

A comparative study of refusal strategies among Chinese learners of Japanese and English

Is there an L2 centered pragmatic competence?

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It has been suggested that second language (L2) learners' pragmatic competence is influenced by both their first language (L1) socio-cultural norm-based pragmatic strategies and the L2 socio-cultural environment. Recently, many L2 learners studying abroad use both English and the host country's official language as communicative languages. However, it is unclear whether these L2 learners' pragmatic competence is more influenced by being exposed to the L2 socio-cultural environment or their L1 norm-based pragmatic strategies. In this study we focus on the pragmatic strategy of refusal and compared the refusal strategies used by Chinese learners of Japanese and English who share the same L1 cultural pragmatic norms (i.e., Chinese), and have been exposed to the same L2 social-cultural environment (i.e., Japan) with those of Chinese and Japanese native speakers without experience living abroad. The data were gathered from four groups of participants: 13 Chinese learners of English, 14 Chinese learners of Japanese, 14 Chinese native speakers, and 12 Japanese native speakers. They were asked to fill out DCT scenarios consisting of refusals of requests and suggestions. The data were coded based on the taxonomy of refusal semantic formulas by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990). Statistical analysis reveals that the responses of the four groups are very similar in terms of the frequency with which semantic formulas within speech act categories were used, but the two groups of Chinese learners used more similar strategies to the native Chinese group and differed from Japanese group regarding the order of semantic formulas used. These findings suggest that learners do have equivalent pragmatic competence to perform refusal speech acts, but their L1 pragmatic norms still play a critical role in their L2 refusals. Based on these findings, it seems that when practicing speech acts of refusing, Chinese L2 learners still rely on their L1 based socio-cultural norms of refusal, though they do adapt some L2 conventional refusal expressions due to the impact of socio-cultural contact.

Key words: Refusal speech acts, L2 pragmatic competence, L1 socio-cultural norms, L2 socio-cultural contact

Introduction

General Background

With the spread of globalization, English has become an academic lingua franca, and international students often speak it when studying abroad instead of the host country's official language. For example, many Chinese students enter Japanese universities to pursue

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higher education and use both English and Japanese as academic communicative languages. It is well-known that cultural and linguistic differences have a strong impact on the development of second language (L2) learners' pragmatic competence – the capacity to use certain linguistic forms to express and convey communicative intentions as well as have the ability to turn to these forms as proper pragmatic strategies under social contexts (Koike, 1989; Taguchi, 2009; Mirzaei, Roohani, & Esmacili, 2012). However, it is unclear whether L2 learners' pragmatic competence is more influenced by the L2 socio-cultural environment or the socio-cultural norms of their first language (L1). Studying how Chinese students living in Japan adapt their pragmatic strategies in both of their L2s (Japanese and English) in Japan can help shine light on this issue.

Refusal Speech Acts and L2 Pragmatic Competence

L2 refusal speech act strategies have received much attention in pragmatics. According to Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz (1990), the speech act of refusal is that of rejecting another's requests, invitations, offers, and suggestions and is the sticking point for many L2 or nonnative speakers because speech acts of refusal are well-known to be face-threatening in nature (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989; Brown & Levinson, 1987), and a lack of competence in them might offend their interlocutors and lead many L2 speakers to be labeled as impolite, even rude (Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Kasper, 1992). However, it is not always clear what issues are difficult for L2 learners when acquiring L2 pragmatic competence. For this reason, numerous investigations have differentiated the refusal strategies by L2 speakers with various first language and socio-cultural backgrounds and compared to the target native speakers.

Many previous studies have pointed out that the L2 speakers frequently undergo negative pragmatic transfer, meaning they have applied their L1 socio-cultural norm-based refusal strategies to the target L2 refusal speech acts situations, which are often regarded as improper behaviors under the target L2 socio-cultural settings (e.g. Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Geyang, 2007; Hashemian, 2012; Hedayatnejad, Maleki, & Mehrizi, 2015; Lee, 2013). Together with other studies in L2 speech acts, researchers have proposed that L2 learners should try to gain native-like pragmatic competence, and more specifically, the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competences to avoid the occurrence of negative pragmatic transfer (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Fernández Amaya, 2008). The former emphasizes the ability of knowing how certain linguistic forms or expressions, such as conventional, direct and indirect expressions can be utilized as pragmatic strategies; the later focuses on the awareness of how certain linguistic forms are connected with their associated meaning and if their politeness values are used in a contextually appropriate manner (Marmaridou, 2011; Mirzaei, Roohani & Esmacili, 2012).

Pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence have been considered by second language acquisition studies to be related to the language proficiency and sociocultural awareness of the L2 learner (Hinkel, 1996; Kasper, 2001). Such studies assume that language proficiency is the key factor and focus on examining the refusal strategies of L2 speakers with

various L2 language proficiencies and socio-cultural backgrounds. They have consistently found that L2 learners' L1 norm-based pragmatic knowledge still has a strong effect on L2 learners' refusal strategies. Moreover, in most cases, L2 learners with higher pragmalinguistic competence (i.e., higher language proficiency) tended to transfer more L1 socio-cultural norm-based refusal strategies to the target L2 refusal situations, which suggests that higher L2 knowledge allows learners to utilize more of their L1 refusal strategies (Beebe & Takahashi, 1987; Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Wannaruk, 2008; Tabatabaei & Farnia, 2015).

On the other hand, other research has argued that the main cause of negative pragmatic transfer is not language proficiency, but rather a lack of L2 sociopragmatic competence and awareness of the socio-cultural and social-human relation differences associated with linguistic expressions (Eslami, 2010; Chang, 2011; Hassall, 2012; Abrams, 2013). For example, a number of studies have attempted to examine whether living abroad experiences and having contact with the target L2 socio-cultural community can improve the socio-cultural awareness of L2 learners and help them to gain L2 sociopragmatic competence and develop native-like refusal strategies. In general, these studies demonstrate that studying abroad experiences do positively correlate with increased L2 pragmatic competence and performance of refusal acts. However, these studies generally find that L1 socio-cultural norms still appear to be an influential factor in the L2 learners' refusal strategies, meaning that they still behave and react differently from native speakers in certain ways (Félix-Brasdefer, 2004; Ren, 2013; Taguchi, 2011).

Rethinking of the L2 Pragmatic Competence

Recently, more attention has been paid to the differences in speech act strategies between L2 speakers and target language native speakers, and Kecskes (2015) has begun to rethink the theoretical foundations of whether nonnative speakers or second language learners can ever develop native-like L2 pragmatic competence. He points to the fact that adults L2 learners generally do not exhibit separated or native-like L2 pragmatic competence, and claims it is evidence that adults already have L1-governed pragmatic ability, and so their existing L1-governed pragmatic competence changes dynamically under the influence of the new social-cultural requirements. Therefore, he theorizes that L2 learners' native language pragmatic strategies/production will blend with those of the L2 depending on the emerging L2 socio-cultural environment, their existing L1 socio-cultural norm-based pragmatic knowledge, and individual preferences.

Current Study

In the current study, we adapt the L1 governed, L2 socio-cultural environment shaped pragmatic competence approach to examine refusal speech acts by Chinese second language learners. Specifically, the current study attempts to check two groups of L2 speakers who share the same L1 socio-cultural norms (i.e., Chinese), hold relative higher language proficiencies, and are exposed to the same L2 social-cultural environment (i.e., Japan), and examine how they respond to the same refusal situations in different L2s (i.e., English or Japanese) in the

same foreign environment.

Previous studies examining the L2 refusal speech acts of Chinese learners of English suggest that pragmatic transfer from the L1 occurs, arguing that differences in the socio-cultural values between the learners' L1 and the L2 (i.e., Chinese are collectively oriented, while Americans are individually oriented) influence the usage frequency and order of certain semantic formulas during their refusal performance. Specifically, studies such as Chang (2009) and Jiang (2015) have shown that Chinese learners of English tend to give more specific reasons than their American counterparts in most of the refusal situations, regardless of their L2 proficiency level. Similarly, Yun (2008) shows that the refusal strategies of Chinese learners of Japanese are also susceptible to L1 pragmatic transfer, manifesting in their L2 Japanese as higher usage of semantic formulas of hesitation and maintaining relationships as compared with Japanese native speakers. Furthermore, Ren (2012) investigated the effects of having socio-cultural contact with the target L2 environment, and found that Chinese L2 English learners' sociopragmatic competence regarding opt-outs of appreciation refusal strategies are better when having had contact with an English L2 environment. However, it is still not clear how Chinese L2 learners linguistically adapt and adjust their L1 refusal strategies in new socio-cultural environments.

This study therefore compares the refusal strategies produced by two Chinese learners' groups and groups of native speakers, in order to reveal to what extent L2 learners' refusal strategies are influenced by both L1 norms and the emerging L2 socio-cultural environment. To this end, we pose the following research questions:

1. Do Chinese learners living in Japan share more similarities in their refusal strategies with Japanese native speakers in various L2s, or with mono-cultural Chinese native speakers living in China?
2. Do the learners show a wider range of strategies than the two groups of native speakers, mixing their L1 and L2 refusal strategies?

