SPEECH ACT SETS OF REFUSAL AND COMPLAINT: A COMPARISON OF NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKERS' PRODUCTION[1]

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Introduction

Communicative, or pragmatic, competence is the ability to use language forms in a wide range of environments, factoring in the relationships between the speakers involved and the social and cultural context of the situation (Lightbown and Spada, 1999; Gass and Selinker, 2001). Speakers who may be considered "fluent" in a second language due to their mastery of the grammar and vocabulary of that language may still lack pragmatic competence; in other words, they may still be unable to produce language that is socially and culturally appropriate.

Speakers employ a variety of communicative acts, or *speech acts*, to achieve their communicative goals, including Searle's seminal broad categories – classification, commissives, declarations, directives, expressives, and representatives – as well as more specific acts such as apologies, requests, complaints, and refusals (Kasper and Rose, 2001). A great deal of research has been done on the speech acts of apologies and requests, including studies by Olshtain and Blum-Kulka (1985), Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986) House and Kasper (1987), Trosborg (1987), Tanaka (1988), and Faerch and Kasper (1989) (as cited in Kasper and Dahl, 1991), as well as those by Brown and Levinson (1987), Blum-Kulka and House (1989), Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989), Barlund and Yoshioka (1990), and Bergman and Kasper (1993) (as cited in Kasper and Rose, 2001). Fewer studies on complaints and refusals have appeared in the literature; Olshtain and Weinbach (1987), Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1990), Chen (1996), and Murphy and Neu (1996) represent some of this research.

This paper investigates the differences between native and non-native English speakers' production of refusals and complaints. It is hoped that this study, with subjects who represent a wide range of first languages, will provide a more broad understanding of the discrepancies that can exist between native and non-native complaints and refusals, rather than those specific differences that tend to exist between American speakers and speakers with a particular first language, as were reported in the studies by Olshtain and Weinbach (1987), Beebe, et al (1990), Chen (1996), and Murphy and Neu (1996), who worked with Hebrew, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean speakers, respectively. The discovery of more general patterns of pragmatic failure as produced by a group of subjects from varying first language backgrounds could be helpful to American ESL educators who must address the needs of classrooms comprised of students from around the world. The results should provide examples that English teachers can use to illuminate situations in which

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students may fail pragmatically, and, in turn, to develop curricula to address these problem areas.

Literature Review

The Speech Act Set

A speech act set is a combination of individual speech acts that, when produced together, comprise a complete speech act (Murphy and Neu, 1996). Often more than one discrete speech act is necessary for a speaker to develop the overarching communicative purpose – or illocutionary force – desired. For example, in the case of a refusal, one might appropriately produce three separate speech acts: (1) an expression of regret, "I'm so sorry," followed by (2) a direct refusal, "I can't come to your graduation," followed by (3) an excuse, "I will be out of town on business" (Chen, 1996). The speech act set is similar to the speech event, which takes into account the speech acts of all interlocutors (Scollon and Scollon, 2001). For example, the speech event "asking for the time," could be composed of four speech acts. The first speaker may (1) excuse him or herself for interrupting, then, (2) ask the listener for the time. The second speaker will likely (3) state the time, and the first speaker will (4) thank him or her for the information.

Cohen and Olshtain (1981) found that an apology could be comprised of one or more components, each a speech act in its own right: an apology, "I'm sorry;" an acknowledgement of responsibility, "It's all my fault;" an offer to compensate, "I'll replace it;" a promise of forbearance, "It will never happen again;" or an explanation, "It was an accident." The semantic formula, or speech act set, has also been used to analyze other speech acts, including refusals and complaints.

The Speech Act Set of Refusals

The speech act of refusal occurs when a speaker directly or indirectly says *no* to a request or invitation. Refusal is a face-threatening act to the listener/requestor/inviter, because it contradicts his or her expectations, and is often realized through indirect strategies. Thus, it requires a high level of pragmatic competence (Chen, 1996).

Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1990), studying refusals produced by American English speakers and Japanese EFL learners, analyzed the refusals as a formulaic sequence, comprised – in the case of refusing an invitation – of (1) an expression of regret, followed by (2) an excuse, and ending with (3) an offer of alternative. In studying these refusals, they found that Japanese speakers of English and native speakers differed in three areas: the order of the semantic formulae, the frequency of the formulae, and the content of the utterances. While the Japanese speakers appropriately produced the same semantic components as their American peers, the quality of the utterances was very different. American subjects tended to offer specific details when giving explanations, while the Japanese subjects often produced explanations that might be interpreted as vague by Americans.

Chen (1996) used semantic formulae to analyze speech act sets of refusal (refusing requests, invitations, offers and suggestions) produced by American and Chinese speakers of English. She found that direct refusal (i.e., "No") was not a common strategy for any of the subjects, regardless of their language background. Further, she found that an expression of regret, common in American speakers' refusals, was generally not produced by the Chinese speakers, which could lead to unpleasant feelings between speakers in an American context.

The Speech Act Set of Complaints

The speech act of complaint occurs when a speaker reacts with displeasure or annoyance to an action that has affected the speaker unfavorably (Olshtain and Weinbach, 1987). Like a refusal, it is also a face-threatening act for the listener, and often realized through indirect strategies.

Olshtain and Weinbach (1987) studied the speech act of complaint as produced by native and non-native speakers of Hebrew. The researchers developed five categories of speech acts that were based on severity of the complaint for a specific scenario, in which one colleague had waited for another colleague, who arrived late to a scheduled appointment. The five categories were: (1) below the level of reproach, "No harm done, let's meet some other time;" (2) disapproval, "It's a shame that we have to work faster now;" (3) complaint, "You are always late and now we have less time to do the job;" (4) accusation and warning, "Next time don't expect me to sit here waiting for you;" and, (5) threat, "If we don't finish the job today I'll have to discuss it with the boss" (p. 202). They found that both groups, regardless of first language, made use of each strategy, while – at least for this particular scenario – tending to prefer the middle of the scale – disapproval, complaint and accusation – rather than the extremes of the continuum (below the level of reproach and threat), avoiding being either too soft or too confrontational.

Murphy and Neu (1996) applied the speech act set to complaints produced by American and Korean speakers of English. The authors identified the semantic formula as (1) an explanation of purpose, (2) a complaint, (3) a justification, and (4) a candidate solution: request. They found a high correlation between native and non-native speakers when producing three of the four speech act components – explanation of purpose, justification, and candidate solution: request. Native and non-native speakers differed in production of the second component, the complaint. The American subjects produced a complaint in each instance, i.e., "I think, uh, it's my opinion maybe the grade was a little low," whereas most Korean subjects tended to produce a criticism, i.e., "But you just only look at your point of view and uh you just didn't recognize my point" (p. 200). Such criticism was reported to have the potential of offending the interlocutor or shutting down the interaction in an American context.

Summary of findings

Differences in the realization of refusals and complaints exist between native and non-native speakers regardless of the languages at issue. Refusals produced in English by Japanese and Chinese speakers have been found to be sometimes vague and indirect, or lacking the requisite excuse prescribed by American culture. On the other hand, complaints, in the American cultural context, have been found to be too direct as produced by Korean speakers of English; sometimes these subjects' complaints were actually realized by a direct criticism, serving to shut down the interaction. Both refusals and complaints – requiring a high level of pragmatic competence – are often achieved by native speakers with only the narrowest margin of appropriateness, and therefore the job of learning to use them appropriately is even more onerous for the non-native speaker.

Methods

Overview

To compare the pragmatic competence of adult ESL speakers to that of adult native English speakers when performing the speech acts of complaints and refusals, all participants were given Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs) wherein they were asked to write their responses to six prompts, representing the two speech acts and two distractors, within familiar equal and superior-inferior relationships. DCTs have been used as the basis of many speech act studies, including Olshtain and Weinbach's (1987) study of complaints, and Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz' (1990) study of refusals.

Responses of native English speakers were reviewed for evidence of common components of speech act sets to establish a set baseline responses. The responses made by non-native speakers were then evaluated for the presence and quality of the speech act components as compared to the native speakers.

Participants

The participants were 25 graduate students at American University in Washington, DC. Subjects' ages ranged from 21 to 46 years old. Of the 25 subjects, five were male and 20 were female. Twelve of the participants were native speakers of English. Thirteen of the subjects were non-native speakers of English, whose first languages included Chinese, Haitian Creole, Korean, Polish, Russian, Serbian, Spanish, and Thai. The study was conducted at American University in Washington, DC, USA. All subjects maintained residences in the Washington, DC metropolitan area.

