Refusing Requests: Is there A Difference between Students and their Teachers?

H. Ipek

Abstract—**Learning a foreign language not only involves learning to read, listen and speak in the target language or to learn its vocabulary and grammar. It also involves a competency in the pragmatics of the foreign language. It has been argued that grammatical knowledge does not necessarily ensure a corresponding level of pragmatic knowledge. Also, the pragmatics of native speakers and leaners may differ as well. Thus, this study aims to investigate the refusals to requests by non-native EFL students, their non-native teachers and their native teachers. 45 subjects (20 upper-intermediate EFL students, 20 non-native EFL teachers, and 5 native EFL teachers) voluntarily participated in the study. The data were collected using a discourse completion test (DCT) consisting of 12 situations as a written role-play questionnaire. Reponses were analyzed in terms of refuser status and semantic formulas using the classification of refusals suggested by Beebe, Takashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990). The content of the most frequent formulas were examined as well. Results revealed that there was no consistency in the order of semantic formulas and their contents among the participants when the respondent was in a higher position. Reponses to requesters at equal position showed a consistency between the native and non-native teachers but not between teachers and students. Finally, a complete similarity in the semantic formulas was observed among the three groups when the requesters and refuser were at equal potion or when refuser was in a lower position. Yet, the contents of these refusals differed. The findings suggest that language learners seem to have a need to improve their competency in using the refusals when they are in higher position.**

Index Terms—**Pragmatic competence, refusals, speech acts.**

I. INTRODUCTION

The aim in teaching a foreign language is to enable students to communicate in that language. This ability requires a competency in both grammar and pragmatics. Criper and Widdowson [1] stated that rather teaching only the rules of a language, the use of language should also be taught. Otherwise, learners might believe that the rules of grammar are the same as the rules of use. Thus, the rules of use should be taught in association with grammatical rules. The rules of use involve pragmatic competence, which is referred to as "the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context." [2] This knowledge that affects and determines the choices of the use of language in socially appropriate terms is said to be more complex for second or foreign language learners. One reason of this complexity is what learners transfer from their first language

(L1) and sociocultural factors. Also, "how and when to learn pragmatically appropriate speech" is regarded as another concern. [3] Schmidt [4] asserts that for pragmatic learning to happen "linguistic form, functional meaning, and the relevant contextual features" are important.

Research has shown that the pragmatics of the learners and native speakers are often quite different and that grammatical development does not ensure a corresponding level of pragmatic development. Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei [5] said that this difference is attributable to two key factors: "the availability of input and salience of relative linguistic features in the input from the point of view of the learner." They conducted a study to find out whether environment and level of proficiency affect the degree of pragmatic and grammatical awareness. Their results revealed that resident English as a Second Language (ESL) students in the US ranked pragmatic violations as more important, whereas, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in Hungary tended to rank grammatical violations higher. This finding was attributed to the higher amount of input of ESL students in the US. Consequently, they suggested that pragmatic awareness should be a goal of classroom instruction and that L2 learners should be provided with pragmatically relevant input.

Koike [6] conducted a study on the pragmatic competence of beginning Spanish students in the use of requests. The results revealed that students could easily identify speech acts and that they used less polite forms with greater illocutionary force when requesting, which she attributed to the level of proficiency. She suggested that textbook authors and classroom teachers should promote pragmatically appropriate input to occur. Similarly, Ellis [7] asserted that "learners have to learn when it is appropriate to perform a particular language function and also how to encode it."