Methodology

Participants

Four groups of participants were recruited: one group of 14 mono-cultural Chinese native speakers living in China (CN), one group of 12 Japanese native speakers (JN), and two groups of second language learners living in Japan—13 Chinese learners of English (CLE) and 14 Chinese learners of Japanese (CLJ). All participants in this study were university students who were studying or enrolled in a university program. At the time of this study, the Chinese participants were studying at Hainan Normal University, China, and the other three groups were studying at Tohoku University, Japan (See Table 1 for details). All of the CN participants reported Mandarin Chinese as their mother tongue and none had lived abroad in any other country for more than three months. All of the CLJ participants had obtained passing scores on the N1 (highest level) of the JLPT (Japanese Language Proficiency Test), indicating

high Japanese language proficiency. Members of the CLE group reported TOEIC test scores that were then converted according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) for indicating the English language ability. All learners in this group were considered to have upper intermediate to advanced level English proficiencies (ranged from level B2 to C1, see details of CEFR in Appendix A). All the information of participants has been summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant information of the four groups.

Participant information	L2 groups		Native groups	
	CLE (<i>n</i> = 13)	CLJ (<i>n</i> = 14)	CN (<i>n</i> = 14)	JN (<i>n</i> = 12)
Age range (years)	20-30	21-27	19-23	19-23
Mean age (years)	24.47	24.31	20.85	18.83
Residence	Japan	Japan	China	Japan
Japanese Proficiency (JLPT)	N1	N1		
English Proficiency (CEFR)	B2 (10) C1 (2) B1 (1)	C1 (3) B1(1) B2 (10)		

Note. According to Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), N1 indicating the advanced level of Japanese linguistic competence. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), B1, B2, and C1 represent the Intermediate, upper intermediate, and advanced English language proficiencies, respectively.

Data Collection

Three online DCT (Discourse Complement Task) were built on Google forms and used to collect data in the appropriate language (i.e., the Japanese, English, and Chinese). The DCT was a production questionnaire that consisted of scenarios, including the settings of the refusal and the characteristics of the speakers and listeners. The Chinese version of the DCT was designed first and then translated into English and Japanese. The CLE participants were asked to complete the DCT in English, the CLJ participants were asked to complete it in Japanese, and the CN and JN groups completed it in their respective native languages. Before beginning the DCT, participants were given explanation regarding the background of the current study, a brief description of the purpose of this study, and information about the appropriate timing to finish the survey. Participants were also given a consent form adapted and designed to match with the online survey (see details of the online DCT surveys via the links in Appendix B). Participants then provided general demographic information about themselves such as their gender, age, degree, grade, and their language backgrounds. After this, the DCT was given. It included two situations designed to elicit two types of refusals – refusal of requests and refusals of suggestions, and two types of interlocutors – those with higher social status and those with equal social status for comparison. This resulted in a total of four refusal situations, one with each type of refusal and each type of interlocutor (see Table 3 for details).

Table 2. Classification of refusal taxonomy (semantic formulas) used in this study.

I. Direct
1. No
2. Negative willingness/ability
II. Indirect
1. Statement of regret
2. Wish
3. Excuse, reason, explanation
4. Statement of alternative
5. Set condition for future or past acceptance
6. Criticism
7. Let interlocutor off the hook.
8. Self-defense
9. Postponement
10. Topic switch
11. Addressing
12. Repetition
III. Adjuncts
1. Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement
2. Statement of empathy
3. Pause filler
4. Gratitude/appreciation

Table 3. Categorization of refusal situations.

Situation types	Social relation of interlocutors		Refusal situation
	Power	Distance	
Refusal of requests	Equal	Neutral	1. Refusal Classmate request to borrow a note
	High	Neutral	2. Refusal Professor's request to stay late at school
Refusal of suggestions	Equal	Neutral	3. Refusal Classmate's suggestion to see a therapy
	High	Neutral	4. Refusal senior's suggestion to make a reminder

Table 4. Example of the refusal situation (Situation one).

One day after class, one of your classmates approaches you.
 He/She asks you to borrow one of your lecture notes, but you don't want to lend it.
 (you are not really familiar with him/her, you just attend the same lecture)

Classmate: Hi, how's it going? I know you take your note very well in Prof.B's class, you know, I was absent last time, may I borrow your note for three days?

(Please write/type down your answer below in English. You need to be polite)

You: _____

Classmate: I guess I have to ask someone else.

The situations in the DCT were designed based on previous studies (Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Chang, 2009), but built with the aims of this study in mind. First, all scenarios were set on university campuses, this was important for the authenticity of the DCT in this study because we aim to examine Chinese second language learners who were using both Japanese and English as available academic lingua franca in Japan, and all participants in this study were university students at the time of the test. Second, interlocutors of lower social status were not included in this study because the participants were students, who do not naturally have anyone around them with lower social status. This helped to ensure that all of the DCT situations matched the experienced realities of the participants.