At the time of this study, the non-native English-speaking subjects reported time spent in the United States as ranging from 1 year and 2 months, to 23 years. Two participants had spent time in another English-speaking country (both in the United Kingdom for six months or more).

A stratified sampling technique was used. Participants were restricted to adults engaged in a course of graduate study in an American (English-speaking) university with the expectation that subjects would be highly proficient in English. Each participant was engaged in graduate study in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages.

Each of the non-native English-speaking subjects had studied English in a formal ESL or EFL setting for at least one year, with the exception of the subject for whom Serbian was the native language; this subject, at age 7, was immersed into an English-speaking elementary classroom and received no formalized ESL or EFL instruction. The non-native English-speaking subjects all used English in their university classes; 60% of the non-native speakers reported using English "often," "everyday," or "all the time," while 40% reported using English "not often," or only at school or work. Half of the non-native speakers (54%) considered themselves fluent in English, while 23% reported they were "sometimes," "almost," or "not quite" fluent. Three subjects (23%) reported that they were not fluent in English.

Materials

The subjects were provided with a survey packet comprised of an Informed Consent Form (Appendix A), a Demographic Survey (Appendix B), and a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) (Appendix C).

In the written Demographic Survey, subjects were asked to provide basic information (age, gender, course of study, and first language) as well as more specific information if the subject was a non-native speaker. Specific information elicited included: English learning environments, length of formal English study, frequency and context of English use, self-determination of English fluency, total time spent in United States, and total time spent in other English-speaking countries.

The Discourse Completion Test, or DCT, was composed of six prompts. Four prompts were created to elicit the specific speech acts comprising the focus of the study, complaints and refusals; two distractors were also included. (These distractors elicited an apology and a request, and are not included in the results of the study.)   The prompts suggested equal or unequal power in the relationships of the speakers; scenarios involved either the subject and another classmate, or the subject and a professor. In each scenario, the subject is familiar with the interlocutor. Each prompt simulated a situation that could occur in a university setting. While the six prompts were listed in random order based on speech acts within the DCT, the DCTs issued to the subjects were identical to each other. The subject of each prompt is listed below:
1.   **Refusal** of invitation given by professor
2.   *Request* (distractor)
3.   **Refusal** of invitation given by classmate
4.   *Apology* (distractor)
5.   **Complaint** made to professor re: missing letter of recommendation
6.   **Complaint** made to classmate re: missing copy shop job

An example of Item 1 is provided below:

> You are working on a group project with three other students. Your group is having a discussion with your professor late Friday afternoon. It is 5:30pm. You are planning to pick up a friend at the airport immediately after the meeting and must leave the university within 15 minutes.

> Professor: Hey, it's getting late. Why don't we all go down to the cafeteria? We can finish up there while we eat dinner.

> You: (*participant response*)

Procedures

Subjects were asked to participate in the study in person by the researcher. The subjects were provided with a survey packet comprised of the Informed Consent, the Demographic Survey, and the Discourse Completion Test (DCT). Subjects were asked to complete the Informed Consent. They then responded to a written Demographic Survey in which they provided the information described above.

Lastly, subjects completed the DCT. Subjects responded by writing what their oral response would be to each situation posed. They were encouraged to respond quickly, and it was requested that they not carefully analyze what they thought their response *should* be. Subjects were asked to write their responses to match as closely as possible what they might actually say. Responses were returned to the researcher personally. Most subjects responded immediately, taking about 15-25 minutes to complete the survey in the researcher's presence. Twenty percent of the subjects completed the survey outside of the researcher's presence and returned the survey one or more days after receiving it. (This time delay could have affected the data by giving the subject extra time to reflect upon his or her answers, a luxury not available in spontaneous oral communication.)