Researchers mainly examined pragmatic competence through speech acts which constitute actions such as commanding, informing, questioning, and requesting [8]. As Koike [6] puts it, "the pragmatics of speech acts in the second language context involves issues of usage such as the appropriateness of the learner's utterance for the situation and the degree of politeness as perceived according to the target culture (p. 219)." Yule [8] defines politeness as the means employed to show awareness of another person's face; the public image of a person. When one shows an awareness of face of a socially distant person, this reveals respect or deference. When the other person is socially equal, then it shows friendliness. Furthermore, if a speaker says something that means a threat to another's self-image, this act is described as a *face threatening act*. When the speaker says something to lessen

the possible threat, then this is called a *face saving act.*

Transfer at the pragmatic level has caught the attention of researchers. Beebe, Takashi and Uliss-Weltz [9] examined whether negative pragmatic transfer exits in the order, frequency, and content of semantic formulas used in Japanese ESL learners' refusals. Their results revealed that Japanese ESL learners used the same range of semantic formulas but in a different order compared to Americans speaking English. Content of these formulas also revealed some differences. They inferred from these results that a difference in the order and content of refusals suggests negative transfer from the L1 and that a similarity reveals acquisition.

A study with English Langue Teaching (ELT) teacher trainees revealed that they mostly used excuse/reason/explanation in the Turkish context. The researchers concluded that this is a reflection of the students' culture, where people are more careful about how they refuse in order not to disappoint their interlocutor [10]. Similarly, a study on refusal strategies of Turkish and American native English speakers, and of Turkish EFL speakers found that all three groups of speakers used the strategy excuse/reason/explanation most frequently. Compared to the other 2 groups, Turkish native speakers used this formula the most. The study revealed that the strategies Americans employed the most were statement of regret, alternative, agreement, and negative willingness /ability. Turkish EFL speakers showed a similarity and used statement of regret, negative willingness/ability and request for help/empathy [11].

Female EFL learners were found to mostly prefer stating reason and excuse when refusing in English. For refusals in higher status, stating regret was common, and direct refusal and criticism were used when refusing requests from equal status [11].

Considering the importance of communicative competence, the present study aimed to find out the order, frequency and content of refusals to requests. It is based on the study carried out by Beebe, Takashi and R. Uliss-Weltz [9] and tried to identify if there is a similarity in the order and content of refusals between EFL students and their teachers. The results have implications about acquisition and language teaching respectively.

II. METHODOLGY

A. Subjects

45 voluntary subjects participated in this study. All participants were either students or teachers at an English Preparatory Program at a state University in Turkey. 20 of the subjects were EFL students (Ss) at the Upper-Intermediate level of proficiency between the ages of 17 and 20. Another 20 of the subjects were Turkish EFL teachers (Ts) who were teaching at the between the ages of 24 to 40. Their teaching experience ranged from 1 to 14 years. The other five subjects were Native English speaking EFL teachers (NTs), all of whom were British. Although, the number of British English speakers (BES) who participated in this study is very low, it was thought that their results would still shed light on the use of refusals to requests.

B. Data Collection

The data were collected through a Discourse Completion Test (DCT), which was a written role-play questionnaire and consisted of 12 situations) [9]. The twelve situations consisted of four stimulus types eliciting a refusal: three invitations, three requests, three offers, and three suggestions. One situation in each group required a refusal to a higher status person, one to a lower status person, and one to an equal status person. The directions were given on the DCT. The subjects were not told that they were required to write a "refusal" in order to avoid biasing the respondent's choice of response. Instead, a rejoinder followed the blank which made it obvious that a refusal is required.

C. Procedure

The student subjects were administered the DCT during a class hour in the presence of the researcher. They were given 50 minutes to fill in the questionnaire. Little explanation on the instructions but no explanation about the vocabulary was given since it was believed that the students at the upper-intermediate level of proficiency are proficient enough in English to understand the situations.

The teacher subjects were given the DCT and were asked to fill it in within two days whenever they had time and hand it to the researcher. This was done due to feasibility reasons. It was impossible to arrange a time that was suitable for all teachers to get together and fill in the questionnaire at the same place and time.

