Pragmatic Transfer in Thai EFL Refusals

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Abstract

The present study examined the occurrence of pragmatic transfer by Thai EFL learners in the speech act of refusal. Another purpose was to uncover motivating factors behind such transfer. Data collected using a discourse completion task (DCT) were analyzed as consisting of a sequence of semantic formulas. EFL refusal data were compared with similar data elicited from native speakers of English responding in English and native speakers of Thai responding in Thai. The findings reveal that pragmatic transfer exists in choice and content of semantic formulae. The findings suggest implications for language teaching methodology, including materials development.

Keywords: Refusal; Pragmatic transfer; Interlanguage pragmatics; Speech acts; Thais; Americans

1. Introduction

Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) is a branch of second language research "which studies how non-native speakers ... understand and carry out linguistic action in a target language, and how they acquire L2 pragmatic knowledge" (Kasper, 1992, p. 203). In other words, interlanguage pragmatics studies aim to investigate language learners' performance and acquisition of pragmatic competence in the second language. Kasper & Blum-Kulka (1993) identify five research areas in interlanguage pragmatics including pragmatic comprehension, production of linguistic action, development of pragmatic competence, pragmatic transfer and communicative effect. Research in interlanguage pragmatics has shown that ESL learners' performance of speech acts is often different from that of native speakers because of "lack of knowledge in the target language sociocultural rules" (Kwon, 2003, p. 38). As a result, communication breakdown may occur. This kind of failure in communication is called "pragmatic failure" (Thomas, 1983, 1984).

According to Thomas (1984, p. 226), pragmatic failure is "the mismatch which arises from cross-culturally different assessments within the social parameters affecting linguistic choice, size, size of imposition, social distance between speaker and hearer, relative rights and obligations, etc." Pragmatic failure is considered more serious than linguistic failure. If a person commits a linguistic error, he is just considered to be a less proficient language learner. However, if he makes a pragmatic mistake, he might sound rude, disrespectful or impolite.

One speech act in which communication breakdowns can possibly occur is the speech of refusal. Refusal is an effort on the part of speakers to deny to engage in an action proposed by the interlocutor (Chen, Ye and Zhang, 1995 cited in Gass & Houck, 1999). It is not an act initiated by the speaker but a response to a speaker's act such as an invitation, a suggestion, an offer or a request. Refusals are also recognized