The collected data was analyzed by the researcher for components of each speech act present in the responses. Using the native speaking subjects' responses to the DCT, a speech act set was formulated for each item. For example, a refusal could be comprised of three individual speech act components: (1) an apology ("Gee, I'm sorry"), (2) an explanation ("I have to go to work now"), and, (3) an offer to compensate ("Could we meet later?"). The presence of each component was calculated for frequency of use for both native and non-native speakers. The frequency of each component is presented in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4. Qualitatively, individual native speaker responses were analyzed for linguistic similarities to determine if language forms, were present in the largest number of responses. The non-native speaker responses were then reviewed to determine which language forms were present or absent as compared to the native speakers' responses.

Results

Presence of components of speech act sets

Each of the native speaker responses was analyzed for individual speech acts that served to complete the speech act set for each prompt. Both of the prompts constructed to elicit refusals produced identical semantic formulae. The prompts constructed to elicit complaints produced two different formulae.

Complaints. Four components were typically found in native speakers' production of complaints. These components were: (1) excusing self for imposition, such as, "Excuse me for interrupting;" (2) establishing context or support, as in, "I placed an order last week;" (3) a request, such as, "Can you please look for it?" and, (4) conveyance of a sense of urgency, as in, "I need it right away." In general, only three of the four components were produced for each prompt, based on the social distance between the interlocutors, one in which the student is in an inferior position to the professor, the other in which the customer is in a superior role to the shop clerk.

The first complaint prompt, in which the speaker is addressing the professor, tended to produce the following speech act set: (1) excusing self for imposition, "Sorry to bother you;" (2) establishing context or support, "I was wondering about the letter of recommendation you offered to write for me;" and, (3) a request, "Did you get a chance to send it?" The final component, conveyance of a sense of urgency, did not appear in the data produced by native speakers for this speaker-listener relationship.

Non-native speakers' complaints to the professor were analyzed for the presence of the speech act components found in native speakers' complaints. The frequency of use (by both native and non-native speakers) of the individual components of speech act set for this prompt can be found in Table 1.

In general, native and non-native speakers produced the components of this complaint speech act with roughly the same frequency, and in fact produced the request component with exactly the same frequency. The difference of 19% between native and non-native speakers producing the component of excusing oneself is less noteworthy than may be expected when it is taken into consideration that less than half of the native speakers produced this component consistently. (However, the presence of the component of excusing oneself still justifies the component as an important aspect of the complaint.) The absence of a conveyance of urgency is expected, as the speaker has asked the professor for a favor – something that the professor is not obligated to do. Furthermore, conveyance of urgency would not be appropriate given the power differential and social and cultural context of the student-professor relationship.

Table 1
Complaint 1 – made to professor
re: missing letter of recommendation

Components		Frequency of Use (# of responses exhibiting component / total # of responses)
Excusing self for imposition	NS	42 %
	NNS	23 %
Establishing context/ support	NS	100 %
	NNS	85 %
Request	NS	92 %
	NNS	92 %
(Conveying sense of urgency)	NS	Not present
	NNS	Not present

The second complaint prompt involved the speaker complaining to a copy shop clerk about an important copy job that is missing. In addition to the power relationship existing between clerk and customer, the clerk is a classmate and thus shares a relationship that is familiar and close in terms of status and social distance. In this case, native speakers produced a different speech act set than non-native speakers did when complaining to a peer. The components of this speech act set were: (1) establishing context or support, "I dropped it off yesterday;" (2) a request, "Please look again;" and, (3) conveyance of urgency, "I have to turn it in to my committee in one hour." The first component of the previous prompt, excusing oneself for imposition, is not present in this scenario, which is not surprising considering the familiarity of the interlocutors and their proximity in social status.

Again, non-native speakers' complaints to the classmate were analyzed for the presence of each component. The frequency of use of the individual components of the speech act set for this prompt can be found in Table 2.

Table 2
Complaint 2 – made to classmate re: missing copy shop job

Components		Frequency of Use (# of responses exhibiting component / total # of responses)
(Excusing self for imposition)	NS	Not present
	NNS	Not present
Establishing context/ support	NS	75 %
	NNS	66 %
Request	NS	100 %
	NNS	83 %
Conveying sense of urgency	NS	58 %
	NNS	50 %

Again, in the context of a complaint made to a classmate, native and non-native speakers produced the components of the above speech act set with close to the same frequency. The absence of excusing oneself for imposition is expected in that the speaker is in a customer role, as well as interacting with a social equal.