D. Data Analysis

A qualitative analysis was applied to determine the formula and content of refusals; and a quantitative analysis was used to determine the number and frequency of their use. Only the refusals to requests were analyzed. First, the responses of the subjects were analyzed in terms of semantic formulas. The formulas were analyzed according to the classification of refusals by Beebe, Takashi and R. Uliss-Weltz [9]. Then, the order of semantic formulas used in each refusal to requests was coded and the frequency of each formula was calculated. Refusals were also analyzed according to refuser status (higher, equal, lower). This analysis was done for each group of participants (Ss, Ts, and NTs). In addition, the content of the most frequent formulas were examined.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before discussing the results, it should be noted that not all of the participants used a refusal strategy in second order. The data revealed that there is no consistency in the order of semantic formulas when the respondent is in a higher position, where he/she has to turn down the request of a pay rise by an employee. Table I shows refusals used in first order, and Table II shows refusals used in second order.

As can be seen in Table I, teachers and their students tended to use various semantic formulas when they had to refuse a request as a higher status person. However, non-native teachers showed a consistency and half of them started their refusal with a positive opinion, followed by excuse/reason/explanation. Or, they started by stating regret. These findings party support previous studies [10], [11]. However, most students tended to first show or request empathy. In second position they mostly expected empathy from the requester. In case of the NTs

there was little consistency among them. NTs first expressed regret mostly, followed by giving a reason. The discrepancy between the refusal formulas might be due to the experience of teachers in following certain norms when refusing requests. Students differed from their teacher in their use of refusals. Perhaps, they need further improvement in their pragmatic competence, especially when using refusals in higher position.

TABLE I: SEMANTIC FORMULAS IN REFUSALS TO REQUESTS IN HIGHER REFUSER STATUS USED IN FIRST ORDER

	Group					
	T		S		NS	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Statement of positive opinion	10	50	4	20		
Statement of regret	5	25	2	10	2	40
Negative willingness/ability	2	10			1	20
Excuse/reason/explanation	2	10	2	10		
Statement of empathy	1	5	6	30	1	20
Request for empathy			5	25		
Positive opinion						
Postponement			1	5	1	20

TABLE II: SEMANTIC FORMULAS IN REFUSALS TO REQUESTS IN HIGHER REFUSER STATUS USED IN SECOND ORDER

	Group					
	T		S		NS	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Excuse/reason/explanation	9	30	1	5	2	40
Negative willingness/ability	5	25	5	25		
Statement regret	3	15	3	15		
Request for empathy	1	5	6	30		
Positive opinion	1	5				
Statement of principle			2	2		
Promise of future acceptance			1	1	1	20

When compared with the results of Americans speaking English [9], there is a similarity between the semantic order of Americans and non-native teachers. As the Turkish English teachers in this study, Americans tended to give a positive opinion in the first place when refusing. Turkish English teachers who participated in this study were perhaps mostly exposed to American English text books or American English via music, films or TV series which led to this similarity. The difference between the refusals of Americans and the British participants in this study could be attributed to cultural differences, even when they are speaking the same native language.

TABLE III: CONTENT OF REFUSALS WHEN REFUSER STATUS IS HIGHER

Group	Semantic Formula	Content
Ts	Statement of positive opinion	The refuser is pleased with the requester's work performance.
	Excuse/reason/explanation	The difficult financial situation of the company.
		The present economic crisis in Turkey.
STs	Statement of empathy	Sympathizes the worker's need or request for a pay rise.
	Request for empathy	Due to the economic crisis in Turkey.
		The difficult financial situation of the company.
NTs	Excuse/reason/explanation	Does not earn or have enough money.

The content of semantic formulas of refusals when the refuser

status is high, as seen in Table III, reveals that statement of positive opinion by teachers and statement of empathy by students all aim to save the face of the requester perhaps in order to make him or her feel more relaxed or less nervous.

An interesting finding is that the reasons stated by the teachers and the requests for empathy by the students both evolve around the same topic: the economic crisis in Turkey. This finding suggests that social matters play an important role in the responses of people. NTs mentioned economic constraints, however, they did not mention the economic crisis although they were residents in Turkey.