The refusal situations did not contain any explicit hints to the participants in terms of refusing, and they were expected to read the scenarios and fill in the DCT blanks basing on the given contexts. This helped us to determine if participants were aware of the sociopragmatic requirements regarding refusal speech acts.

Data Analysis

The participants' responses were coded according to the semantic formulas classification of refusal taxonomy, as per Beebe et al. (1990) (see Table 5). Semantic formulas were analyzed according to Cohen's (1996) definition: "a word, phrase, or sentences that meet a particular semantic criterion or strategy; any one or more of these can be used to perform the act in question" (p.265). For example, if the participant gave the response 'Thank you, but I don't think it will work' for refusing a suggestion, was coded as a semantic formula of 'gratitude/appreciation' followed by 'negative willingness/ability'. After coding the responses, the frequency, characteristic refusal order and example of the utilized semantic formulas were compared amongst the four groups under the four refusal situations. Due to the nominal nature of the data collected from each participant, Chi-square tests were used to test the usage frequency differences of semantic formulas between learners' groups and native groups.

Results

Refusal of Request (Social Power: Equal)

Frequency of semantic formulas.

The first situation required participants to refuse a request to borrow notes from an interlocutor with equal social power (i.e., a classmate). The frequency of the utilized semantic formulas by the four groups is summarized in Table 5. For the direct refusal strategies, the results show that all the groups tend to avoid using the direct refusal strategies of 'No', and the usage frequency of 'negative willingness/ability' are similarly low among the four groups, $\chi^2(3, N = 53) = 2.61, p = .46$. In contrast, all the groups are in favor to use the indirect strategies, in particular, we found the strategies of 'statement of regret', $\chi^2(3, N = 53) = 2.51, p = .47$, 'excuse, reason, explanation', $\chi^2(3, N = 53) = 4.86, p = .18$, 'statement of alternatives', $\chi^2(3, N = 53) = .35, p = .95$, and 'set condition for future or past acceptance', $\chi^2(3, N = 53) =$

7.34, $p = .62$ are used as common indirect refusal strategies in a similar frequency. In addition to these similarities, the findings also show differences in the usage frequency of ‘postponement’ strategy: frequency in the CN group is significant higher than the CLE group, $\chi^2(1, N = 27) = 8.78, p = .003$, and the CLJ group $\chi^2(1, N = 28) = 6.3, p = .012$. Moreover, the strategy of ‘wish’, and the ‘pause filler’ were observed only in the CLE group, and amongst the four groups, the ‘addressing’ strategy was solely appeared in the CN group.

Order of semantic formulas.

Table 6 summarizes the characteristic order of semantic formulas with an example response used by each group when refusing an interlocutor of equal social status. In general, all of the groups utilized a similar order in that they all prefer to put the strategy of ‘statement of regret’ at the initial position, following it with ‘excuse, reason, explanation’ and ‘alternatives’. However, among groups, only the CLE group tended to start with the statement of a ‘wish’ strategy.

Refusal of Requests (Social Power: High)

Frequency of semantic formulas.

Table 7 summarizes the frequency of the refusal strategies utilized by the four groups in the second situation, in which participants refuse a request of staying late at lab by an interlocutor with relatively higher social power (i.e., a professor). Similar with situation one, a few participants used the direct strategy of ‘negative willingness/ability’, and the observed usage frequency is not different among groups, $\chi^2(3, N = 53) = .88, p = .83$. In examining the usage frequency of indirect refusal strategies, the statistical analysis shows that the frequency in using the strategies of ‘statement of regret’, $\chi^2(3, N = 53) = 2.07, p = .56$; ‘excuse, reason, explanation’, $\chi^2(3, N = 53) = 2.87, p = .73$; ‘set condition for future or past acceptance’, $\chi^2(3, N = 53) = 6.69, p = .082$, and ‘postponement’, $\chi^2(3, N = 53) = 5.92, p = .12$ were similar among groups. Moreover, the results also revealed that only the three Chinese groups utilized the ‘addressing’ strategy, and among them, the frequency in the CN group is significant higher than the CLE, $\chi^2(1, N = 27) = 9.91, p = .002$, and CLJ groups, $\chi^2(1, N = 28) = 9.14, p = .002$.

Order of semantic formulas.

Table 8 presents the characteristic strategies order with an example used by each group under the situation of refusing a request by the interlocutor with higher social status. The semantic orders used by the CLE, CLJ, and JN groups were the same, but only the CN group began with the ‘addressing’ strategy at the initial position.

Refusal of Suggestions (Social Power: Equal)

Frequency of semantic formulas.

