Refusal production via DCTs and role-plays

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Abstract

This study was conducted as a twofold investigation. Firstly, it focused on refusal strategies and modification tools employed by a group of Turkish EFL learners. Secondly, it aimed to compare the content of data collected via two different data collection tools popular in interlanguage pragmatics research: Discourse Completion Task and open role plays. As the target speech act, refusals have been the focus of the investigation. The results showed that the participants could use a range of refusal strategies appropriately and the data collected via DCT and role plays were significantly compatible in terms of variety of strategies employed by the participants.

Keywords: Interlanguage pragmatics; DCT; Role plays; Refusals; EFL

1. Introduction

The study of the developmental nature of L2 learning in relation to pragmatics has been called interlanguage pragmatics and it has mainly investigated how certain speech acts have been comprehended and fulfilled by L2 learners (Kasper&Dahl, 1991). Interlanguage pragmatics has been a popular research area particularly following the Cross cultural Speech Act Realization Projects (CCSARP) by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984). Various speech acts from requests to apologies, from suggestions to compliments have been deeply investigated under interlanguage pragmatics. Despite the range of speech acts investigated, the methodological framework has been quite limited and repetitive: most of the studies were conducted with a cross-cultural perspective via use of discourse completion tasks (DCTs) as the data collection tool and the data came mainly from advanced level learners (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999). This study attempts to bring another dimension to existing literature by gathering data from intermediate level EFL learners via the use of two popular data collection instruments, namely role plays and DCTs.

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1.1. Literature Review

1.1.1. Role-plays in Interlanguage Pragmatics

Though a range of data collection tools has been used in interlanguage pragmatics, they can be roughly categorized as the ones providing either spoken or written data. Kasper (2000) mentions authentic discourse, elicited conversation, interviews, think aloud protocols, and role plays under the data collection tools requiring spoken interaction. Among these types, authentic discourse can be addressed as providing the most valid data among all but it is known to bring several challenges with it. Felix- Brasdefer (2010) mentions several factors making natural data collection hard to reach as (1) difficulty in reaching situations with same sociolinguistic factors to compare such as age and educational level, (2) very low chance of observing the occurrence of target speech act interactions between the participants from native and nonnative groups outside the class, (3) low frequency of observations of target speech act performances. In addition, it is important to state that keeping a real record of the target settings to capture all features of real speech requires researchers to always carry the necessary equipment such as a video camera, which is again nearly impossible for longitudinal studies. Kasper (2000) also mentions the difficulty of recording authentic discourse. She states that even if authentic data is available, field notes fall short of reflecting all features of naturalistic talk and it makes video recording essential for making the real use of authentic discourse. However it is stated to be quite difficult to take permission from institutions to make video recording. Kasper (2000) claims that regarding the constraints of using authentic discourse, spoken interactions that are designed appropriate to the nature of interlanguage pragmatics studies provide the best solution, among which open role plays is the focus of this study.

In the most basic sense, role plays are 'simulations of communicative encounters' (Kasper, 2000). They not only promote active participation of learners but also lead them to concentrate more on components under focus (Joyner&Young, 2006), that is refusals as target speech acts in our study. Role plays are valued on that they are useful in eliciting pragmatic and sociolinguistic features of authentic discourse (Kasper, 2000; Kasper and Dahl, 1991).

A recent study employing role plays as data collection instrument in interlanguage pragmatics was carried by Rose (2013). Rose observed whether L2 pragmatic developmental stages proposed by the previous research were applicable to L2 Spanish proposals. In the study, a group of L2 Spanish learners (n=46) took place during a 7-week Spanish immersion program. The proposals made by the participants during the completion of researcher-designed-tasks were recorded. As a result of data analysis, the researcher found out that the participants did not go through formulaic speech development path as suggested by the previous research and they displayed a U-shaped curve during their proposal productions in Spanish as L2.

