that only participants in the explicit group were aware of factors involving interlocutor social distance and level of imposition. She concluded that making use of explicit and implicit consciousness-raising activities in conjunction with feedback were beneficial for noticing requests.

Ghavamnia et al. (2014) compared four instruction conditions that differed in terms of the way in which input was enhanced and made more noticeable for participants. They have operationalized input enhancement on a continuum of explicit (i.e., metapragmatic explanation), less explicit (i.e., form comparison), and fairly implicit (i.e., typographically enhanced input plus input flooding) conditions. Overall, results of their study showed that more explicit methods of instruction (i.e., form comparison and metapragmatic explanation) were more effective than both the control group and input flooding and typographical enhancement.

4.1.2 Implicit and Explicit Instruction on L2 Refusals

Félix-Brasdefer (2008) examined the effects of explicit and implicit instruction of refusal strategies in Spanish as a foreign language. The experimental group (i.e., the explicit instruction condition), was presented with metapragmatic information, with the same material displayed on PowerPoint slides. Under the implicit condition, learners merely performed role plays. Félix-Brasdefer (2008) found that explicit instruction caused a significant decrease in the inappropriate use of direct refusals, and a significant increase in the use of indirect strategies, which is, in fact, considered to be more polite.

Al-Gahtani and Roever (2018) investigated how EFL learners' dispreference marking in refusals changed as their English proficiency and interactional competence increased. They found learners' options for implementing refusals as dispreferred actions expanded with the increase of their pragmatic competence. While learners with low English proficiency exhibited little delay or mitigation of refusals, those with intermediate proficiency used "yes, but" structures and other refusal turn formats,

showing early signs of being able to prolong the refusal by using sequential strategies. Advanced learners used sequential and lexical resources more precisely, and had access to a wider variety of refusal strategies. Additional techniques not used by all the learner groups were used by native English speakers, most notably the prefatory particle "well".

Ahmadian (2020) investigated the effects of implicit and explicit instruction of refusal strategies in English and whether and how the effects of different instruction methods interacted with learners' working memory capacity (WMC). He followed Beebe *et al.* (1990), coded and analyzed refusals in terms of semantic formulas. The results revealed that explicit instruction was more effective than implicit instruction for both the production and comprehension of refusals and both implicit and explicit instruction retained the improvement of refusal strategies in the delayed post-test administered two months later. It was also found that explicit instruction equalized learning opportunities for all learners different in WMC. Ahmadian argued that it was inappropriate to evaluate learners' pragmatic competence in terms of appropriateness, because what might sound utterly inappropriate to one person in a specific context might come across as fairly appropriate to another person or under different conditions.

4.2 Longitudinal Studies on L2 Refusals

Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993, 1996) and Barron (2003) have studied refusals longitudinally. In one of the earliest longitudinal studies on refusals, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993, 1996) investigated the pragmatic development of suggestions and refusals to suggestions in 10 advanced adult English learners in advising sessions. The findings indicated that the learners developed their pragmatic competence with regard to the choice of speech act and content, however they presented fewer changes in their ability to employ appropriate forms. The learners showed changes in their ability to employ appropriate speech acts by initiating more suggestions and fewer refusals. When the learners employed refusals, they refused more directly and explicitly, an approach that was considered to be more appropriate in advising sessions.

Barron's (2003) study was designed to investigate the pragmatic development of 33

Irish learners of German in their German requests, offers, and refusals to offers using a free Discourse Completion Task (DCT). The findings indicated that overall, the sojourn in the L2 speech community resulted in some important developments in the learners' L2 pragmatic competence. However, it was also found that not all change necessarily represented developments towards the L2 norm, reflecting a non-linear path in the learners' L2 pragmatic development.

5. Individual Learner Characteristics in L2 Refusals

5.1 L2 Proficiency

Findings on the influence of language proficiency on the development of pragmatic competence are inconclusive. Christiansen (2003) and Takahashi (2005) took Japanese college students as subjects and found that there was no significant correlation between their pragmatic competence and their second language proficiency, which was also confirmed in Ahn's study (2007). Liu (2006) also found that higher-proficiency Chinese EFL learners did not have higher pragmatic competence. The relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic competence was not a simple linear one. Chinese EFL learners' L2 pragmatic competence did not improve with the improvement of their foreign language proficiency (Wu & Chen, 2006; Siu, 2008; Chang, 2010; Ji, 2010).

Learners' L2 proficiency deserves consideration in task-based pragmatics instruction since existing studies have focused on proficiency and generated inconclusive findings. Ekiert *et al.* (2018) and Neary-Sundquist (2013) found that proficiency affects task performance, while Levkina (2018) did not find such effects in task-based learning of speech acts. These findings suggest that proficiency plays a different role in task performance and task-based instructional outcomes, which warrants further investigation.