The results of the third situation, which requires the refusal of an equal social status interlocutor’s suggestion by each group are shown in Table 9. The findings show that the

Table 5. Frequency of semantic formulas used in situation one (social power: equal).

Semantic formulas	CLE (<i>n</i> = 13)	CLJ (<i>n</i> = 14)	CN (<i>n</i> = 14)	JN (<i>n</i> = 12)
I. Direct				
1. No	0	0	0	0
2. Negative willingness/ability	8%	21%	7%	17%
II. Indirect				
1. Statement of regret	69%	93%	57%	67%
2. Wish	38%	0	0	0
3. Excuse, reason, explanation	85%	100%	100%	83%
4. Statement of alternative	31%	29%	7%	17%
5. Set condition for future or past acceptance	8%	7%	79%	33%
6. Criticism	0	0	0	0
7. Let interlocutor off the hook	15%	0	0	0
8. Self-defense	0	0	0	0
9. Postponement	0	7%	86%	42%
10. Topic switch	0	7%	0	0
11. Addressing	0	0	79%	0
12. Repetition	8%	7%	0	0
III. Adjunct				
1. Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement	0	0	0	0
2. Statement of empathy	0	0	0	0
3. Pause filler	23%	0	0	0
4. Gratitude/appreciation	8%	0	7%	8%

Table 6. Characteristic refusal strategies order and example in situation one (social power: equal).

Groups	Characteristics of refusal order	Example of refusal strategies
CLE	'Statement of regret' + 'wish' + 'excuse, reason, explanation'	e.g., 'Oh, I am sorry, I'd like to help you, but I happened to fell asleep during the last class, so I didn't take a note completely, either.'
	'Wish' + 'excuse, reason, explanation' + 'statement of alternatives'	e.g., 'I'm glad to help you, but I did not attend the class either. And I want to recommend one of our classmates, Miss Raku. It's pretty sure that she took a perfect note about that lecture.'
CLJ	'Statement of regret' + 'excuse, reason, explanation' + 'statement of alternatives'	e.g., 'gomen tesuto benkyō ni tsukaitai kara betsu no hito ni karite moraeru.' (I am sorry, I will use it for preparing the test, could you try to borrow it from others?)
CN	'Statement of regret' + 'excuse, reason, explanation' + 'statement of alternatives'	e.g., 'bu hao yi si, wo yijing daying jie gei qi ta tongxue le. ni zhao qita ren wenwen ba.' (I am sorry, I already lend it to others. You may ask somebody else)
JN	'Statement of regret' + 'excuse, reason, explanation' + 'alternatives'	e.g., 'gomen tesuto benkyō ni tsukaitai kara betsu no hito ni karite moraeru.' (I am sorry, I will use it for preparing the test, could you try to borrow it from others?)

Table 7. Frequency of semantic formulas used in situation two (social power: high).

Semantic formulas	CLE (<i>n</i> = 13)	CLJ (<i>n</i> = 14)	CN (<i>n</i> = 14)	JN (<i>n</i> = 12)
I. Direct				
1. No	0	0	0	0
2. Negative willingness/ability	8%	14%	7%	17%
II. Indirect				
1. Statement of regret	46%	71%	57%	67%
2. Wish	8%	0	0	0
3. Excuse, reason, explanation	85%	86%	100%	83%
4. Statement of alternative	15%	7%	7%	17%
5. Set condition for future or past acceptance	69%	71%	79%	33%
6. Criticism	0	0	0	0
7. Let interlocutor off the hook	15%	0	0	0
8. Self-defense	0	0	0	0
9. Postponement	69%	71%	86%	42%
10. Topic switch	0	0	0	0
11. Addressing	15%	21%	79%	0
12. Repetition	0	0	0	0
III. Adjunct				
1. Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement	0	0	0	0
2. Statement of empathy	0	0	0	0
3. Pause filler	8%	0	0	0
4. Gratitude/appreciation	25%	21%	7%	8%

Table 8. Characteristic refusal strategies order and example in situation two (social power: high).

Groups	Characteristics of refusal order	Example of refusal strategies
CLE	'Statement of regret' + 'excuse, reason, explanation' + 'set condition for future or past acceptance/postponement'	e.g., 'I'm very sorry, I have some other things to do today. Can I do that next week?'
CLJ	'Statement of regret' + 'excuse, reason, explanation' + 'set condition for future or past acceptance/postponement'	e.g., 'hontō ni mōshiwake gozaimasen ga, kore kara wa baito ni ikanakere ba naranaidesu no de, asu no asa ni teishutsu shite mo yoroshi deshō ka.' (I am so sorry, I must go for my part-time job, could I give it to you tomorrow?)
CN	'Addressing' + 'statement of regret' + 'excuse, reason, explanation' + 'set condition for future or past acceptance/postponement'	e.g., 'laoshi, hen baoqian a, wo jintian he bieren you yue le, keyi xia ci ma.' (Teacher, I already made an appointment with others, can I do it next time?)
JN	'Statement of regret' + 'excuse, reason, explanation' + 'set condition for future or past acceptance/postponement'	e.g., 'sumimasen, kyō wa hazusenai yōji ga aru no de gojitsu ni shiteitadakemasu ka.' (I am sorry, I already had an appointment, could I do it later?)