1.1.2. DCTs in Interlanguage Pragmatics

Regarding the written data, Kasper (2000) lists production questionnaires, multiple-choice items, diaries, discourse completion tasks, and scaled responses as the alternative data collection tools. Among these options, DCT has appeared to be the most popular data collection tool to explore pragmatic competence via a range of speech acts, particularly based on cross cultural comparisons (Beebe & Cummings, 2006). DCT, with slightly different variants such as oral DCT, written DCT, and multiple choice DCT, is a data elicitation tool in which participants are expected to provide what would be a suitable answer to a given scenario (Roever, 2011). DCTs are preferred mainly because they are easy to administer, allow target variables to be controled, and make the studies replicable by other researchers (Golato, 2003). Moreover, the low chance of observing abundant occurrences of target speech acts in daily life and the difficulty of always carrying a video to catch those instances encourage many researchers to focus on elicited data via DCTs (Kasper&Dahl, 1991; Felix-Brasdefer, 2010).

CCSARP by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) stands as a pioneering study which designated the path of interlanguage pragmatics research. The researchers focused on speech acts – requests and apologies- in this project; they conducted a cross cultural comparison via data from native speakers and non-native speakers in 8 different languages; they used DCT as the data collection instrument. They looked for the universally identifiable patterns in request and apology performances across the languages. As a result of the data analysis, they came up with a comprehensive taxonomy of request strategies and apology strategies.

DCTs were also used in investigation of refusals as target speech acts. Wannaruk (2008) employed a comparative methodology to investigate how refusals were performed by 40 native English speakers, 40 native Thai speakers, and 40 Thai EFL learners from three proficiency groups, namely lower intermediate, intermediate, and upper intermediate. The data was collected via DCTs in which the situations required the participants to refuse suggestions, invitations, offers, and requests. The results suggested significant similarity in terms of the type of refusal strategies regardless of speech acts initiated these refusals. L1 interference was the most important variable affecting refusal strategy of the Thai EFL learners. While Thai groups supported their refusals by modest explanations in English as they normally did in Thai, English speakers mostly fulfilled this by expressing their gratitude for the invitations. The researcher draw the conclusion that Thai EFL learners needed more awareness of the target culture's social norms.

Wide use of DCTs in interlanguage pragmatics has been criticised deeply because the data acquired via DCTs is not suitable for representing the nature of pragmatics and it does not reflect how the participants would maintain the extended dialogue (Roever, 2011). Golato (2003) also states that data elicited via DCTs do not reflect the real structure of natural interactions and it measures *symbolic* action not real *pragmatic* action of participants. DCTs require participants to do a certain action, i.e. refuse or apologise, and this deters us from observing real strategies or actions participants would employ or take if these scenarios occurred naturally (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1992).

Taking all these points into consideration, two different research tools were employed in this study. The purpose was two-fold. Firstly, we aimed to find out how compatible data these two data elicitation tools provided. Secondly, triangulating the data via two different data elicitation techniques was expected to strengthen the construct of the study and gain better insights about the target phenomenon (Mathison, 1988), that is the nature of refusal strategies Turkish EFL learners use.

1.1.3. Refusals

Participants in any human interaction are assumed to have an emotional side, which is called 'face' by Brown and Levinson (1987). Accordingly, every individual has positive and negative face and s/he expects his/her face to be maintained during any interaction. While positive face refers to individuals' expectations of being approved, negative face refers to individuals' expectation of being free from imposition by other interlocutors. Some speech acts are accepted to be face threatening by nature as in the case of refusals. Refusals are categorized as face threatening acts, which require refusing people to use face saving strategies. Performing a face threatening act in a second language is considered to be especially challenging for language learners since it may cause misunderstandings and communication breakdowns (Wannaruk, 2008). As such, refusals have been a popular focus in studies related to interlanguage pragmatics and have been investigated from a number of perspectives.