Table IV and V show the semantic formulas participants used when refusing a request from a requester in an equal status, where a classmate asks for class notes.

TABLE IV: SEMANTIC FORMULAS IN REFUSALS TO REQUESTS IN EQUAL REFUSER STATUS USED IN FIRST ORDER

	Group					
	T		S		NS	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Statement of regret	9	45	7	35	2	40
Criticizing requester	5	25	2	10	2	40
Statement of positive opinion	2	10	2	10		
Negative willingness/ability	2	10	3	15		
Statement of positive feeling	1	5				
Excuse/reason/explanation	1	5	1	5	1	20
Statement of negative consequence			1	5		
Request for empathy			1	5		
No			1	5		
Statement of empathy			1	5		
Guilt trip			1	5		

TABLE V: SEMANTIC FORMULAS IN REFUSALS TO REQUESTS IN EQUAL REFUSER STATUS USED IN SECOND ORDER

	Group					
	T		S		NS	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Excuse/reason/explanation	8	40	3	15	2	40
Negative willingness/ability	5	25	8	40		
Criticizing requester	2	10				
Statement of regret	2	10	3	15		
Statement of philosophy	1	5	2	10		
Request for empathy			2	10		
Statement of alternative			1	5		
Promise of future acceptance					1	20

TABLE VI: CONTENT OF REFUSALS WHEN REFUSER STATUS IS EQUAL

Group	Semantic Formula	Content
Ts, Ss,	Excuse/reason/ explanation	Refuser needs to revise the notes.
	Criticize the requester	Criticism on being late
Ns	Excuse/reason/	Refuser needs to revise the notes.

In this case, subjects tended to show mostly regret in the first position. In terms of a combination of regret and reason, in the second order, both native and non-native teachers used the same combination. This result may suggest acquisition on the non-native teachers' part, as argued by Beebe, Takashi and R. Uliss-Weltz [9]. However, students tended to express negative

ability or negative willingness in second position. This difference might suggest a difference in sociocultural experiences.

As can be seen in Table VI, the most frequent used formula when refuser status is equal was excuse/reason/explanation in all three groups. However, Turkish English teachers and students also tended to indicate criticism.

When subjects were asked to refuse the request of a friend to give him/her the class notes, the most consistent excuse/reason/explanation they provided was that they had to revise or study the notes themselves. Perhaps stating such a reason was viewed as more polite and saving one's own face. Another finding was that some participants tended to criticize the requester, therefore, using a face threatening act. Interestingly, more teachers (35%) than students (10%) tended to criticize the requester. This might be due to the fact that there is a higher possibility for students to be in the situation of the requester than for the teachers, which in return leads them to sympathize with the requester.

Finally, as seen in Table VII and VIII, there is a similarity in the semantic formulas and the order in refusals when the refuser is in a lower position, where he/she has to refuse the request by the boss to stay and work. However, teachers and students differ in terms of the content of their refusals

TABLE VII: SEMANTIC FORMULAS IN REFUSALS TO REQUESTS IN LOWER REFUSER STATUS USED IN FIRST ORDER

	Group					
	T		S		NS	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Statement of regret	11	55	7	35	2	10
Excuse	4	20	4	20		
Statement of positive opinion	3	15	3	15		
Positive feeling	1	5			1	5
Statement of alternative	1	5				
Negative ability	2	10				
No			2	10		
Promise of future acceptance			1	5		
Statement of sympathy			1	5		
Statement of sympathy					1	5

TABLE VIII: SEMANTIC FORMULAS IN REFUSALS TO REQUESTS IN LOWER REFUSER STATUS USED IN SECOND ORDER

	Group					
	T		S		NS	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Excuse	15	75	14	70		
Statement of Positive opinion	1	5				
Reason					3	30
Statement of positive opinion	1	5				
Statement of sympathy	1	5				
Negative willingness/ability			3	15	1	10
Statement of negative consequences			1	5		

Most of the participants first expressed regret and then an excuse. It seems that students follow the pattern of their teachers. However, when compared to the order by Americans speaking English, they tend to first give a positive opinion and then a statement of regret. It might be argued that, basing on the results of the Americans speaking English, teachers and students seem to have not acquired the refusal strategies or were affected by their own social norms and culture.