strategy of ‘negative willingness/ability’ was more frequently used in the CLE group than those in the CN group, $\chi^2(1, N = 27) = 8.98, p = .003$, and than those in the JN group, $\chi^2(1, N = 25) = 5.24, p = .02$. In the comparison of indirect strategies, we found that all the groups preferred to use the ‘excuse reason, explanation’ strategy in a similar frequency, $\chi^2(3, N = 53) = 5.84, p = .12$. The CLJ and JN groups used the strategy of ‘set condition for future or past acceptance’ more than the CN and CLE groups, however, the differences of usage frequency was not significant in the comparison between CLJ with CN group, $\chi^2(1, N = 28) = 4.37, p = .11$, and CLJ with JN group, $\chi^2(1, N = 26) = .93, p = .63$. In addition, the ‘self-defense’ was barely used by the CLE and JN groups, but frequently utilized by the CN and CLJ groups. Furthermore, the findings also show that the three Chinese groups tended to use more adjunct strategies of ‘statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement’ and ‘gratitude/appreciation’ than did the Japanese group, however, the statistic results indicate that only the CLE group, $\chi^2(1, N = 25) = 14.5, p = .001$, but not the CLJ group, $\chi^2(1, N = 27) = 5.19, p = .053$, utilized the ‘statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement’ more frequent than the JN group.

Order of semantic formulas.

The typical order of semantic formulas in the third situation are shown in Table 10, which illustrates that the CLE and CN groups used a similar order, with both beginning their expressions with the strategy of ‘gratitude/appreciation’. However, the CLJ group used an order differed from the other three groups. Notably, only the JN group put the strategies of ‘set condition for future or past acceptance’ or ‘postponement’ at the beginning position.

Refusal of Suggestions (Social Power: High)

Frequency of semantic formulas.

The results for refusing a higher social status interlocutor’s suggestion are summarized in Table 11 below. Both the CLE and CLJ groups (12 and 11 strategies) used a wider variety of refusal strategies than the CN and JN groups. Similar with the previous situations, none of the four groups utilized direct ‘No’ strategies, and the usage frequency of ‘negative willingness/ability’ was not significant different among groups, $\chi^2(3, N = 53) = .44, p = .93$. With regard to the indirect strategies, the results show that all the groups utilized the strategies of ‘excuse, reason, explanation’, $\chi^2(3, N = 53) = .77, p = .86$, ‘set condition for future or past acceptance’, $\chi^2(3, N = 53) = 1.56, p = .67$, ‘postponement’, $\chi^2(3, N = 53) = 5.92, p = .12$, and ‘gratitude/appreciation’, $\chi^2(3, N = 53) = 1.75, p = .63$ in a similar frequency. For the group differences, the statistic results show that differences were found in the usage frequency of ‘self-defense’ strategy in comparison between the CLE and CN groups, $\chi^2(1, N = 27) = 5.04, p = .025$. Moreover, the CLE group was found to utilize the strategy of ‘statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement’ significantly more frequent than did the CN, $\chi^2(1, N = 27) = 5.43, p = .021$ and JN groups, $\chi^2(1, N = 25) = 7.29, p = .007$.

Table 9. Frequency of semantic formulas used in situation three (social power: equal).

Semantic formulas	CLE (n = 13)	CLJ (n = 14)	CN (n = 14)	JN (n = 12)
I. Direct				
1. No	8%	0	0	0
2. Negative willingness/ability	62%	27%	7%	17%
II. Indirect				
1. Statement of regret	15%	0	0	0
2. Wish	0	7%	0	25%
3. Excuse, reason, explanation	54%	47%	43%	25%
4. Statement of alternative	0	0	0	0
5. Set condition for future or past acceptance	0	67%	7%	42%
6. Criticism	0	0	0	0
7. Let interlocutor off the hook	0	7%	0	0
8. Self-defense	8%	40%	71%	8%
9. Postponement	0	87%	7%	17%
10. Topic switch	0	7%	0	0
11. Addressing	0	0	7%	0
12. Repetition	0	0	0	0
III. Adjunct				
1. Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement	92%	60%	93%	17%
2. Statement of empathy	0	0	0	8%
3. Pause filler	8%	0	0	0
4. Gratitude/appreciation	54%	33%	36%	8%

Table 10. Characteristic refusal strategies order and example in situation three (social power: equal).