One of the earliest studies on refusals was conducted by Takahashi and Beebe (1987) who included native Japanese (n=20), native Americans (n=20) and Japanese EFL and ESL learners' (n=40). The analysis of the data collected via DCTs indicated a pervasive influence of native language on EFL and ESL Japanese learners' refusal strategies in the target language, especially in more proficient ESL learners' performances, which downplayed the influence of length of residence in the target language

community. Felix-Brasdefer (2004) also carried out research on refusal performances of L2 learner. In this study, the target language was Spanish and the findings were not in line with that of Takahashi and Beebe (1987). Felix-Brasdefer reported the length of residence as an indicator of more native-like performance because the strategies employed by participants with a long residency in Spain (9 months or more) were reported to be more approximate to native norms than the participants with shorter residency (5 months or less). A more recent study done on refusals was conducted by Wannaruk (2008) with a twofold focus: having a cross-cultural perspective by exploring refusal performances of native Thais (n=40) and native Americans (n=40) and investigating the pragmatic transfer on refusal performances of Thai EFL learners (n=40). The refusal strategies employed by native Thais and native Americans were found to be highly similar. Still, the researcher reported an apparent pragmatic transfer in the performances of Thai EFL learners and suggested providing more natural input for these learners to understand the nature of refusals in English. This study also focuses on refusal performances of EFL learners and aims to explore this phenomenon via a different research structure in which participants were Turkish EFL learners who refused only requests and in which the data was collected via DCTs and open role-plays.

2. Method

This study was conducted with a group of intermediate level Turkish EFL learners (n=16) whose proficiency was determined according to the results of an in-house proficiency exam given in a state university. Firstly, the participants completed the given scenarios individually in the form of DCTs during the class time. Later, they were invited to perform the same scenarios in the form of open role plays. For the role plays, they worked in pairs and they were scheduled by the researcher so as not to intervene with their school program. Each role play was video recorded by the researcher with the consent of the participants and transcribed later. Before the recording, the pairs were given a few minutes to plan how they would structure their conversation.

Scenarios used in this study were prepared by following the steps described in the study of Rose (2009). For preparing the scenarios of this study, firstly, existing scenarios in the related studies were compiled. Secondly, the researcher prepared an example generation form and asked a different group of learners to come up with possible refusal scenarios to appear in a university context. Next, the researchers listed the appropriate scenarios from the literature and from the pool gathered via example generation form. Another group of students were asked to rate these scenarios by considering the likelihood of occurrence on a 5-point Likert Scale. Finally, the scenarios with the highest mean values were selected for the study and each participant completed 4 scenarios separately in paper and in role plays, which yielded 64 cases for the data analysis.

3. Results

The data was categorized according to three variables: head acts in refusals, external modification tools, and internal modification tools. Table 1 below shows the percentages of refusal strategies collected via DCT and role plays. Participants were seen to be quite productive in both instruments, though the number of strategies used in act-outs was significantly higher than DCTs (p<.001).

Table 1. Frequency Rates of Refusal Strategies according to DCTs and Role Plays

Refusal Strategy Types	DCT*	Role Play**	χ^2	df	p
Bluntness	4	30	19.8	1	.000
Negation of Proposition	57	84	9.06	1	.003
Plain indirect	5	10	1.66	1	.197
Reason / Explanation	84	129	9.50	1	.002
Regret /Apology	42	72	7.89	1	.005
Alternative	34	54	4.54	1	.033
Disagreement / Criticism	2	5	-	-	-
Avoidance	-	3	-	-	-
Statement of Negative Consequence	-	3	-	-	-
Total	229	390	41.8	1	.000

* the total amounts of each strategy type elicited via DCT

** the total amounts of each strategy type elicited via role plays

As can be seen in Table 1, chi square tests were run to explore if the type of data elicitation tool made a significant difference in refusal strategy types and amounts in the participants' performances. In terms of strategy types, role-plays were seen to be remarkably more productive in appearance of several strategies, which were Bluntness, Reason/Explanation, Negation of Proposition, Regret/Apology, and Alternative. Regarding Bluntness, the participants overused 'No' in their role plays (p<.001) while they used this word only 4 times in DCTs. Another strategy that was used abundantly in both instruments but significantly more in role plays was Negation of Proposition (p<.005), which was only actualized via the negative phrase of 'I can't' by the participants. A strategy that immediately preceded or followed Negation of Proposition was Regret/apology, which was again used significantly more in role-plays (p<.05). When the participants refused a request either from a friend or a teacher, they were observed to state a Reason or offer an Explanation each and every time, but considerably more in role plays (p<.005). The last strategy that was employed noticeably more in role-plays was offering an Alternative (p<.05). Employment rates of strategies were always lower in DCTs but the differences between DCT and role-plays in the amounts of Plain Indirect, Criticism, Avoidance were not significant. Statement of Negative consequence was observed only in role-plays just for 3 times. Finally, the total number of refusal strategies recorded in role plays was also significantly high (p<.001). The second step of analysis was done for internal modification tools, expressions that serve to downgrade or upgrade the head act (Kasper, 1988). The results for internal modification tools are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency Rates of Internal Modification Tools according to DCTs and Role Plays

