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Proficiency and preference organization in second language refusals

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the development of second language (L2) learners' interactional competence, specifically how their dispreference marking in refusals changes as their general target language competence and interactional competence increase. 30 L2 speakers of English with L1 Arabic at three proficiency levels and 10 native English speakers conducted dyadic role plays involving requests and refusals. With increasing proficiency, learners' range of interactional methods for implementing refusals as dispreferred actions also increase. Low-proficiency learners showed little delay or mitigation of refusals, whereas intermediate proficiency learners employed "yes but" constructions and other refusal turn formats and showed incipient ability to delay the refusal by sequential means. Advanced learners exhibited more active reciprocity, implemented sequential and lexical resources more precisely and conventionally, and had a larger range of methods at their disposal. English native speakers used additional methods, not found in the learner groups, most notably the prefatory particle "well". We attribute learners' changes in interactional competence to their greater ability to formulate responses while still listening to the interlocutor, and their extensive practice with methods of conveying refusal without damaging social solidarity. We note remaining gaps in even advanced learners' competence, which may require focused instruction.

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1. Introduction

Research into second language learners' ability to produce social actions in extended discourse is fairly recent but has grown appreciably (see [Taguchi and Roever, 2017](#), for a review). In this paper, we will consider how second language learners of English at different proficiency levels produce refusals in role plays, and how sequential organization and formatting of their refusals are affected by their proficiency.

Refusals can be conceptualized from a speech act perspective as commissives ([Austin, 1962](#); [Searle, 1976](#)), committing the speaker to a course of action. In [Brown and Levinson's \(1987\)](#) terms, they are face-threatening acts as they highlight speakers' and hearers' different wants and needs and thereby potentially disturb social harmony. This leads to a high likelihood of mitigation through negative and positive politeness strategies.

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From a sequential perspective, refusals are by necessity responding actions: a speaker cannot refuse without being given something to refuse, e.g., a request or an offer. In Conversation Analysis terms, a refusal is the second pair part of an adjacency pair (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973), with the preceding request or offer being the first-pair part. Given that refusals are commonly disaffiliative and threaten social solidarity (Heritage, 1984; Stivers, 2008), they are usually sequentially organized and formatted as dispreferred actions (Pomerantz and Heritage, 2013). Dispreference is characterized by a delay or outright avoidance of the core refusal, which is achieved sequentially through inter-turn gaps and delays, insert expansions, and ostensible repair initiation, and turn-internally via certain prefatory particles (“well”, “oh”), pro-forma agreement (“yes but”), explanations or accounts, mitigation, and elaboration (Schegloff, 2007). Not all these features need occur but the fundamental characteristic of a dispreferred response is that it avoids the immediacy and clarity of a preferred response.¹

In this study, we investigate how second language learners of English with L1 Arabic organize their refusals as dispreferred, how their ability to do so changes with increasing L2 proficiency, and how their refusal organization differs from native speakers'. This investigation contributes to the emerging research area of the development of interactional competence, which describes language users' ability to participate in extended discourse as speakers and recipients, and specifically the ability to adapt social actions to interlocutors and make them recognizable to them (Pekarek Doehler & Pochon-Berger, 2015).

1.1. Empirical studies of L2 refusals

Second language pragmatics research has long held an interest in refusals. Takahashi and Beebe's (1987) undertook a pioneering study with Japanese learners of English, which was followed by the development of a detailed coding scheme based on the same data set (Beebe et al., 1990). Their study and most subsequent work used discourse completion tasks for the collection of refusal data (e.g., Allami & Naeimi, 2011; Kwon, 2004; Nelson et al., 2002), which do not allow conclusions about sequential organization or online production (Golato, 2003; Kasper, 2006; Turnbull, 2001) and are limited to the elicitation of offline knowledge (Félix-Brasdefer, 2010).

A smaller number of studies has investigated refusals in extended discourse (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1993, 1996; Bella, 2011; Félix-Brasdefer, 2004, 2009; Gass and Houck, 1999), though few of them have compared learners at different proficiency levels. Taguchi (2013) compared the refusal production of higher- and lower-proficiency EFL learners as well as native English speakers on four open role plays in terms of appropriateness, speech rate, and use of linguistic strategies, following Beebe et al. (1990). Taguchi found a proficiency effect for appropriateness and speech rate, with higher-proficiency learners performing more appropriately and speaking faster than lower-proficiency ones. Higher- and lower-proficiency learners differed little in their use of direct and indirect refusals strategies but used far more direct refusals than native speakers. Taguchi ascribes these findings to learners' smaller range of linguistic resources that did not allow them to adapt their responses to the situation.

In a study comparing learners at three proficiency levels of L2 Modern Greek and an NS group, Bella (2014) employed three role plays varying power difference and social distance. She analyzed learner production for linguistic strategies and also collected retrospective interview data. Similarly to Taguchi (2013), Bella (2014) found that learners used far more direct strategies than native speakers, though this tendency declined with increasing proficiency. Conversely, learners used fewer indirect strategies and fewer adjuncts, though both generally increased with greater proficiency. Overall, however, patterns of strategy use were markedly different even between the highest-proficiency learner group and native speakers.

While both, Taguchi (2013) and Bella (2014) used extended discourse data, neither analyzed learners' production from an interactional competence perspective using the fine-grained toolset of Conversation Analysis. In fact, few papers in L2 pragmatics research have undertaken such analyses, and none have investigated refusals. However, studies on requests (Al-Gahtani and Roever, 2012, 2014; Youn, 2015), disagreements (Pekarek Doehler & Pochon-Berger, 2011), story openings (Lee and Hellermann, 2014; Pekarek Doehler & Pochon-Berger, 2016), repair organization (Hellermann, 2011) and turn taking (Cekaite, 2007) provide general insights about learners' developmental trajectory in their interactional competence. For example, in studies on requests with ESL learners at different proficiency levels, Al-Gahtani and Roever (2012, 2014) found a clear developmental pathway of learners' interactional competence for carrying out the social action of requesting, which is usually done as a dispreferred action with the request utterance itself mitigated and delayed through preliminary moves (explanations, accounts, background, etc.) (Schegloff, 2007). Low-proficiency learners produced requests as preferred social actions early in the conversation and with little hesitation or mitigation. As learners' proficiency increased, they preceded their requests at first with minimal and later more extensive preliminary moves, thereby laying the groundwork for the upcoming request.

Synthesizing research from interactional L2 studies, Pekarek Doehler and Pochon-Berger (2015) identify as a central aspect of development of interactional competence the diversification of interactional tools for making social actions recognizable to

¹ Schegloff (2007) points out that refusals and similar actions (rejections, disagreements) do not necessarily have to be done as dispreferred. Where a preferred format is more affiliative, that may occur, e.g., in rejecting a pro-forma offer: “Would you like the last piece of chicken?” – “No, you have it.” However, it is difficult to imagine how a refusal following a request could be affiliative given that requests are designed to commit the hearer to a course of action in the speaker's interest. Indeed, this would only be likely under duress. For example, A and B are under pressure from their respective families to marry but neither wants to marry the other. To satisfy their families, A asks B to get married, and B flatly refuses. This refusal might well be done as preferred (“Will you marry me?”-“No.”) since B is affiliating with A's stance.

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