When we look at the content of refusals when the refuser is in lower status, the employee whom the boss asks to stay late for work, we can see in Table IX that most of the teachers and the students gave an excuse.

TABLE IX: CONTENT OF REFUSALS WHEN REFUSER STATUS IS LOWER

Group	Semantic Formula	Content
Ts	Excuse/reason/ explanation	Refuser has to take care of *her* child.
		Refuser is going to be a guest or a host.
		Refuser is too tired to work late.
Ss	Excuse/reason/ explanation	Refuser is too tired to work late.
		Refuser is going to be a guest or host.
NTs	Excuse/reason/ explanation	Each subject stated a different personal excuse/reason/explanation.

Most of the excuses of the teachers, 35%, were related to having the obligation of taking care of the child. What is interesting here is that, all of the subjects who gave this excuse were female. It can be argued that people bring their social roles into their pragmatic competence. In most societies, looking after the child is regarded the responsibility of the woman, even if she is working.

Furthermore, more students (35%) than their teachers (15%) told their boss that they were too tired to work late. The reason why so many students stated that they were too tired or exhausted to work might be that they have no working experience. Teachers might have thought that such an excuse is socially inappropriate. Both teachers and students have stated that they are going to visit or host friends. Such an excuse seems culture specific. In the Turkish culture, such an excuse has a high chance to be accepted. The data of the NTs does not allow us to make any comparison because none of them provided an excuse, but each provided a different reason.

Considering the discrepancy of the refusals used when the refuser is in higher status and the order of these refusals, it is suggested that students need further exposure to such examples. Providing students with real language examples where the refuser is in higher position, along with equal and lower position, might benefit their learning and/or acquisition of this aspect. The differences in the order and content of semantic formulas might be attributed to negative transfer while the similarities could be attributed to positive transfer.

IV. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that even students at the Upper-Intermediate of proficiency of English face problems in using the pragmatically appropriate statements. Such problems can lead to the hearer's 'faulty' reading of the speaker's utterances which in turn can lead to wrong attributions. In order to avoid such attributions, learners need to acquire an understanding of the rules and conditions that govern speech acts in the two languages concerned, Turkish and English in this case. Furthermore, all such linguistic knowledge must be contextualized [13].

Boxer and Pickering [14] argue that sociolinguistic competence is a necessary component in language learning

where the context, setting and the relationship between speakers and addressees is very important. They suggest that authentic data should be used to arm students with the underlying social strategies of speech behavior. Bordovi--Harlig and Dörnyei [5] put forward that in order to enable pragmatic competence to occur more input needs to be provided perhaps by using awareness-raising and noticing activities especially in EFL classrooms. LoCastro [3] suggested that teaching pragmatics involves teaching FL learners how to be polite through formulaic expressions and routines to students at any language level. She added that teachers should create pragmatic awareness in students through authentic language examples.

Pragmatic awareness and competence is especially important considering the argument that native speakers tend to forgive phonological, syntactic, and lexical errors but that they see pragmatic errors negatively [15], [5]. Furthermore, Alptekin [16] argued that the idea of native speaker norms were utopian and unrealistic regarding English as an International Language because it "fails to reflect the lingua franca status of English." Thus, he argues that a new notion of communicative competence that recognizes English as a world language is necessary.