Internal Modification Types	DCT	Role play	χ^2	df	p
Intensifier	16	64	28,8	1	.000
Hedge	-	4	-	-	-
Understater	-	2	-	-	-

Lexical Adverbs	10	17	1,81	1	.178
Mental State Predicate	4	8	4,76	1	.029
Cajoler	1	-	-	-	-
Total	31	95	34,1	1	.000

As Table 2 shows, the amounts of internal modification tools were quite similar to each other for both DCTs and role-plays, which did not require running chi square analysis for all the categories. Role plays were more productive not in the variety but in the amount of internal modification tools (p<.001). Accordingly, the participants employed significantly more intensifiers (p<.001) and moderately more mental state predicates in role-plays (p<.05). No other significant difference was detected in the variety and amount of internal modification tools for the data elicited via DCT and role play. The final analysis was run for external modification devices, moves taken to soften the influence of face-threatening acts (Jorda, 2007). The results for the frequency and types of external modification tools detected in both type of tools are given in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Frequency Rates of External Modification Tools according to DCTs and Role Plays

External Modification Types	DCT	Role play	χ^2	df	p
Agreement	3	8	8,00	1	.005
Willingness	2	7	7,14	1	.008
Empathy	7	8	1,80	1	.180
Total	12	23	3,45	1	.063

Table 3 displays the types and amounts of external modification devices used by the participants in their refusal performances. Similar to the case of internal modification devices, more external modification devices were detected in role plays, though this time the difference was not statistically significant (p>.05). Considering that only 5 types of external modification tools are reported for refusals in the literature, 3 types of external modification tools detected in this study may seem acceptable in variety. To sum up, the type of data collection instrument did not make a significant difference either in the variety or the amount of external modification tools.

4. Discussion

The aim of this study was twofold. Firstly, it was conducted to gain insight about the refusal performances of Turkish EFL learners. Secondly, it sought the compatibility of the data collected via two popular data elicitation tools in pragmatics: DCTs and role plays.

Regarding the refusal performances of Turkish EFL learners, the first issue was how similar their performances were to native English speakers. The analysis showed that the most frequently used refusal strategy was Reason/Explanation in our study which was similar to the performances of native English speakers reported in the literature (Wannaruk, 2008; Lauper, 1997; Sadler&Eröz, 2002; Nelson, Carson, Al Batal, & El Bakary, 2002). This finding suggests that Turkish EFL learners will perform refusals appropriately without suffering from cultural mismatches when they encounter native speakers of English. What is different from native English speakers' refusal performances in some other studies is