Refusals. Three components were typically found in native speakers' production of refusals of an invitation, and they were consistent between prompts, regardless of whether the interlocutor was of the same or higher social status. These components are: (1) an expression of regret, "I'm sorry;" (2) an excuse, "I have to pick up a friend at the airport;" and, (3) an offer of alternative, "Can we meet again tomorrow?"

The first refusal prompt required the speaker to decline an invitation to go to the cafeteria with the professor. Non-native speakers' refusals to the professor were analyzed for the presence of each of the components listed above. The frequency of use of the individual components of the speech act set for this prompt can be found in Table 3.

Table 3
Refusal 1 – made to professor's invitation

Components		Frequency of Use (# of responses exhibiting component / total # of responses)
Expression of regret	NS	83 %
	NNS	85 %
Excuse	NS	100 %
	NNS	85 %
Offering alternative	NS	50 %
	NNS	39 %

The frequency of use of the components above was very similar between native and non-native speakers. One noteworthy difference occurs in the component of excuse; non-native speakers were somewhat less likely to give an excuse for the refusal of a professor's invitation. Another distinction of note is that non-native speakers produced fewer offers of alternative than native speakers.

In the second refusal prompt, the speaker declined an invitation to go to lunch with a classmate. Non-native speakers' refusals to the classmate were analyzed for the presence of each of the components of the speech act set of refusal. The frequency of use of the components of the speech act set for this prompt can be found in Table 4.

Table 4
Refusal 2 – made to classmate's invitation

Components		Frequency of Use (# of responses exhibiting component / total # of responses)
Expression of regret	NS	100 %
	NNS	69 %
Excuse	NS	92 %
	NNS	92 %
Offering alternative	NS	83 %
	NNS	77 %

The components of excuse were produced with almost the same frequency between native and non-native speakers. The non-native speakers produced fewer expressions of regret and offers of alternative. Expressions of regret were produced in every native speaker refusal speech act in this scenario, and offers of alternative were produced in most native speaker refusals. When refusing a classmate's invitation, non-native speakers may feel that it is less necessary to express regret or offer alternatives, due to the familiarity and close social distance; however the fact that both of these elements are present in nearly all of the native speaker responses suggests that these components are in fact culturally and socially important in American refusals.

Quality of components of speech act sets

While native and non-native speakers often produced the same speech act set components for complaints and refusals, the quality of the components produced by native speakers differed from those produced by non-native speakers. In general, non-native speakers' responses were linguistically correct, but often lacked the pragmatic elements that allow these face-threatening acts to be well received by the interlocutor.

Complaints. In the complaint scenario with the professor, non-native speakers tended to produce request components that could be considered less appropriate than those produced by native speakers. Some of the non-native speakers requests were nearly identical to the native utterances, such as, "did you get a chance to send the recommendation letter?" produced by a non-native speaker, and "did you ever get a chance to send that recommendation letter I asked for?" produced by a native speaker. However, some non-native request components were less appropriate to the situation, including, "Do you remember *when you sent it* or *do you have a copy of it* so that we can send it again?" and "So, would you mind to tell me *when did you send it*?" At best, these utterances sound presumptuous, and at worst imply that the student was asking for proof that the letter had been written. The non-native speaker responses, "*Did you send the letter* I asked you to write for me?" and "*Is it done*?" are yes-no questions, once again suggesting that the professor can be held accountable by the student. In American culture, these questions are generally too direct, and may even sound confrontational.

In the complaint scenario with the classmate at the copy shop, one of the more obvious differences between native and non-native speakers was that non-native speakers sometimes added an emotional plea to the conveyance of urgency. Native speakers conveyed urgency with little personal detail: "It's very important," "I have one hour to deliver them to the evaluation committee," and "I have to deliver the copies by noon today," for example. Non-native speakers made the same statements, but sometimes with a personal element; i.e., "They are really important *to me* and I need to have a meeting in a couple of hours," and, "These booklets are so important *to me*!" The personalization of the plight may not be highly valued in American culture, where one's own special circumstances are not considered valid or responsible excuses for late work or tardiness. Such personalization in this case may even be considered whining or irritating.