Takahashi and Beebe (1987) examined Japanese English learners' L2 refusals. Learners varied in both learning contexts (EFL vs. ESL) and L2 proficiency levels (lower vs. higher). With respect to L2 pragmatic development, no significant effect of proficiency was found in the EFL context, whereas in the ESL context, the frequency of direct refusals decreased as the proficiency increased. In addition, the higher

proficiency ESL group appeared to have a wider range of expressions and more flexibility to adjust their level of directness according to different situations compared to the lower proficiency ESL group. The positive effect of study abroad was also evidenced in pragmatic transfer: Although pragmatic transfer existed in both the EFL and ESL contexts, L1 influence was more prevalent in the EFL context than in the ESL context.

Taguchi *et al.*'s (2022) scoping review of 156 studies showed that proficiency has been the most examined individual factor, studied in 86.5% of the studies, followed by motivation (8.3%). Their meta-analysis revealed that proficiency has a moderately sized effect on L2 pragmatic knowledge, with a slightly larger effect for productive knowledge over receptive knowledge. Taguchi (2022) studied the effects of feedback conditions and individual characteristics on learning request-making and found that higher English proficiency had a positive impact on their immediate gains in productive knowledge.

Taguchi (2013) studied the effects of proficiency on EFL learners' production of 4 types of refusals in formal and informal situations by using role plays. The refusals were analyzed for overall appropriateness and fluency. Appropriateness was quantitatively rated on a six-point scale, and qualitatively judged by the level of directness of the linguistic expressions used to produce refusals. Fluency was measured by the average number of words per minute. The results revealed a significant influence of proficiency on both appropriateness and fluency, for refusals both in formal and informal situations.

Wang and Ren (2022) studied the effects of proficiency and study-abroad on Chinese EFL learners' refusals via a computer-animated elicitation task. The refusals were evaluated by appropriateness, syntactic complexity, refusal strategies, adjuncts and internal modifiers. He found that there were significant effects of L2 proficiency on appropriateness and syntactic complexity.

The above literature review shows that whether the development of pragmatic competence is affected by L2 proficiency is still inconclusive. Previous studies have mostly focused on speech acts such as requests and apologies. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the relationship between

EFL learners' pragmatic competence and their English proficiency from more speech acts.

5.2 Working Memory Capacity

Working Memory is a limited-capacity cognitive mechanism responsible for temporarily storing and manipulating information (Baddeley, 2001). The theoretical model adopted in most of the SLA studies is originally developed by Baddeley and Hitch (1974). According to this model, WM is comprised of three main components: the central executive which controls the limited attentional capacity and is assisted by two subsidiary slave systems, the phonological loop and the visuospatial sketchpad. A large and growing body of research has shown potent WMC effects across various L2 learning mechanisms, production and comprehension skills, and abilities (e.g., vocabulary learning, speaking, L2 reading and writing) (Juffs & Harrington, 2011; Linck et al., 2014; Wen et al., 2015), and there are theoretical grounds to hypothesize that learners with greater WMC are more likely to benefit from implicit instruction conditions.

Taguchi (2008) examined the effects of WMC on processing L2 pragmatic features. This study explored whether and how speedy and accurate comprehension of conversational implicatures is affected by WMC as measured by Reading Span Test. However, it did not examine how WMC mediates the effects of different L2 pragmatics instruction methods. The findings did not reveal any statistically significant relationship between WMC and comprehension of implicatures.

Allami & Naeimi (2011) found significant differences between Persian and American speakers in terms of the ways in which they realize refusals. Also, they found that with an increase in L2 proficiency, the amount of transfer of first language (L1) sociocultural norms to L2 performance rises significantly.

Ahmadian (2020) investigated the differential effects of implicit and explicit instruction of refusal strategies in English and whether and how the impacts of instruction methods interact with learners' WMC. The unique feature of this research is demonstrating that explicit instruction of refusal strategies equalizes learning opportunities for all learners with differential levels of WMC.

6. Conclusion

In summary, research on L2 refusal instruction

has mostly concentrated on implicit and explicit instruction, ignoring the role of other instruction, like task-based instruction and corpus-based instruction, especially when computer-assisted language learning (CALL) is popular, and other speech acts like requests are taught effectively by task-based instruction. Furthermore, whether the development of pragmatic competence is affected by L2 proficiency and working memory is still inconclusive. Previous studies have mostly focused on speech acts such as requests and apologies. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the relationship between EFL learners' pragmatic competence and their English proficiency from more speech acts.

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