Groups	Characteristics of refusal order	Example of refusal strategies
CLE	'Gratitude/appreciation' + 'statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement'	e.g., 'Thanks for your advice, but I'm not the kind of person who can talk well with strangers.'
CLJ	'Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement'	e.g., 'daijōbu, daijōbu, shaken ga owattara shizen ni naoreru kara.' (It's okay, I will be fine after the test)
CN	'Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement' + 'gratitude/appreciation'	e.g., 'wo juede jiushi kaoshi jiaolvzheng eryi, guo jitian keneng jiu hao le, xiexie.' (I think it's just caused by the stress of the exam; I'll be fine a few days later, thank you)
JN	'Set condition for future or past acceptance/postponement'	e.g., 'konkai wa enryo shitoku yo.' (I will consider it later)

Order of semantic formulas.

In the fourth situation, the CLE and CLJ groups used the same semantic formulas order, which all started with a ‘statement of positive opinions/feeling or agreement’, followed by the refusal reasons. Furthermore, all of the Chinese groups gave specific reasons in the second position, while only the JN group used the strategy of ‘set condition for future or past acceptance/postponement’ (see Table 12).

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate if differences in pragmatic competence would manifest in refusal speech act performance when the L1 governed and L2 socio-cultural environments were different. Therefore, we looked to compare how Chinese learners of English and Chinese learners of Japanese who were all living in Japan would make refusals as compared to each other and to mono-cultural groups in their native languages. We found some differences amongst these participants, as noted below.

First, when participants were asked to refuse a request by an interlocutor of equal social power, all four groups showed a tendency to use indirect methods of refusal, such as statements of regret and reasons. However, the two-second language learner groups used a greater variety of strategies than the two groups of native speakers. These findings are in line with most of the previous studies, which suggests that higher pragmalinguistic abilities (language proficiency) could push learners to produce more speech acts strategies (Garcia, 2004). The data also shows that none of the participants used any of the ‘direct-No’ strategies. This finding is likely due to the fact all of the participants are adult's bilinguals who have grown up in China and studying in Japan, where both two cultures are collective-oriented, wherein it is frowned upon to refuse in a direct way. The order of their semantic formulas in this situation were also quite similar with only the CLE group giving a different pattern (‘wish + statement of regret + excuse, reason, explanation + statement of alternatives’). One possible explanation for these finding is that Chinese learners of English adapted the stereotyped refusal strategies based on their own perceptions of English refusal routine, despite having never been exposed to a native-speaking English environment.

When refusing a request from an interlocutor with higher social power, the CLE group used a greater variety of strategies than any other group. This could be in part due the fact that the CLE group was mixing more of their L1 and L2 refusal strategies. While the CLJ group might also use both L1 and L2 refusal strategies, since refusals are handled more similarly in Chinese and Japanese culture than in western culture, the CLE group may have had more strategies to choose from than the CLJ group who might not have been as familiar with western refusal strategies. Furthermore, we found out all the three Chinese groups utilized the ‘addressing’ strategy, with the CN speakers using it most frequently. However, using this strategy was not find in JN groups. These findings are indicative of a similar refusal strategy being carried over from L1 Chinese socio-cultural norms into both of the L2s.

Table 11. Frequency of semantic formulas used in situation four (social power: high).

Semantic formulas	CLE (<i>n</i> = 13)	CLJ (<i>n</i> = 14)	CN (<i>n</i> = 14)	JN (<i>n</i> = 12)
I. Direct				
1. No	0	0	0	0
2. Negative willingness/ability	23%	13%	21	17%
II. Indirect				
1. Statement of regret	8%	13%	0	0
2. Wish	0	0	7%	0
3. Excuse, reason, explanation	38%	60%	64%	25%
4. Statement of alternative	0	0	0	0
5. Set condition for future or past acceptance	38%	53%	36%	42%
6. Criticism	0	0	0	0
7. Let interlocutor off the hook	8%	0	0	0
8. Self-defense	15%	27%	57%	8%
9. Postponement	31%	33%	21%	33%
10. Topic switch	8%	7%	0	0
11. Addressing	0	0	14%	0
12. Repetition	0	0	0	0
III. Adjunct				
1. Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement	46%	27%	7%	0
2. Statement of empathy	8%	7%	0	8%
3. Pause filler	15%	0	0	17%
4. Gratitude/appreciation	38%	40%	50%	25%

Table 12. Characteristic refusal strategies order and example in situation four (social power: high).