Refusals. Nearly all of the native speakers offered a specific excuse when refusing the invitation of the professor in the first refusal prompt, "I have to pick up a friend at the airport," or some variation of this. Only about half of the non-native speakers offered a specific excuse, stating instead, "…I have a very important appointment," "I need to leave early," and, "I have to leave soon, I have a prior commitment." One non-native speaker avoided all of the native components of this speech act set (expression of regret, excuse and offer or alternative) by instead asking for permission to be excused, "Professor, may I please be excused from the remainder of this activity? It is important that I leave." This lack of specificity can lead to the speaker being perceived as vague or secretive. In the student-professor context, such vagueness can seem disrespectful, as if the student feels superior to the professor and thus justified to withhold information, or as if he or she cannot be bothered to provide the professor with a compelling reason to refuse the invitation.

Interestingly, the second refusal scenario, refusing the invitation of the classmate, shows that the non-native speakers were more willing to give a specific excuse to a peer, stating the same excuses as the native speakers. Native speaker excuses included, "I've got some studying to do," "I've really got to get caught up on this project," and, "I'm not taking lunch today so I can leave early." Non-native speakers produced similar excuses, such as, "I really have to finish this today," "I need to work on my project," and, "…today I have to leave early and I will skip lunch."

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to compare the differences between native and non-native English speakers' production of the speech acts of refusal and complaint. The hypotheses were:

1.   Non-native speakers of English *will produce fewer components* of the semantic formulae of refusal and complaint.

2.   Non-native speakers of English will produce utterances that *are not consistent with native speakers' in terms of appropriateness* to the situation.

Non-native speakers sometimes produced *fewer components* of the speech act sets of refusal and complaint than their native speaker counterparts. The *quality of the components* of the speech act sets produced by non-native speakers was sometimes less appropriate than those produced by native speakers.

Whether non-native speakers were well practiced in complaints and refusals, or had acquired the semantic formulae for the speech acts, or were able to rely upon their first languages to combine common parts of the speech act set, they generally produced the same components as the native speakers. Kasper and Schmidt (1996) also found that both intermediate and advanced learners use the same realization strategies as native speakers.

Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1998) argued that the impression of linguistic and phonological fluency may not be achieved simultaneously with pragmatic fluency, which is more likely acquired in the target language culture rather than one's first language culture. These findings suggest that it is possible that the non-native speaker subjects had acquired a higher level of pragmatic fluency due to having already spent more than a year in the target American culture.

One component that was absent from both native and non-native complaints was a direct assignment of blame. In this study, neither group outwardly issued blame in either of the scenarios, although the support component in the complaint to the classmate may have served to say, "It's not my fault that you've lost my copy job." One non-native speaker, however, stated, "I think I surely placed an order for 10 bound copies." The mitigators in this utterance give the impression that the speaker may be willing to take the blame for the mistake. In a scenario where the speaker is complaining to the professor about a low grade, Murphy and Neu (1996) found that native speakers tended to depersonalize the problem – to transfer blame from the professor to the paper – but that the non-native (Korean) speakers tended to place the blame directly on the professor.

A component generally absent from the refusal data was the direct refusal. Although a few students (native and non-native) did offer more direct refusals, such as "Actually, I can't" or "No, I don't," subjects generally avoided refusing directly. Chen (1996) also found that in refusals, most subjects avoided a direct refusal ("no"), choosing instead to provide reasons or excuses as a way to convey their inability or unwillingness.

Especially when responding to the prompt in which the speaker is complaining to the professor, non-native students responses were somewhat longer than those of native speakers. Olshtain and Weinbach (1993) found that non-native speakers' complaints were generally longer than those of native speakers. Additionally, middle level learners have been found to produce longer utterances than native speakers, low level learners and higher proficiency learners (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1986). Middle level learners may be uncomfortable with their attempts to produce appropriate utterances, and, as a result, keep talking. Lower level learners might not have the linguistic proficiency to attempt this strategy. This hypothesis would seem to be supported by the following example, in which the non-native speaker's utterance is twice as long as the native speaker's:

> Native speaker: Hi, Professor. I hate to bother you, but I
> need to follow-up on the reference letter that I had asked
> you to prepare for the interview committee. Did you have a
> chance to write and send it? (38 words)

> Non-native speaker: Hi, Professor! I stopped by to ask you
> about the letter of recommendation that I asked you to write
> for me some time ago. I have heard from the interview
> committee that they have not received your letter and that
> they can't review my application without it. Do you
> remember when you sent it or do you have a copy of it so

that we can send it again? I'm really sorry to bother you
about this but this is very important to me. (84 words)

There are many examples in the data in which the native and non-native speakers perform almost identically, both linguistically and pragmatically. For example, when refusing a classmate:

NS1.   I would love to, but I can't today. Let's make plans
to get together next week.