the type of refusal strategy which frequently followed or preceded Reasons/Explanations. While Sadler & Eröz (2002) mention the frequent co-existence of Reasons/Explanations with Regrets, Wannaruk (2008) reported Positive Feelings or Negation (saying 'No') were frequently used with Reasons/Explanations by the native English speakers in their studies. Our findings were in line with that of Lauper (1997) who reported that the native speakers of English in their study opted mostly for Explanations which were often accompanied by Negation of Proposition in the form of a direct no. We assume that the variety in the type of refusal strategies that go with Explanations/Reasons arises either from the type of speech act that is being rejected, i.e. requests, suggestions, offers, or from the influence of social variables, i.e. distance, imposition, power. The second finding of the study is about the narrow scope of the linguistic means the participants used for actualizing some strategies. Accordingly, the only linguistic mean used for expressing regret was *'I am sorry'*. Similarly, the participants used only *'I can't'* for negating the proposition. Another finding that points at limited linguistic repertoire of the participants is the significantly higher employment rate of 'No' in role play performances of the participants. Refusals are already face threatening acts and saying a direct 'No' especially during face to face interactions should contribute more to the threatening nature of this act. This result also supports the conclusion that our learners are in need of pragmatic instruction and general teaching courses fall short of emphasizing pragmatic aspects. The limited variety of refusal strategies and modification tools suggests us that we should enhance our learners' knowledge of speech acts via pragmatic instruction, whether it is offered implicitly or explicitly (Takahashi, 2010). In order to develop our learners' pragmalinguistic competence, we should systematically address strategies and linguistic tools our learners can use for actualizing target speech acts (Garcia, 1996). As Cohen (2005) argues, our learners should be equipped with a wide repertoire of strategies so that they can deploy *strategy chains*, i.e. supportive moves for initiating the act, attempts for grounding the act, and the head act itself, which can be actualized in several different ways.

The second aspect of this study was on comparing the compatibility of the data elicited via two different research tools, which were DCT and role play. The results suggested that DCT and role plays elicited strikingly similar refusal strategies. The participants employed the similar types of strategies via both instruments, which supports the findings of Arnandiz, Codina-Espurz, & Campillo (2012) who found that oral and written data collection tools did not differ in terms of refusal strategy types. For our study, the only difference worth mentioning was about the amount of strategies. The role plays were significantly more productive both in total and in individual amounts of several refusal strategy types, namely Explanations, Bluntness, Negation of Proposition, Regret, and Alternative. The same finding applied also to the production rates of internal modification tools, which were produced significantly more via role plays. This finding is in line with the observation of Beebe and Cummings (2006) who stated that DCTs require quite limited negotiation attempts. In our case, no negotiation attempt was required because we designed our scenarios in such a way that the participants would refuse the hearer in just one attempt.

5. Conclusions

Overall, this study shows that the participants opted for similar refusal strategies with that of native English speakers reported in the relevant literature. It implies that Turkish EFL learners would perform refusals successfully without being identified as a foreigner. However, the results also show that they need to enlarge their linguistic repertoire for actualising refusal strategies in English. This leads us to the result that refusals should be addressed systematically in EFL curriculums in Turkey for improving our learners' related knowledge.

Additionally, our findings lead us to the argument that if the scenarios are described in details and the tools are administered appropriately, any data collected via role plays and DCTs will produce a compatible content in terms of strategy variety. Though the amount of strategies used by participants varied depending on the structure of data elicitation tool, i.e. role plays produced higher number of strategies due to more negotiation attempts, the data elicitation instrument did not appear to make a significant difference in the content of the data elicited for the refusals. Depending on their priorities, future researchers can use DCTs for understanding the type of semantic formulas to be used in speech acts or they can use role plays for understanding the structure of conversational turns people use for actualizing speech acts.

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Yazılı söylem tamamlama testi ve canlandırma aracılığıyla ret eyleminin gerçekleştirilmesi

Öz

Bu çalışma, iki boyutlu bir araştırma olarak gerçekleştirildi. İlk olarak, İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen bir grup Türk öğrencinin ne çeşit ret stratejileri ve niteleme ürünleri kullandığında odaklandı. İkincil olarak ise ara dil gelişimi üzerine yapılan araştırmalarda sıklıkla kullanılan iki farklı veri toplama aracı vasıtasıyla, yazılı söylem tamamlama testi ve canlandırma tekniği, elde edilmiş verinin içeriğini karşılaştırmayı hedefledi. Hedef söz eylem olarak ise ret eylemi inceleme konusu olarak seçildi. Sonuçlar göstermiştir ki katılımcılar bir dizi ret stratejisini uygun biçimde kullanabilmekte ve yazılı söylem tamamlama testi ve canlandırma tekniği kullanılan stratejilerin çeşitliliği açısından önemli derecede uyumlu veri üretimi sağlamıştır.

Anahtar sözcükler: ara dil gelişmi; yazılı söylem tamamlama testi, canlandırma, ret eylemi, yabancı dil olarak İngilizce

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