It can be concluded that, while trying to enable pragmatic competence in EFL students one should not forget the cultural or sociocultural aspects of the two languages in question. Students should be aware that where one thing is acceptable in one culture it may not be in another. Investigating whether, despite the differences in the order and content of refusals, such deviations are accepted may reveal valuable insights. Considering that English is spoken as a lingua franca around the world, deviations from native speaker usage may still be acceptable by native speakers of English and nonnative speakers of English from different cultures.

REFERENCES

[1] C. Criper and H. G. Widdowson, "Sociolinguistics and language teaching," in *Papers in Applied Linguistics*, J. P. B. Allen and S. Pit Corder, eds., Oxford University Press, 1975.

[2] J. Thomas, "Cross-cultural pragmatic failure," *Applied Linguistics*, vol. 4, pp. 226-235, 1984.

[3] V. LoCastro, *Pragmatics for Language Educators: A Sociolinguistic Perspective,* NewYork: Routledge, 2012, ch. 6 & ch. 13.

[4] R. Scmidt, "Consciousness, learning and interlanguage pragmatics," in *Interlanguage Pragmatics,* G.Ê. Kasper an S. Blum-Kulka, eds., NewYork: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 21-42.

[5] K. Bardovi-Harlig and Z Dörnyei, "Do language learners recognize pragmatic violations? Pragmatic versus grammatical awareness in instructed L2 learning," *TESOL Quarterly,* vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 233-262, 1998.

[6] D. A. Koike, "Pragmatic competence and adult L2 acquisition: Speech acts in interlanguage," *The Modem Language Journal*, vol. 73, no. 3, pp. 279-289, 1989.

[7] R. Ellis, *The Study of Second Language Acquisition,* China: OUP, 1994, ch.1 & ch. 5.

[8] G. Yule, *The Study of Language,* United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1996, ch. 7.

[9] L. M. Beebe, T. Takashi, and R. Uliss-Weltz, "Pragmatic transfer in ESL refusals," in *On the Development of Communicative Competence in a Second Language*, R. C. Scarcella, E. Andersen and S. D. Krashen, Eds., Cambridge, MA: Newburry House, 1990.

[10] S. Hergüner and A. Çakır, (2017). "Pragmatic awareness of ELT teacher trainees: A study of refusals of requests," *Journal of Human Sciences,* [Online], 14(2), pp. 1517-1533. Available: https://www.j-humansciences.com/ojs/index.php/IJHS/article/view/4283

[11] H. Çiftçi, (2016). "Refusal strategies in Turkish and English: A cross-cultural study," *ELT Research Journal,* [Online]. 5(1), pp. 2-29. Available: http://dergipark.ulakbim.gov.tr/eltrj/article/view/5000183737

[12] M. Capar, "How do Turkish EFL learners say 'no'?," *International Journal of Language Academy*, vol. 2, pp. 262-282, 2014.

[13] R. White, "Saying please: Pragmalinguistic failure in English interaction," *ELT Journal,* vol. 47, no. 3, pp. 193-202, 1993.

[14] D. Boxer and L. Pickering, "Problems in the presentation of speech acts in ELT materials: The case of complaints," *ELT Journal,* vol. 49, no. 1, pp. 44-58, 1995.

[15] G. L. Nelson, J. Carson, M. Al Batal, and W. El Bakary, "Cross-cultural pragmatics: Strategy use in Egyptian Arabic and American English refusals," *Applied Linguistics,* vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 163-189, 2002.

[16] C. Alptekin, "Towards intercultural communicative competence in ELT," *ELT Journal*, vol. 56, pp. 57-64, Jan. 2002.

Hülya İpek received her BA in 1991, her MA in 1997 and her PhD degree in 2006 in English Language Teaching (ELT) from the Anadolu University, Eskisehir, Turkey. Her fields of interest include affect in language teaching and learning, listening and note taking, teaching and testing language skills.

She has taught English to young adults at various language levels at the school of foreign languages from 1991 to 2012. Since 2012, has been an Asst. Prof. Dr and a teacher educator at the English language teaching department at Anadolu University.