NNS3. Hi! Oh! I'm sorry. I would love to but I need to
work on my project. Why don't we go out during this
weekend?

However, high proficiency learners, such as the subjects of this study, are not pragmatically successful by default; instead they tend to show a wide range of pragmatic success.

Limitations

This study was compromised by several limitations that should be addressed if the study were to be duplicated. Limitations included, but were not limited to, the areas of the subject pool and the study instrument, the Discourse Completion Test.

The study should be replicated with a larger and more diverse group of subjects. With only 25 subjects, roughly half native and half non-native speakers, one subject's response could change the native or non-native group's percentage results by approximately 8%. This subject pool was largely female, with only 20% of the subjects being male. The subjects, all pursuing graduate studies in a TESOL program, could have been especially familiar with language pragmatics as part of their curriculum. Future studies should include students from a variety of academic fields.

The Discourse Completion Test, while a time-efficient instrument, may not be the best way to obtain authentic data. Subjects are writing, not speaking, and have the opportunity to contemplate and change their responses, something that is less possible in a naturalistic spoken setting. For this study, most subjects responded immediately, taking about 15-25 minutes to complete the survey in the researcher's presence. Twenty percent of subjects completed the survey outside of the researcher's presence, and many took a number of days before returning the completed survey. When naturalistic data collection is not an option, future studies should adopt procedures to better control the amount of time that the subject spends completing the DCT. Another enhancement may be to produce an oral version of the DCT, in which participants respond orally to the prompts and audio recordings are made and transcribed (Hendriks, 2002).

The DCT used for this study tested only four items, two samples for each speech act studied, and only one of those two for each of the social distances represented. Future

studies should use DCTs with a greater number of prompts directed to each of the four scenarios. Kasper and Dahl (1991) suggest that when using the DCT for interlanguage speech act studies, "questionnaires with 20 items and 30 subjects per undivided sample will serve as a rough guide" (p.16).

Conclusion

This study illuminates several areas where ESL/EFL students might appear inappropriate (i.e., confrontational, presumptuous, vague) when making a refusal or complaint. To help our students achieve optimal pragmatic success, teachers need to make students aware of specific *speech act sets* and the accompanying *linguistic features* that are necessary to produce appropriate and well-received refusals, complaints, and other important speech acts. Non-native speakers, especially those with little opportunity for interaction, may not have knowledge of the routine of semantic formulae, or may not have internalized such rules to adequately produce them in spontaneous speech (Kasper, 1997), and textbooks are generally not a good source of input for students when studying pragmatic functions (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). However, specific speech act instruction could lead to greater pragmatic competence for non-native speakers. In one study, ESL students demonstrated improvement in their performances of complaints and refusals after 3.5 hours of instruction, and continued to maintain their improvement in a post-test given six months after the instruction (Morrow, 1996, as cited in Kasper, 2001). Hudson (2001) suggests that teachers could use DCTs in the classroom to focus on social distance between speakers, and then use role play activities to mimic an authentic situation, beginning with the more semantically formulaic apologies and requests. These speech acts may be easier for students to acquire than refusals and complaints, which demand more social interaction as well as many face-saving moves. Future studies should investigate semantic formulae, or speech act sets, as potential materials for curriculum development, as well as classroom applications of the DCT.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent

Sharyl Tanck is conducting research on the English language use of adult ESL speakers. This pilot study intends to investigate how ESL speakers accomplish communicative purposes when speaking in English with university acquaintances through written responses and how these responses compare with those made by native speakers of English.

Methodology: An open-ended survey will be administered to adult ESL speakers and adult native speakers of English in the form of a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) in which participants in the study write the responses that they would make verbally for each situation described in the DCT. These DCTs will be collected by Sharyl Tanck in person or via electronic mail, and examined for how participants realize communicative intent in English in certain situations. The goal is to determine what language choices ESL speakers make when performing these speech acts, and how these responses compared to those made by native speakers. Participants' performance will be kept confidential, and participants' names will not be revealed, although specific responses from the DCTs may be used for exemplary purposes.