Groups	Characteristics of refusal order	Example of refusal strategies
CLE	'Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement' + 'excuse, reason and explanation.'	e.g., 'I know about that, I just don't have enough time to do the cleaning.'
CLJ	'Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement' + 'excuse, reason, explanation' + 'postponement'	e.g., 'tashika ni sō desu ne, tada saikin wa isogashiku te, jikan no aru toki niyatte mimasu yo.' (Yeah, certainly, but I am busy these days, I'd like to give a try later)
CN	'Gratitude/appreciation' + 'excuse, reason, explanation/self-defense'	e.g., 'xiexie xuejie de jianyi, wo bu tai xiguan tie zhitiao.' (Thank you for your suggestion, I am not used to taking a reminder note)
JN	'Gratitude/appreciation + 'set condition for future or past acceptance/postponement'	e.g., 'adobaisu arigatō. gozaimasu, yatte mimasu.' (Thank you for the suggestion, I will try it later)

When refusing an equal social power interlocutor's suggestion, the two-second language groups behaved quite differently from the native speaker groups. First, with regard to the frequency of semantic formulas, the all three Chinese groups of participants (CN, CLE and CLJ) mainly used two strategies: 'statement of positive opinions/feelings or agreement' and 'gratitude/appreciate.' On the other hand, native Japanese speakers used these strategies far less, instead relying on the strategy of 'set conditions for future or past acceptance' more frequently. This once again points to some degree of L1 transfer of socio-cultural norms, regardless of the L2.

When refusing a high social power interlocutor's suggestion, the CN group utilized 'self-defense' strategies far more often than the other three groups. This finding suggests that Chinese learners of English and Japanese realized that in their new sociocultural environment, their native strategies of using 'self-defense' would not meet the requirement of current refusal situations. It suggests that they were able to adjust to the new socio-pragmatic environment and adapted their target language refusal strategies to match the environment, rather than those of the language being used. However, not all aspects of the new socio-pragmatic environment were adapted by the learner groups, as only Japanese native speakers exhibited the semantic formula order of 'set condition for future or past acceptance/postponement'.

Overall, the above findings suggest that while even advanced adult L2 learners retain some of their L1 pragmatic strategies when creating L2 expressions, there is also evidence that socio-cultural contact with a different cultural environment impacts their refusal speech acts to some degree, regardless of whether or not the cultural environment is that of the L2. However, there was also evidence of some differences in the variety of expressions used by the CLE and CLJ groups, which suggests that while socio-cultural norms may have the greatest influence on speech acts, the linguistic variation with which one acts may be influenced by the linguistic options available and how much they differ from the L1 as well. Furthermore, the results of this study also suggest that the participants have the necessary pragmatic competence to undertake refusal speech acts in their L2s. Taken together, this supports the notion that for adults L2 learners, L1 based pragmatic norms still influence and play a fundamental role in their L2 pragmatic ability, but that there is no L2 centered pragmatic ability, and thus, the learner's pragmatic competence should be viewed as being L1 based, but shaped on the conventions of the L2 linguistic and sociocultural norms.

Conclusion and limitations

This study found that when practicing speech acts of refusing, Chinese second language learners still rely heavily on their L1-based refusal patterns, but do adapt some L2 conventional refusal expressions, which seem to be influenced mostly by socio-cultural norms, and to a lesser extent L2 linguistic patterns. Specifically, both Chinese learners of English and Chinese learners of Japanese living in Japan showed many similarities to each other and to mono-cultural native speakers living in China, but did vary from them to some degree.

Furthermore, they only varied from each other slightly, specifically in the variety of strategies that were used.

However, the findings of the present study should be taken with caution because it is limited in several ways. Firstly, a larger sample size is desirable before making strong conclusions, so hopefully similar studies can collect more data in the future that can help to support or modify the findings reported here. Secondly, all of the L2 learner participants were chosen from Tohoku University, and most of them were graduate school students, while the two native groups were all undergraduate students. Therefore, there may have an age gap affect in their refusal strategies. Third, the current study was unable to collect data about how participant would react to an interlocutor with lower social status. Finally, there are some researchers who question the validity of DCT tests, claiming them to not elicit natural enough responses. Therefore, future studies may consider looking at different speech acts and interlocutor social positions, as well as test the ideas through different methodologies.

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Appendix

Appendix A

<http://gostudylink.net/en/support/levels> (CEFR language levels explained)

Appendix B

The online forms of the surveys for data collection (Check the links for details)

<https://goo.gl/forms/ekSB3mXOBzI8LKhf2> (Japanese version)

<https://wj.qq.com/s2/1007762/d9a8> (Chinese version)

<https://goo.gl/forms/TMBtlgLkukyoRf7B2> (English version)

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