

The influence of social situations on fluency difficulty in Korean EFL learners' oral refusals

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Abstract

This study investigated fluency difficulty in Korean EFL learners' refusals by examining the impact of social factors such as power and social distance on measures of processing speed and appropriateness. 40 Korean learners of English at two different proficiency levels produced refusals of request in a role play task in six social situations. Immediately after the role play task, retrospective verbal reports were elicited in order to examine the participants' perceptions of task difficulty. Results show that the factors of power and proficiency had a significant effect on both appropriateness scores and production speed in Korean EFL learners' production of refusals. Refusals of requests from persons of lower status were more difficult to produce and required a longer production time for learners than did refusals in power-high and power-equal situations, and the lower proficiency group had more difficulty in producing refusals than the higher proficiency group. It is suggested that learners' fluency difficulty results from a combination of cognitive and socio-linguistic factors, particularly (i) their familiarity with situations, (ii) sensitivity to maintaining self-face and (iii) the level of politeness and complexity of the appropriate expressions required in a particular social situation.

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1. Introduction

Research in interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) since the late 1970 has made significant contributions to our understanding of how learners at different proficiency levels achieve pragmatic competence in a second or foreign language. One aspect of pragmatic competence concerns the production and perception of politeness strategies among L2 learners. The literature in ILP has empirically examined the production, perception and development of L2 learners during the realization of numerous speech acts including apologies, requests, complaints and refusals. This literature has shown that learners at different proficiency levels lack the pragmatic knowledge necessary to mitigate a face-threatening act (FTA), such as refusals or requests. Refusals have been of particular interest in ILP because they constitute a major cross-cultural challenge for non-native speakers and require a high level of pragmatic competence.

Most of the studies on refusal speech acts in ILP have focused on examining the effects of learners' sociolinguistic sensitivity on their linguistic forms or content (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1990; Beebe et al., 1990; Chang, 2009; Jung and Kim, 2008; Kim, 2007; Robinson, 1992): whether learners could vary their linguistic forms and content according to situations, thereby approximating native speaker norms. Yet with the exception of Taguchi (2007), little attention has been given to the processing dimension of speech acts, i.e., whether and how social factors affect performance fluency in

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learners' oral speech act production, and few studies have investigated Korean learners' oral speech act production from a processing perspective.

The present study aims to fill up this gap by investigating fluency difficulty in Korean EFL learners' refusals. The main purpose is to enhance our understanding of fluency difficulty in pragmatic production by examining the impact of social factors such as power and social distance on measures of production speed, such as speech in planning and articulation, combined with the measure of appropriateness.

The data for the present study were collected using two types of elicitation instruments: role plays and retrospective verbal reports. 40 Korean learners of English at two different proficiency levels produced refusals of request in a role play task in six social situations. Immediately after the role play task, retrospective verbal reports were elicited in order to examine the participants' perceptions of task difficulty. We will show that learners' fluency difficulty results from a combination of cognitive and socio-linguistic factors, particularly (i) their familiarity with situations, (ii) sensitivity to maintaining self-face and (iii) the level of politeness and complexity of the appropriate expressions required in a particular social situation.

2. Previous research on refusal speech acts and task difficulty

2.1. Previous research on refusal speech acts

Studies on the speech act of refusals can be broadly divided into two strands: one examined the refusal behavior of native speakers of particular languages; the other investigated the characteristics of non-native speaker refusals. This section provides a brief review of studies on non-native speaker refusals in English.

Perhaps the most influential study on non-native speaker refusals in English is Beebe et al. (1990), which investigated written refusals by native speakers of English, native speakers of Japanese, and Japanese ESL students (twenty in each group) by using a discourse completion test (DCT) of 12 items. Twelve situations and four types of refusals (refusals to requests, invitations, offers and suggestions) comprised the discourse completion task – one of each type to persons of higher, equal and lower status. The refusal responses were categorized using the following coding framework¹:

- (1) A. **Direct Refusal:** Direct denial using denying vocabulary or statements showing unwillingness or inability.
- B. **Indirect Refusal:**
 1. Statement of regret/apology (I'm sorry.../I feel terrible...)
 2. Wish (I wish I could help you...)
 3. Excuse, reason, explanation (My friends will visit my place that night./I have a headache.)
 4. Statement of alternative (I can do ... instead of .../Why don't you do ... instead of ...)
 5. Promise of future acceptance (I'll do it next time./I promise I'll ...)
 6. Avoidance:
 - a) Nonverbal: Silence, hesitation, doing nothing, physical departure
 - b) Verbal: Topic switch, joke, repetition of part of request, postponement, hedge
 7. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor:
 - a) Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester (Do you know how many people are waiting for job opportunities?)
 - b) Criticize the request/requester (statement of negative feeling or opinion; insult/attack (Who do you think you are?/That's a terrible idea!))
 8. Statement of principle/philosophy (I never do business with friends./One can't be too careful.)

Beebe et al. (1990) found that pragmatic transfer² influenced the English of Japanese ESL students in terms of the order, frequency and content of semantic formulas³ they selected for refusals. For example, whereas Americans used the

¹ In addition to the direct and indirect strategies, Beebe et al.'s classification also includes adjunct strategies, which refer to expressions that accompany a refusal but cannot be used to fulfill a refusal alone. Examples include statements of positive opinion ("It's good, but ... " or I would like to go, but ..."), statements of empathy or understanding ("I realize you are in a difficult situation."), or gratitude/appreciation ("Thanks.").

² Pragmatic transfer refers to "the influenced exerted by learners' pragmatic knowledge of languages and cultures other than L2 on their comprehension, production and learning of L2 pragmatic information" (Kasper, 1992).

³ A semantic formula refers to "a word, phrase or sentence that meets a particular semantic criterion or strategy; any one or more of these can be used to perform the act in question" (Cohen, 1996: 265). In the case of a refusal, for example, one might produce three separate semantic formulas: (i) an expression of regret, "I'm so sorry", followed by (ii) a direct refusal, "I can't come", followed by (iii) an excuse, "I will be out of town this weekend."

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