You can ask Sharyl Tanck about the research project at any time. You can call her at 202-319-8449 or 202-257-8348, or email her at shari544@aol.com. Ms. Tanck's faculty advisor in this pilot study is Dr. Sigrun Biesenbach-Lucas of American University in Washington, DC, who may be contacted at 202-885-2247 or sblucas@american.edu. There are no risks involved with your participation in either project. Only a small investment of your time is required. Your agreement to grant permission is voluntary and refusal will not be penalized. You may withdraw your consent at any time.

I, _____ *(print your name),* have read and understood the above description of Sharyl Tanck's research project. I hereby allow Sharyl Tanck to use the responses that I report on the DCT for purposes of pragmatic competence research as described above. I understand that she may present the results of this study at conferences or in professional publications.

Your signature: _____

Your printed name: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B

Demographic Information
1.   Age and Gender:

2.   Course of study at university:

3.   Is English your first language?

   (If Yes, please go on to the Discourse Completion Test on the next page.)

4.   If not, what is your first language?

5.   How many years have you studied English in classes?

6.   Have you studied English outside of school or university? If yes, please describe:

7.   What has your English study focused on (i.e., Grammar and grammar exercises, translation, conversation, reading skills, listening skills)?

8.   How often do you speak English?

9.   With whom do you speak English, and for what purpose?

10.   Do you consider yourself fluent in English?

11.   Total time spent in United States:

12.   Total time spent in other English-speaking countries (please specify country and amount of time):

Appendix C

Discourse Completion Test

Directions: Please write your response in the blank area. Do not spend a lot of time thinking about what answer you think you should provide; instead, please respond as naturally as possible and try to write your response as you feel you would say it in the situation. Potential follow-up responses by the other person in each scenario have been left out intentionally.

1. You are working on a group project with three other students. Your group is having a discussion with your professor late Friday afternoon. It is 5:30pm. You are planning to pick up a friend at the airport immediately after the meeting and must leave the university within 15 minutes.

Professor: Hey, it's getting late. Why don't we all go down to the cafeteria? We can finish up there while we eat dinner.

You:

_____

_____

_____

*****

2. You and a classmate have been working in the registration office at the university for two years. You are preparing for an emergency staff meeting in which 20 people will be participating, and need 20 sets of materials compiled right away. You decide to ask your classmate for assistance as soon as he arrives.

Classmate: Hi! So what's on our agenda today? Is there anything we have to prepare?

You:

_____

_____

_____

3. A classmate that you have known for a couple of years stops by your desk at the library and invites you to lunch. You want to leave school early today, so you would rather work through lunch to get ahead on your project.

Classmate: Hi. How have you been? Hey, do you want to go to the cafeteria and get a bite to eat?

You:

_____

_____

_____

<center>*****</center>

4. You borrow a classmate's notes because you and your lab partner missed class. You photocopy the notes and then give the notebook to your lab partner to photocopy as well. Your lab partner returns the notes to you and you return them to the classmate. When your classmate opens her notebook, she notices that coffee has been spilled on some of the pages and they are ruined.

Classmate: Hey, what happened here?

You:

_____

_____

_____

5. You are applying for a position with a multinational company. The interview committee has requested that you have your professors send letters of recommendation directly to the company. When you call the interview committee to check the status of your application, you are told that one of the recommendation letters has not arrived. You are concerned because you asked your professor for the letter over a month ago. You stop by your professor's office to find out what has happened.

Professor: Hi, [your name].

You:

_____

_____

_____

*****

6. Yesterday you placed an order at the photocopy shop for 10 bound copies of your thesis. Today you must deliver all 10 copies to your evaluation committee by 12:00 noon. When you go to the photocopy shop at 11:00am to pick up your booklets, the clerk, whom you recognize from one of your classes, seems confused and unaware of your request.

You: Hi, I'm [your name]. Do you have my thesis booklets ready?

Clerk: Hmmm. Uh, I don't see anything here under your name.

You:

_____

_____

_____

Thank you for your time and effort!